

The disjunction of emotional intelligence and foreign language proficiency

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Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and linguistic competence of some Iranian learners of English in the areas of structure, written expression, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and composition. A forty-item test of linguistic proficiency secured from TOEFL preparatory books with the Cronbach's Alpha reliability of 0.742, the thirty-three-item Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale, and a task of writing in English were administered to 110 Iranian undergraduate students of English language and literature to elicit the necessary data for study and analysis. Seventy-nine respondents succeeded to finish the tests and the tasks. While there is much literature supporting the existence of a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and academic success, a series of Pearson correlation tests applied to the results from the proficiency test, the essay task, and emotional profiles of the participants did not indicate any significant positive relationship between their emotional intelligence scores and their scores on

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proficiency tests. The article discusses reasons for these counter-intuitive findings.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale, linguistic competence, reading comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, writing

1. Introduction

Since the wake of philosophy, the mind has been frequently pitted against affection. Some have assumed that “intelligence/thinking is superior and belongs to men but it is liable to be undermined by feelings, which are inferior and belongs to women” (Sparrow & Knight, 2006, p.23). And, Descartes believed that “Cogito Ergo Sum” (I Think; Therefore I Am). Contrariwise, Blaise Pascal believed that “heart has its reason, which reason does not know” (Cited in Zeidner, Mathews & Roberts 2009, p. iii). As a result, there have been fiery debates over such dichotomies as thinking/feeling, cognitive/emotive, affection/reason, notion/emotion, book-smart/street-smart. Cognitive psychologists and neurologists have underscored prefrontal cortex and emotive psychiatrists have focused on limbic system and amygdala. Once the deficiency of mere mentally-oriented approaches regarding human learning, behavior, and performance became obvious, the heyday of more pronounced emotive issues arrived. More strident than others, Howard Gardner announced that “our IQ is the tip of the iceberg... [Therefore] we need more than our IQ in life to be effective and successful” (cited in: Sparrow & Knight, 2006, p. 12). Similarly, Steinberg (2002) in his book *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid* tried to elevate emotions to a higher position than the mind.

2. Literature Review

These rounds of scientific ebbs and flows waned once emotional intelligence (EI) hit the market. This buzzword was first introduced by Edward Thorndike, a behaviorist psychologist in early 20th century, then it was used by Salovey, Mayer, and Caruso in late

1980's, and promoted by Daniel Goleman in his flagship book *EQ: Why It Can Matter more than IQ* in 1995. This notion tends to reconcile the two Abel and Cain-like notions of *cognition* and *emotion*. Salovey and Mayer (1997)—in unknitting the conflict—accentuated on the confluence of cognition and affection mediated by EQ: “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions to assist thought; to understand emotions and emotional meanings, to reflectively regulate emotions in ways that promote emotional and intellectual growth” (cited in Stein & Book, 2006, p. 14). Sparrow and Knight (2006) also underscored the interrelationship between emotion and cognition: “emotional intelligence integrates feeling, thinking and doing. It is the habitual practice of thinking about feeling and feeling about thinking when choosing what to do” (p. 29).

This confluence and interrelationship had practical implications. Sparrow and Knight (2006) claimed that emotional intelligence and performance are highly correlated. Stein and Book (2006) were also on the same wavelength and reported that IQ “can serve to predict between 1 and 20 percent (the average is 6 percent) of success in a given job. On the other hand, [EQ] has been found to be directly responsible for 27-45 percent of job success, depending on which field was under study” (p. 18). Having conducted a longitudinal project involving 93 British university students, Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, and McDougall (2003) argued that the Big Five personality traits --which are highly correlated with emotional intelligence--“are better predictors of AP [Academic Performance] than cognitive ability, BAI [Beliefs About Intelligence], and gender” (p. 62). To back up their argument on this issue, they mentioned several recent studies which had replicated the predictive power of personality traits in ... educational settings, i.e., Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, (2003), Costa and McCrae, (1992), and Eysench and Eysneck, (1985). Furnham et al. (2003) concluded that “well-established personality traits such as the Big Five and the Gigantic Three should be taken into account in the prediction of academic success and failure in university programs” (p. 50).

Fahim and Pishghadam (2007) investigated whether “emotional intelligence, psychometric intelligence, and verbal intelligence have any role in the academic achievement of university students majoring in English language literature, teaching, and translation” (p. 240). To this end, they collected data from “a sample of 508 [sophomore students]... 134 males and 394 females, between the ages of 19 and 29... [who had] passed their language proficiency courses including: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking”. The results showed that low but significant correlations existed between EQ and its competencies and GPA, demonstrating that EQ contributes to academic achievement of second language learners at university. The results also demonstrated that the academically successful students had higher scores of intrapersonal... stress management, general mood, and total EQ in GPA. They concluded that intrapersonal ability ... was the best predictor to differentiate the successful from unsuccessful students.

To determine the role of EQ in second language learning, Pishghadam (2009) gathered university students’ scores on reading, listening, speaking, writing, as well as their GPA. Their results indicated that stress management in reading and writing, intrapersonal abilities in listening, speaking, and GPA were the best predictors to differentiate successful from unsuccessful students. He concluded that:

to be a good reader, one must know how to cope with and manage stressful situations, how to define problems and generate potentially efficient solutions To be a successful listener, one must try hard to acquire high level of EQ in general and stress management and intrapersonal abilities in particular. It seems that the nature of speaking is such that interpersonal competencies (empathy, interpersonal relationship, and social responsibility), intrapersonal competencies, and general mood can be contributory And to be a good writer requires one to acquire stress management and adaptability competencies well. (p. 40)

These findings and remarks were supported by Motallebzadeh (2009), who found a strong relationship between EFL learners’ reading comprehension and structural ability and their emotional

intelligence, except for social responsibility and empathy as interpersonal categories. Shahmohamadi and Hasanzadeh (2011) did not find strong associations between the linguistic achievements of 111 Iranian adult English learners at intermediate level and their total emotional intelligence scores, but they found significant correlations between language achievement and two main components of emotional intelligence, i.e., interpersonal intelligence (independence, assertiveness, self-actualization, self-regard, and self-awareness) and general mood (optimism and happiness).

The observations and findings reported above seem intuitively plausible because, for one thing, picking up any new skill in any realm is durational or longitudinal. The time for the task may also vary from short term to long run (depending on its complexity). Hence, what may cause the learner to linger up to the end, despite any ordeal or plight, is emotional management which may compensate for possible lacks. Learning a language other than the cradle tongue is no exception. Language is multi-faceted and includes many competencies—strategic, linguistic, socio-cultural—and many skills—speaking, reading, listening, writing—which in turn, involve many subskills; therefore, learning language calls for self-regulation and self-management on the side of the learner.

3. Purpose of the Study

In spite of the intuitive appeal of the theoretical remarks and empirical findings concerning the relationship between emotional intelligence, as an offshoot of affective and emotive domain, and cognitive performance and academic success, the present teacher-researchers noticed some discrepancy between their foreign language teaching experience and these relationship claims. This study is the response to this subjective experience. The researchers embarked on a confirmatory study to secure answers to the following questions:

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1. Does EQ of undergraduate foreign language learners correlate with their knowledge of English structure and written expression?
2. Does EQ of undergraduate foreign language learners correlate with their knowledge of English vocabulary and reading comprehension?
3. Does EQ of undergraduate foreign language learners correlate with their writing skill in English?

Accordingly, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

H₀₁: There is no relationship between EQ of undergraduate foreign language learners and their knowledge of English structure and written expression.

H₀₂: There is no relationship between EQ of undergraduate foreign language learners and their knowledge of English vocabulary and reading comprehension.

H₀₃: There is no relationship between EQ of undergraduate foreign language learners and their English writing skill.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

To investigate the connection between emotional intelligence and language learning, the researchers administered an English proficiency test, a task of essay writing, and the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (Schutte, Malouff, and Bhullar, 2009) to 110 undergraduate students of English language and literature at Semnan University, Iran. They all had successfully taken the university entrance examination, which is annually held nation-wide in a standardized manner. The participants were sophomore, junior, and senior students who had passed general proficiency courses (Conversation I and II, Reading Comprehension I, II and III, Grammar I and II, and Paragraph and Essay Writing). The freshmen were excluded since they did not generally seem qualified to take the essay writing task. Seventy-nine students returned the

questionnaire forms, answered the proficiency test, and did the essay writing task.

4.2 Instruments

Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale: The 33-item Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) was used in order to obtain an emotional profile of the candidates. Perez, Petrides, and Furnham (2005) observe that “[SEIS] has been used extensively in the literature and can be employed as a short measure of global trait EI” (p. 129) with a reliability range of 0.70-0.85. The developers of the scale describe it as follows:

[it] is based on Salovey and Mayer’s (1997) original model of emotional intelligence...the items composing the subscales are as follows: Perception of Emotion, Managing Own Emotions, Managing Others’ Emotions, Utilization of Emotion...[accordingly] respondents rate themselves on the items using a five-point scale. Respondents require an average five minutes to complete the scale...total scale scores are calculated by reverse coding items 5, 28 and 33, and then summing all items. Scores can range from 33 to 165, with higher scores indicating more characteristic emotional intelligence. (Schutte et al., 2009, p. 120)

To minimize the cultural biases and misunderstandings, this scale was translated into Persian—the candidates’ mother tongue –and piloted with 20 learners. Feedback from them was considered to make sure about its comprehensibility, accuracy, and cultural relevance.

English Language Proficiency Test: A 40-item multiple choice English language proficiency test measured the participants’ verbal competence in structure, written expression, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. To this end, 70 questions were drawn out of Longman (Phillips, 1995), Cambridge (Gear, 1993), and NTC (Broukal & Nolan-Woods, 1991) preparatory TOEFL books. The items were subsumed under two sections of ‘Structure and Written Expression’ (Section A), and ‘Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension’ (Section B). Each section started with directions and examples. Structure and Written Expression contained 10

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sentence completion items and 10 items with incorrect words or phrases to be identified. For the vocabulary part of Section 2, the respondents were to choose the words or phrases that could replace the underlined words or phrases. The reading comprehension part included two passages, each accompanied by five multiple choice questions. The test was checked with a pilot group for the appropriate duration, difficulty of questions, and possible problems. The Cronbach's alpha equation measured the reliability of the final version of the whole test as .742, and the reliability of Structure and Written Expression, and Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension as .631, and .543, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1: Reliability information for the language proficiency test and its subcomponents

Proficiency test (40 items)	0.74
Section A: Structure and Written Expression (20 items)	0.63
Section B: Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension (20 items)	0.54

Essay Writing: The candidates also wrote an essay within set conditions. The researchers assembled a series of argumentative topics from writing tutorial books-- *Doing Academic Writing in Education* (Richards & Miller, 2008), *Academic Writing* (Bailey, 2006), *Public and Professional Writing* (Surma, 2005), *Academic Writing* (Bailey, 2003), *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (Swales & Feak, 1994). The topics Mega Cities, Prison, Capital Punishment, Independence and Family, Happiness and Hope were presented to 10 English language students to write about. These pilot students were then interviewed on their familiarity with the topics, the topics' novelty, and which topic they would suggest as the best essay topic. *Being Far from the Family Makes Me Independent. Agree/Disagree. Discuss* was chosen as the final essay topic, as, among other things, it furnished an outlet for learners to

argumentatively knit their feelings and cognition. On a second pilot study, the appropriate time was determined.

4.3 Data Collection Procedure

The researchers collected the data they needed in two separate sessions. In the first session, the participants took the linguistic test, which took 60 minutes on the average. They also did the writing task, which took 25 minutes on the average. The subjects' rough drafts on the writing topic were collected at the end of the session. In the second session, they answered the SEIS in 5 minutes. These measures were administered to 110 participants from three batches of students in three different academic years. Seventy-nine candidates managed to complete all the three inquiries.

4.4 Data Analysis

Many writing assessment schemes rely on holistic scoring, assigning a single score to a script based on overall impression of it. In a typical holistic scoring session, each script is read quickly and then judged against a rating scale, or scoring rubric that outlines the scoring criteria. It is more practical to read a script once and assign a single score than to read it several times, each time focusing on different aspects (Weigle, 2002, p. 112). For the assessment of candidates' essays, IELTS holistic band descriptors were followed. This scheme assesses the compositions holistically on a scale ranging from 1 to 20 against these criteria: command over language and grammar, adequacy of answers, clear communication of message, organization and paragraphing of answers, level and appropriateness of diction. Taking these scoring rubrics into account, each composition was read and received a mark from 1 to 20. To add to the reliability of the scores, the rating of the writings was repeated one week later and the sum of the marks for each writing was averaged. The marking was done only by one of the researchers.

The data obtained from these measures were fed into SPSS 16 MicrosoftTM to get descriptive output as minimums, maximums, means, and standard deviations. Pearson correlation tests were

applied to the SEIS, general proficiency test and essay writing scores to obtain inferential information.

5. Results

The 40-item English-proficiency test, which evaluated the candidates' linguistic ability, consisted of 20 items on structure and written expression, and 20 items on vocabulary and reading comprehension. Table 2 demonstrates how participants performed on this test and its subsections.

Table 2: The participants' scores on the English language proficiency test and its subsections

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. Deviation
The whole proficiency test	79	13	37	24.70	5.16
Structure and Written Expression	79	6	20	12.91	2.96
Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension	79	4	19	11.86	3.05

The participants also wrote an essay on a specific topic. Table 3 displays information about the participants' scores on this task.

Table 3: The participants' scores on the essay writing task

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. Deviation
Writing task	79	11	19	15.09	1.29

The SEIS portrayed the candidates' emotional profiles through 33 five-point Likert type questions. Schutte et al. (2009) assert that "scores can range from 33 to 165, with higher scores indicating more characteristic emotional intelligence" (p. 120). The scores of

participants in this study varied from 87 to 149 with the average score of 121.90 (Table 4).

Table 4: The candidates' scores on the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. Deviation
SEIS	79	87	149	121.90	11.63

In order to know the target variables' relationship, correlation analysis was conducted. Pearson correlation analysis unveiled the extent that language proficiency could be connected to emotional intelligence. As Table 5 reveals, the two variables are negatively associated ($r=-.13$), but this association is not statistically significant.

Table 5: Pearson correlation statistics between SEIS and English language proficiency

	Total EQ	Total Proficiency	Structure and Written Expression	Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension
Total EQ	1	-0.13	-0.16	-0.06
Total Proficiency	-0.13	1	-	-
Structure and Written Expression	-0.16	-	1	0.48**
Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension	-0.06	-	0.48**	1
Essay Writing	-0.31**	-	0.41**	-0.14

** Correlations significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The same inferential analysis was also run among EQ and the proficiency test's subcategories (Table 5). Accordingly, emotional intelligence and 'section A' –structure and written expression— went negatively together ($r= -.16$), emotional intelligence and

'section B' -vocabulary and reading comprehension- were also negatively associated ($r = -.06$), and emotional intelligence and essay writing yielded the negative go-togetherness of ($r = -.31$).

As the statistics in Table 5 suggest, the first null hypothesis – the association of emotional intelligence and the candidates' linguistic knowledge of structure and written expression – is accepted, since the variables were negatively correlated, ($r = -.16$). The second null hypothesis – lack of relationship between emotional intelligence and the participants' knowledge of vocabulary and reading comprehension – is also accepted as the variables went negatively together, ($r = -.06$). The third null hypothesis, which deals with emotional intelligence and the respondents' productive skill of essay writing is accepted too ($r = -.31$). In total, the results did not prod to any positive and significant correlation between linguistic proficiency and emotional intelligence ($r = -.13$). It should be noted that although the reported figures for relationship carry negative signs, we cannot claim that they show negative correlations because they are not large enough to be attributed to something other than chance.

6. Discussion

The lack of relationships between the candidates' English knowledge and EI may have to do with the fact that the participants studied English in a foreign context. True, there is sound theoretical support behind the strong relationship between EQ and academic achievement and/or language learning success. But this may be an ideal situation which may not hold true in the EFL context which is highly contrived and, to varying degrees, externally imposed on the learners. When the developmental trajectory of knowledge or skills does not match the natural route that emergent systems cover and are not consistent with and supported by natural mechanisms of the learners, the catalyst function of EI may not get the opportunity to exert its influence. In other words, while EI is a facilitator of language learning in natural a context where learning happens in congruity with all learning mechanisms, the catalyst function of EI does not become operational when there is not much

interoperability between it and the processes involved in the target learning. It is interesting to see that the learning/acquisition contrast is nowhere so strong and apparent as in foreign language learning contexts, where Krashenian “learning” has a good chance of happening and “acquisition”, in the sense of natural, emergent development as a result of natural exposure, should be hard strived for. Language teaching, whether done through the traditional GTM, modern TPR method, or post-method task-based instruction, is easy to fall victim to discrete-point and disintegrated applications, which are highly conscious and monitored and may limit the effective mechanisms in exerting their full influence because the learning task is stripped to the cognitive core.

Goleman’s (2011) remarks in his website endorse this argument:

There is no necessary relationship between emotional intelligence and a cognitive ability like language learning.... The neural circuits that govern self-management and relationship skills -- the two main parts of EI -- are independent of the areas for verbal and other cognitive capabilities. On the other hand, it may depend on how you are learning the language. The one way in which EI might facilitate language learning is if you go to that culture and learn the language by living there. The more naturally occurring opportunities you have to practice, the quicker your learning will be. And EI should make it easier for you to cultivate the ongoing relationships with people who can help you learn.

Another, but related, cause of not observing a positive correlation between the linguistic measures and the emotional measure in this study may be the particular study strategies that the participants resort to. True integrative motivation and communicative goals may be more associated with ESL context than EFL situations. However, it is conceivable that even in a foreign context, students with instrumental drives may study based on different agendas and scenarios. In one scenario, they may use strategies which involve several types of intelligences and bring different aspects of their resources and personality traits into play. For example, when they

look at learning as a long-term goal and contextualize that goal within their other life goals and pursue that goal for personal growth, language learning becomes a dynamic social-psychological process involving different socio-affective aspects of their intelligence. Alternatively, they may follow a memory-based agenda, looking at learning as a singular process detached from their other activities and faculties. They set themselves linguistic goals of vocabulary learning, grammar learning, even learning the norms and techniques of writing and the sounds of the words. The success of the strategies that they employ to implement these goals may not be less than the strategies which are attuned to learning language components and elements integratively— at least in the short run and at the level of knowledge and awareness. Obviously, this success cannot be validly attributed to social or emotional competencies.

Furthermore, the test used to check the linguistic knowledge could not differentiate between the strategies which were dominantly memory- and cognitive-based and those which involved socio-affective aspects of the learners. A learner who marked a multiple choice item employed in this study could have been a great memorizer interested in committing vocabulary items of grammar rules to memory, but at a loss if it came to using those items in actual context. It seems reasonable that a test should be examined for the types of ability requirements and the processes and strategies which can lead to the learning targeted by that test. It is true that the tests used in this study were checked for their reliability but as the results indicated, the contents of the linguistic tests were not associated with the features which the SEIS purported to measure. If the linguistic measures had been less memory-based and involved non-cognitive traits in the learners, i.e., they required more holistic learning processes, they might have produced a different correlational profile.

This study was motivated by the suspicion that the relationship frequently reported in the literature between the emotional intelligence of learners and their academic achievement may not necessarily hold true for foreign language learning. This suspicion

seemed counterintuitive in the general educational context of affect-cognition relationship and the interdependence of communicative and verbal skills on the one hand and social and managerial skills on the other. The major finding of this correlational study is that this suspicion should not be ruled out. However, because of the small scale of the study and such limitations as the low number of participants, the similarity of their contexts, and measurement and scoring issues, it is premature to make final claims. Without questioning the previous studies, this research may encourage us to think that the relationship between language learning and EI is more than a simple linear relationship, but subject to various influences, the exploration of which being a worthy project as such.

7. Conclusion

This research attempted to address the relationship between emotional intelligence and the linguistic proficiency of a group of English learners in an Iranian university. No positive correlation obtained between participants' emotional intelligence and their reading comprehension, grammatical and vocabulary knowledge and writing skill. In all cases, the correlation was negative; in the case of essay writing it was significantly so. This indicates they do not resort to the components of emotional intelligence in the process of writing essays and doing other language tasks targeted by this study. It also indicates that EI components have not played a crucial role in the process of their development of those competencies in English.

Lack of positive correlations between language test scores and emotional ones should not be interpreted as an absolute irrelevance of EQ to linguistic skills development. In acquisitional and natural processes of language learning we have more holistic processes and more right brain involvement; hence, it is easily conceivable to have much interoperability or tandem operations in such contexts. In foreign language learning situations, there may be fewer chances of right-brain involvement or we may traditionally be less used to involving the right brain in such situations. however, there is a lot of variation across EFL situations. Situations in which communicative

processes are encouraged seem to tap more of the emotional resources of the learners than those which encourage solo activities. Further research is needed to see whether the same correlational outcomes are repeated in longer spans of time, i.e., after more years of language study; or, whether EI still stays outside the EFL road even when more use-oriented tests are used,

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