

## Potential Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety among Saudi Female Students in the United States

**Haifa Almotiary**

Linguistics and Applied Linguistics

Department of English

Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA

Email: [halmotia@asu.edu](mailto:halmotia@asu.edu)

Received: 12/13/2021

Accepted: 5/1/2022

Published: 6/24/2022

### Abstract

This study aims to answer the following main question: What are the possible factors that cause foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Saudi Arabian female students living and studying English as a foreign language in the US? Data were obtained from interviewing nine Saudi females learning English as a second language in the US. There has been increased research into foreign language learning and anxiety. Some studies have focused on Western students learning a foreign language in a Western setting, while others have involved Asian students, ignoring other perspectives. Due to the significant increase in Saudi women currently studying in the US, this study investigated FLA among this population accustomed to segregated classrooms. The results revealed that the participants exhibited some commonly cited FLA types (e.g., communication apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation). Still, the role of their Saudi cultural background may have been equally important in influencing their FLA. Future research might include a larger sample of students and teachers to investigate FLA and help elucidate students' experiences.

*Keywords:* classroom research, English as a second language, ESL context, foreign language anxiety,

**Cite as:** Almotiary, H. (2022). Potential Causes of Foreign Language Anxiety among Saudi Female Students in the United States . *Arab World English Journal*, 13 (2) 267-281.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol13no2.18>

## Introduction

For decades, scholars and language teachers have paid attention to the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety (FLA). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) argued that FLA is a distinct unique construct that differs from other forms of anxiety. The authors defined FLA as a “distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128).

The role that language anxiety plays in the acquisition of a foreign language has been studied extensively over the past several years. However, few of these studies have explored the causes of such anxiety in female Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) speakers (e.g., AlSaqqaf, Swants, Din, Bidin, & Shabdin, 2017). AlSaqqaf et al. (2017) investigated the factors causing language anxiety among Arab Ph.D. holders and candidates in the US. In addition, they examined anxiety levels, considering that these students come from a male-dominated culture. However, the small sample makes it difficult to extrapolate to the general population, and the selection only includes Ph.D. students limits its application to English as a second language (ESL) students. Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2015) addressed the issue of FLA among female EFL Arabic speakers using different variables but failed to delineate the experiences of male and female learners.

Furthermore, there is little evidence of any in-depth studies exploring anxiety among female foreign language learners in male-dominated societies. In the first part of her study, Al-Saraj (2014) invited Saudi female participants to answer open-ended prompts regarding situations in which they had felt anxiety while learning English, but this is one of few studies involving Saudi female participants. As a result, the topic has received limited attention.

## The Rationale of the Study

Due to the significant increase in Saudi women currently studying or residing in the US, more research is needed to investigate in depth the source of FLA among this population. Furthermore, the importance of this study is magnified by the salient differences between the American and Saudi cultures, such as the law that forbids interactions between males and females in public. The contrasting nature of social life and norms in the two environments is blatant. The reality for females in Saudi Arabia is that they are segregated, restricted, and censored, whereas, in the US, they are included and encouraged to share their opinions and perspectives.

Other studies about FLA have not emphasized the influence of cultural background on anxiety formation, especially as it pertains to female Saudi Arabian learners of English language in the US. To address this gap, the researcher conducted a study to explore the factors that can influence anxiety among nine Saudi female participants studying or residing in the US. FLA research has not yet considered the perspectives of Arab female ESL learners. FLA research has been done in only a few countries. Within that body of investigative work, few studies have even been conducted on Arabs as a second language (L2) learners/users. For example, the main countries in which FLA research has been conducted are the US (e.g., Bailey, 1983; Lucas, 1984), Australia (e.g., Woodrow, 2006), and the UK (e.g., Wan, 2012).

The value of considering FLA from the perspective of Saudi females comes from the fact that a vast number of Saudi females are now being educated abroad. According to Zong and Batalova (2018), Saudi Arabia is one of the leading sources of international students in the US. Also, Saudi Arabia is one of the top 10 sources of international students in the UK and Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018; UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2019). However, even with so many Saudi female students studying in other countries where co-ed classes are standard, the relationship between their level of anxiety and their educational success, specifically in co-ed classrooms, has not been investigated formally.

There is a general dearth of information on Arab ESL students' gender-specific learning anxiety. However, Marzec-Stawiarska's (2014) study at least sheds a generalized light on how women become more anxious than men in certain situations when speaking a foreign language in the classroom. To carry out the study, Marzec-Stawiarska (2014) adapted the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), added new items specific for this study, and focused on in-class speaking comprehension (e.g., I can overcome the stress of speaking English during classes). The study intended to identify gender-related anxiety experiences within a group of EFL students (61 women and 45 men) at a university in Poland. The results confirmed that women are more prone to feeling anxious in a learning environment. The study showed that anxiety could differ between male and female second language (L2) learners, but the study was conducted in Poland. Due to distinctive cultural differences between Polish and Saudi society, the research could not utilize the same data to obtain the same result for Saudi female learners. The female learners showed anxiety levels that far surpassed their male counterparts, specifically when giving oral performances of their English acquisition progress. Still, the authors did not explain the cause of this difference. With such a conclusion, it is worth engaging in further investigation to determine what might create higher levels of anxiety for female students. However, one of the limitations of this study regarding the focus on Arab female ESL students and their levels of language acquisition anxiety is that it involved Polish culture, where female and male roles in society are starkly different than in the Saudi context. For example, the educational system in Poland is not segregated, while in Saudi Arabia, females are only allowed to study in all-female classes. Therefore, it is more likely that the dynamic in mixed-gender classes will differ from same-sex classes. Therefore, while Marzec-Stawiarska's (2014) study focus on gender is of value, setting it apart from other studies, the cultural background of that study keeps its findings from wholly applicable to the topic of study at hand.

The current array of FLA studies lacks a gender-specific lens or has involved cultures that promote gender equality. So, it is important to engage in an investigation that focuses on participants from societies where male-female roles and relationships are imbued with unique cultural norms. Based on this pressing need, the current study was designed to investigate the factors that cause FLA among Saudi female students by taking into consideration the segregated nature of the Saudi culture and how mixed-gender classes in the US can trigger specific feelings of anxiety. Therefore, the study will answer the following research question:

What are the possible factors that cause FLA among Saudi Arabian female students living and studying English as a foreign language in the US?

## Literature Review

Anxiety in L2 learning has been defined in various ways, and commonality in these definitions has been three main components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation. These three components make up the FLA framework, which is a tool that has been used to study FLA. For example, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined FLA as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language L2 context, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p. 284), while Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FLA as occurring when a student has to perform a task in a foreign language. However, despite differing definitions, Horwitz et al. (1986) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) define the three main FLA components as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation.

The FLA framework begins with the first component of communication apprehension, which is a specific example of state anxiety. For example, learners could experience FLA when speaking a foreign language in the classroom. In his study, Tanveer (2007) conducted research in the EFL classes at the University of Glasgow, UK. Twenty subjects from various nationalities participated in the study, and some of these students were from Saudi Arabia. The study used a qualitative approach through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The data revealed that communication apprehension, especially giving presentations in the classroom, is highly anxiety-inducing. This same situation and anxiety-producing outcome hold true for Saudi students in Al-Saraj’s (2014) study.

The FLA framework also focuses on test anxiety students experience when concerned about their performance on a foreign language assessment. This type of performance anxiety is triggered in students during both oral and written forms of testing, and it is linked to the student's expectations of their performance. For example, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggested that several foreign language students feel that anything less than perfect performance on a test negatively affects their identity, making the basic experience a difficult anxiety-producing situation. Horwitz et al. (1986) also suggested that with an oral test, students may also experience oral communication anxiety in addition to test anxiety. For example, Nahavandi and Mukundan (2013) conducted a study to understand FLA among Iranian students. The study involved 548 EFL students (elementary to advanced learners) studying at the Jihad-e-Daneshgahi institute of Tabriz, Iran, and the FLCAS was used. The results showed that test was a factor of anxiety among the EFL learners.

Lastly, the third component is the fear of negative evaluation. This component is different from test anxiety that ESL students may feel because it encompasses both performance on formal assessments and foreign language linguistic performance in virtually any given social setting (Horwitz et al., 1986). This component helps highlight how FLA can occur outside the classroom setting in dynamics such as job interviews or other situations where the speaker is being evaluated by peers and people of importance to them. Essentially, this is a more broadly impacting and potentially crippling fear. It creates insecurities and heightened sensitivities that keep ESL speakers from communicating successfully in all circumstances, from job interviews to social situations. The fear of negative evaluation has been reported as a source of FLA in many studies. For example, in Alrabai’s (2014) first phase, he identified FLA sources among 596 Saudi EFL learners in the Saudi context using the FLCAS. He reported that the fear of negative evaluation is a significant source of FLA among learners.

Research has produced some findings on the causes of FLA among ESL/EFL learners. Competitiveness is a significant factor associated with FLA. Effiong's (2016) study investigated FLA among 24 Japanese EFL learners. The data were obtained from interviews and class observation and revealed that students having low L2 self-concepts when comparing their English abilities to those of other students could lead to FLA.

Other studies have reported that teacher-student interaction is one of the most common factors of FLA. For example, Subekti (2018) investigated FLA among six university students and six of their teachers in an Indonesian context. The study utilized interviews to obtain data. The participants revealed that teachers' attributes and student-teacher interaction contribute to FLA. For example, when students view their teachers as strict and unfriendly, their FLA increases.

The literature supports that being in a situation of acquiring a new language is almost inherently anxiety-producing but that different personal and situational characteristics determine how intense and, thus, how debilitating the anxiety might be. However, more importantly, for this study, the literature review shows an almost total dearth of studies produced on how gender impacts FLA for Saudi females studying English in the US. The main elements that create anxiety include the new atmosphere of desegregated classroom dynamics, the student-centric instructor approach, and the new instructional methods that prompt a great deal of attention on the students. All these together create a new lens with which to view the situation of Saudi female students in American EFL classrooms and, thus, a new prompting for instructional methods and support that provide them with the tools and comfortable learning dynamics they need to succeed.

While much research has investigated these factors, more research is needed. Researchers who have studied FLA have argued that more research is needed (Al-Saraj, 2011, 2014; Lababidi, 2016). Al-Saraj's (2011) recommendation provides for future research involve studying Saudi English students' perspectives within the co-ed English environment, as well as the views of students coming from surrounding nations (who share the same culture as Saudi Arabian students):

Examining individuals in mixed-sex learning environments, and looking at both men and women in other Gulf countries ... examination of FLA in students in other Gulf countries would be of interest because, although the countries share similar cultures, they differ in whether men and women are segregated at college levels education. (p. 222)

Nahavandi and Mukundan (2013, p. 11) added, "The present research may encourage further research in anxiety and the related problems it can cause for EFL learners by other interested researchers."

## Methods

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study to explore in-depth the causes of FLA among Saudi female learners in the US. A qualitative research design is used to investigate in depth the perspective and the beliefs people have towards the issue at hand (Creswell, 2012). Many FLA studies have involved quantitative approaches (e.g., questionnaire surveys). Still, the researcher chose a qualitative study because by asking students to answer an open-ended prompt, it would be possible to determine which situations are relevant to specific groups of learners who

had been included or overlooked. Al-Saraj (2014) stated that the open-ended prompt allows students to respond freely and talk about any issues, concerns, or anxiety without being guided (e.g., by questionnaires or interviews).

### ***Research Instruments***

Anxiety can be brought about by environmental factors, as the social structures of Western cultures are distinct from Eastern cultures. Oxford noted that anxiety is always experienced within a social context dictated by cultural norms (as cited in Al-Saraj, 2014). According to Al-Saraj (2014), due to the culturally defined experience of anxiety, questionnaires other than the FLCAS are needed to discuss situations where different social contexts apply. Al-Saraj developed a questionnaire that measures the anxiety level of Arab students—the AFLAS (the Arabic Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire), basing it on Horwitz et al.'s (1986) model. The AFLAS was oriented toward the Saudi culture and its norms, but it was designed to target Arabic learners studying in Saudi Arabia, not in a foreign country. The researcher used some statements in the questionnaire that concern situations that may provoke anxiety in students to help get an idea of the anxiety level of the participants. I also used part of the questionnaire to initiate the conversation with the participants.

The researcher chose to do oral interviews that would result in evidence specific to Saudi women learning English within an American context. I knew this method would allow the women to volunteer their feelings and experiences that make them anxious in that environment instead of giving them a list of situations that may or may not invoke their anxiety. For example, the presence of male Saudi students in the class may increase the anxiety that female Saudi students feel, but this is a matter that is not addressed in any current FLA questionnaires.

I asked the students an open-ended prompt to elicit their answers. The open-ended prompt that Al-Saraj (2014) suggested states, "Some people feel anxious or nervous from time to time when learning a foreign language. When do you feel anxious (or nervous) in the English language classroom? (Try to think of as many examples as you can)." (p. 57). I asked the students the question in Arabic to prompt them to talk about their experiences by elaborating on the anxiety-provoking situations they faced when speaking English or when they were in ESL classes. This research is not necessarily a classroom-focused approach, as the participants were encouraged to express their language experience beyond the classroom. Hilleson (1996) used open-ended questions to allow students to discuss their experiences related to FLA freely. This approach provided authentic, insightful, and unexpected feedback that would not have been possible with the more structured forms of questionnaires. I used this same approach for this study with the desire for a similarly insightful outcome.

Adaptation of the FLCAS has been successful in previous studies, such as when Ohata (2005) conducted a study similar to the current one to examine the potential causes of anxiety among Japanese English learners in the US. He adapted some FLCAS statements to understand the participants' anxiety levels in his study, and he was successful. I used the AFLAQ, derived from the most well-known instrument for measuring FL classroom anxiety. I expected it to produce valid results because it has been used to assess similar populations in other studies (Al-Saraj, 2011; 2014).

### ***Participants***

This study involved nine Saudi female ESL users/learners as participants. Hilleson (1996) and Ohato (2005), who used a qualitative approach (interview/diaries/journals) to investigate FLA, recruited a similar number of participants because it allowed them to explore the issue in depth without needing to claim that they had employed a representative sample. My purpose of having a small number of participants was also to try and understand the issue from the participants' perspectives. However, this number does not represent all Saudi female learners in the US. Therefore, I used snowball sampling to recruit participants for the current study. They have to be female Saudi ESL learners in the US and above 18 years old.

### ***Data Analysis Procedure***

The early stage of the data analysis employed a top-down approach based on Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLA framework. The three themes of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation identified in the first stage of my data analysis parallel the three components of the FLA framework. Further analysis showed several additional recurring themes. This led to the development of an additional phase of the research process that employed a bottom-up approach to analyzing the data from the perspective of previous studies. Other themes that emerged were a cultural influence, competitiveness, and variable anxiety levels related to the four skills: writing, reading, speaking and listening. The responses from the interview sessions were grouped according to themes.

### ***Data Collection***

The researcher met with each participant in a café shop in Tempe, Arizona, two weeks apart in June and once in July 2019. The interviews took approximately 10 minutes to complete, tallying up to 18 interviews. During the meeting, I collected personal data (e.g., age, major, and year in college), and I asked the participants about their L2 learning background. In addition, I explained the purpose of the study to each participant and recorded the interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured, using specific prompts to elicit responses (see Appendix A). Additional questions were asked to clarify their intended meanings based on their answers. I attempted to leave an open space for each interviewee to provide their response to prevent interviewer bias. In other words, the questions and prompts were general, but more focused definitions of the questions were given whenever the participant requested clarification. In addition, to allow the respondents to speak more freely, the interview was conducted in their first language (i.e., Arabic).

### ***Findings***

In this section, the results of the analysis will be described. The analysis will include themes that emerged, and for each theme, there will be a definition, a descriptive example, and a sample excerpt from the transcripts. The sample excerpts are typical examples of how the participants talked about the themes. More specifically, the data show potential sources of language anxiety among the participants: cultural influences, communication apprehension and the fear of negative evaluation, test-taking, competitiveness, and the effect of four English skills on anxiety levels among participants. The researcher will describe each theme below.

### *Cultural Influences*

All the participants mentioned that the cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the US had affected their anxiety levels. The main cultural difference brought up by the participants was the situation of mixed classes in the US and how it is different than the all-female classes in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the other cultural difference that several participants spoke of was the different expectations of teacher-student interactions in classes that led them to feel out of their comfort zone and thus induced high anxiety.

### *Mixed Classes*

It seems that having male students in the classroom is a new experience for most participants. Some of them indicated that being in mixed classrooms increased their anxiety level. Three of the participants (1, 6, and 9) showed that having male students in the classroom increased their anxiety levels initially. However, for Respondents 6 and 9, exposure to male classmates over time has lessened their anxiety levels. Respondent 6 indicated that her anxiety level was not high at the time of the interview, although it was initially high in the presence of Saudi male students in the classes. Her experience and anxiety level changed because the male students adapted to her presence with a more open-minded and accepting approach than is customary in Saudi culture.

Embarrassment, anxiety, and culture. It is a new environment! I haven't lived that before. Being a Saudi female studying in the US and a guy sitting next to me in the class, it was the most difficult things I had to face as a Saudi girl. It wasn't easy for me. I come from a society that segregates males and females. Communication between me and him is prohibited. It was very difficult at the beginning of the class. (interview 2 with participant 6)

Most respondents reported that having foreign males in the classroom does not affect their anxiety level. However, three respondents (1, 6, and 9) mentioned that they might react differently to a Saudi male than a male from any other country.

When a pen drops, I can bring it to the foreigner but not to you. You got it! It was so difficult. However, Subhan-Allah, after that, the situation has changed; his mentality and mine have changed. So we have become more open-minded, and we can accept each other; we have been immersed in American culture. We learned from it, and we had to adapt to the class rules and the country's culture. (interview 2 with participant 6)

When there are Saudi male in the classrooms, I used to get nervous because we were not used to interacting with each other. It is weird. It is forbidden. If you pay close attention, you will see Saudi guys communicate with foreign girls freely, and you will see Saudi girls talk to foreign guys freely but not with each other. Right? (interview 2 with participant 9)

### *Teacher-Student Interaction*

It seems that the difference between the educational systems in the US and Saudi Arabia was initially a source of FLA because the students were not used to a great deal of the interactive practices that teachers in the US asked of them. For example, asking the professors questions and having a dialogue with professors and other students are challenges that put the participants outside their comfort zone because they come from a structured educational environment. However, many

American professors' open and friendly attitude provides a release from anxiety the participants may have felt back home.

I mean, yeah, in Saudi Arabia, there are things I wish existed, like we didn't have the agency or the power to challenge our professor. They consider it disrespectful. You cannot even ask the professor questions or challenge their ideas. It is considered rude. Unlike here, they want you to ask questions and to challenge them. This helped me a lot to be more daring, even though it came late, but at least now, I ask questions. Before, I was so shy, and I blamed the educational system in Saudi Arabia. They taught us how to be scared and never ask questions. (interview 2 with participant 8)

Despite this, other dynamics within American classrooms contribute to the participants' anxiety. For example, instructors expect students to speak in class in the US and encourage them to participate. In contrast, this type of participation is not familiar in Saudi Arabia. For some, the anxiety this cultural background causes has lessened over time, but speaking in the classroom, especially during an evaluation of their speaking, creates anxiety for most respondents.

I mean, most of the professors ask me. Why you feel shy to speak or feel fear? Some of you do not do presentations, and do not speak. The Saudi students said that they are not used to practicing English inside or outside the classroom in Saudi Arabia. We barely speak in the class. When we go out the classroom we speak in Arabic and not in English. And maybe that is why we feel anxious when we speak in the classrooms here. (interview 2 with participant 4)

This corresponds with the statements by Participant 8—who felt their anxiety is due to a lack of practice, thus presenting a skills-deficit type of anxiety.

### ***Communication Apprehension and the Fear of Negative Evaluation***

Almost all the participants in this study attributed their apprehension of speaking to being afraid of being judged. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, given these responses, I felt that combining both communication apprehension and the fear of negative evaluation prevented the confusion that might have occurred since there is an overlap.

In analyzing their responses, it is clear that anxiety levels varied from participant to participant regarding public speaking. A certain level of fearfulness, or anxiety, seemed to be present in all the participants. The way they reacted to this anxiety varied from person to person, as Participant 2 clearly showed that preparation reduced her anxiety level, and Participant 8 explained that she never prepares. Participant 8 also stated that she has ADHD, which makes her feel that too much preparation might increase her anxiety. Interestingly, nearly all the participants reported experiencing some anxiety when speaking in English, but speaking in class was the most referred to as a stressor.

Several participants indicated that they suffered less anxiety in the ESL classrooms since all the students were striving to learn English than in other classes at the college or university level, where various abilities and interests were present. Another source of anxiety comes from their fear

of being judged. At the college or university level, the participants believed that more proficient levels of English were expected of them, which made them feel anxious.

But when I speak with a foreign person, I feel that he understands that I am here to study and that I speak English as a second language, and my language is not perfect.

Because in class in college, I feel that I need to know English. If I make many English mistakes, the students would note how this student is doing her master's and her English is not good. But when I speak with someone outside the class, I always tell them that I am from Saudi Arabia, and they always say, "Oh, your language is good." But they do not know that I am studying for my master's here. When they know that, I feel that they will change their mind. (Interview 2 with Participant 1)

Similarly, Participant 3 considered speaking inside the classroom more anxiety-inducing than speaking outside the classroom. She attributed this to her fear of being judged and evaluated based on her English language, affecting her scores and grades.

### ***Test Taking***

Most participants stated that taking a test is an anxiety-provoking situation because they are afraid of the negative judgment of getting a bad grade. This makes them lack self-confidence or feel inferior to others. They also mentioned that they feel pressure when their assessment has a time limitation. This can be seen in the following excerpt from Participant 5: "When you have an exam, or someone is evaluating you. You will feel more anxious ... Like TOEFL and IELTS tests, it is necessary to finish in a certain period. This makes me nervous" (Interview 2).

### ***Competitiveness***

The data show a prevalent theme of competition in some participants, whether they are aware of it or not, and that it can affect their anxiety level. Respondents 1 and 2 stated that they were comfortable around other ESL students because they were all engaged in a similar experience. This is mainly because they had approximately the same level of English language competency. Within their classes, they were all pursuing a similar learning goal and perhaps even having the same difficulties. Due to their similar levels of English language achievement, they did not experience any emotions of anxiety or competition.

In contrast, Respondent 8 indicated that her experience of comparing herself to someone whose English was better than hers gave her a negative opinion of her own English and increased her anxiety level. This can be seen in the following excerpt from Participant 8: "But sometimes, I feel my comparing myself to others could increase my anxiety level" (Interview 2).

### **Discussion**

This study suggests that cultural differences (i.e., mixed classes), teacher-student interaction, communication apprehension and apprehension about others' judgment, test-taking, and competitiveness are the main causes of FLA among Saudi female learners studying in the US.

### ***Mixed Classes***

Most of the participants in the current study had a problem at the beginning of their time in the US, as learning to interact with Saudi males in an entirely different context was an abrupt paradigm shift for them. However, over time, their anxiety has lessened through increased exposure to this new environment and the language improvement efforts that several have undertaken to enhance their command of the English language. An interesting discovery within the scope of this study is that almost none of the participants indicated that interacting with foreign males or male native speakers increased their anxiety.

The researcher thought men and women participating in the same classroom would be a significant factor among Saudi female students but was surprised that only a few respondents felt it was a significant problem. Some of them indicated a level of anxiety when the male students in their classes were from Saudi Arabia, but this is attributable to the cultural factor that all classes, and even all sectors of life, in Saudi Arabia are segregated. Most of the respondents indicated that they may have had some anxiety from this at first. Still, this negative feeling has decreased over time due to becoming accustomed to it and noting the open-minded attitudes of the male students involved. This finding, therefore, extends existing research, such as that done by Al-Saraj (2014) regarding FLA in female Saudi students studying in Saudi Arabia, to provide a perspective on the FLA that female Saudi students in US-based ESL classrooms experience and how they process it. Furthermore, several of the questions and recommendations from Al-Saraj's (2014) study were incorporated into the current study.

### ***Teacher-Student Interaction***

Consistent with previous research, the participants in the current study reported that having teachers with specific characteristics, such as being strict and unfriendly, can affect their FLA. In addition, the participants reported that interactions between teachers and students in the US are different than in Saudi Arabia. In other words, the level of anxiety resulting from these interactions may vary depending upon whether the teacher is flexible and friendly with the students. This is consistent with Subekti's (2018) study, in which the participants reported that viewing their teachers to be friendly and caring reduces their FLA. In contrast, if the teacher plays the role of an authoritarian figure, that could induce FLA among learners.

### ***Speaking***

The current study results also show that certain situations induce FLA more than others. All the respondents indicated that certain situations make them more anxious than usual. There were three primary situations that several respondents indicated could produce anxiety. The first was when they were asked to give presentations, and this type of anxiety is related to the second type of anxiety that occurs when they feel that they are being judged on their linguistic performance. Thus, the current study reinforced the findings of earlier studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Tanveer, 2007). Participants in his study reported that speaking in class (i.e., giving a presentation or speaking in front of the class) is the most anxiety-provoking situation.

Several participants indicated that this is because they have never faced the same situations in Saudi Arabian classrooms. None of them indicated that they had any experience with public speaking in the classroom setting before coming to America. In the US, students often feel that

they are being judged by both their instructor and their classmates (especially in college classes), which creates/increases anxiety. The third anxiety-producing situation is test-taking, and the respondents also felt that tests constitute a situation in which they are generally being judged. There is also the variable of time limits being set for the completion of tests, which increases stress and anxiety. There is a parallel between the ideas that the participants expressed and the three forms of performance anxiety that Horwitz et al. (1986) identified in their discussion of communication apprehension, testing anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation.

The fear of negative evaluation varied among the respondents, with significant factors including who is in the potential audience and their role concerning the speaker. Respondents indicated that their anxiety levels would vary depending on whether the audience members were Saudis, other Arabs, non-Arabic speakers from other countries, or Americans. They were in ESL classrooms, college classrooms, or outside the classroom. This is similar to Alrabai's (2014) finding that the fear of being judged by peers and teachers is the most significant source of language anxiety.

### ***Test Taking***

The participants in the current study indicated that taking tests is one of the factors that affect their FLA. This finding confirms existing research similar to how ESL students find test-taking anxiety-provoking. For example, the participants in the current study and Nahavandi and Mukundan's study (2013) stated that test-taking is an important factor of FLA. They also attributed their fear of taking tests to their being anxious about the negative consequences of getting a bad grade.

### ***Competitiveness***

Consistent with previous research, the participants in the current study reported that competitiveness is a major cause of FLA. This aligns with Effiong's (2016) finding that self-comparison induces FLA among learners. The most insightful matter that Effiong (2016) shared is that when the competition turns from a healthy drive to outdo another into an envious dynamic, it goes from being productive to anxiety-producing. The learner may put too high a value on grades, race through work, or lose focus on the effective acquisition of the language in the desire to show off in a given moment, and all this prevents them from improving their language skills in the long term.

Although some respondents in the current study describe themselves as not being competitive, some of their responses indicated that they ranked themselves compared to other students. According to Bailey (1983), self-ranking is a factor in competitiveness, which means that, despite the participants' responses, they were more competitive than they believed. As long as they felt equal to other students, they did not feel anxiety; however, if they felt that other students performed better than they did, their anxiety level increased. This corresponds with Bailey's study (1983), in which she indicates that she was not aware of her level of competitiveness until she read her diaries detailing her language class experience. She noted that, although she did not initially recognize her competitiveness, she had persistently evaluated the level of her foreign language ability and ranked the ability of others in her class. Given how similar this is to what my

respondents said about their own experiences, it is evident that their level of anxiety was related to their subconscious drive for competitiveness.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Due to the sample size, the limited range of ages being studied, and the varying lengths of stay in the US, this study can be considered limited in its scope. Future studies might include a larger sample size of students and their teachers, a more formal means of selecting respondents, and more in-depth questioning of why particular responses are given. Within this study, none of the respondents would fit the category of a recent arrival. Some of the participants in the current study indicated that their opinion regarding their anxiety level over having male students in the same classroom has changed over time. New arrivals might give more accurate opinions based on their first impressions, which might have been difficult for the current respondents to recall.

### Conclusion

This study has discussed the potential causes of FLA among Saudi female students in the US. The nine female Saudi participants reported the general types of anxiety in this study to correspond to many of the findings previously reported on FLA. Cultural influence (i.e., mixed classes), teacher-student interaction, communication apprehension, negative evaluation, test-taking, and competitiveness. There has been research on FLA; however, previous studies that looked at FLA have not emphasized the influence of cultural background on anxiety formation, especially as it pertains to female Saudi Arabian learners of English language in the US.

### About the Author:

**Haifa Almotiary**, a PhD candidate at Arizona State University in the United States. Her research interest is in foreign language anxiety. She is also a lecturer at Jeddah University in Saudi Arabia. She holds a master degree in TESL from California State University- Dominguez Hills in the US and a bachelor degree in English Language from King Saudi University in Saudi Arabia. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1526-9841>

### References

- Alrabai, F. (2014). A model of foreign language anxiety in the Saudi EFL context. *English Language Teaching*, 7(7), 82–101.
- AlSaqqaf, A., Swanto, S., Din, W. A., Bidin, S. J., & Shabdin, A. A. (2017). Factors causing language anxiety among Arab Ph.D. holders and candidates: A cultural dimension? *American Journal and Education Research*, 5(12), 1208–1211. DOI: [10.12691/education-5-12-6](https://doi.org/10.12691/education-5-12-6)
- Al-Saraj, T. M. (2011). *Exploring foreign language anxiety in Saudi Arabia: A study of female English as foreign language college students* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Institute of Education, University of London, London.  
<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10020618/1/AL-SARAJ%2C%20T.M.pdf>
- Al-Saraj, T. M. (2014). Revisiting the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS): The anxiety of female English language learners in Saudi Arabia. *L2 Journal*, 6(1), 50–75.  
<https://doi.org/10.5070/L26121650>
- Bailey, K. M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: Looking at

- and through the dairy studies. In H. W. Seliger & M. H. Long (Eds.), *classroom-oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 6–103). Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
- Canadian Bureau for International Education. (2018, August). International students in Canada [PDF file].  
<https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/International-Students-in-Canada-ENG.pdf?msclkid=23fb8dbfcea611ec881b42fc4c0bcba>
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Dewaele, J., & Al-Saraj, T. (2015). Foreign language classroom anxiety of Arab learners of English: The effect of personality, linguistic and sociobiographical variables. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 5(2), 205–228. DOI:10.14746/ssl.2015.5.2.2
- Effiong, O. (2016). Getting them speaking: Classroom social factors and foreign language anxiety. *TESOL Journal*, 7(1), 132–161. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.194>
- Hilleson, M. (1996). “I want to talk to them but I don't want them to hear”: An introspective study of second language anxiety in an English-medium school. In K. M. Bailey & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices from the language classroom: Qualitative research on language education* (pp. 248–275). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132. <https://doi.org/10.2307/327317>
- Lababidi, R. A. (2016). Language anxiety: A case study of the perceptions and experiences of students of English as a foreign language in a higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates. *English Language Teaching*, 9(9), 185–198.  
 doi: 10.5539/elt.v9n9p185
- Lucas, J. (1984). Communication apprehension in the ESL classroom: Getting our students to talk. *Foreign Language Annals*, 17(6), 593–598.  
 DOI:10.1111/j.1944-9720.1984.tb01748.x
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1991). Methods and results in the study of anxiety and language learning: A review of the literature. *Language Learning*, 41(1), 85–117.  
 doi:10.1111/j.1467-1770.1991.tb00677.x
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, 44(2), 283–305.  
 doi:10.1111/j.1467-1770.1994.tb01103.x
- Marzec-Stawiarska, M. (2014). Gender differences in foreign language speaking-in-class anxiety. *Linguistica Silesiana*, 35, 417–434.
- Nahavandi, N., & Mukundan, J. (2013). Foreign language learning anxiety among Iranian EFL learners along gender and different proficiency levels. *Language in India*, 13(1).
- Ohata, K. (2005). Potential sources of anxiety for Japanese learners of English: Preliminary case interviews with five Japanese college students in the US *TESL-EJ*, 9(3), 1–21.
- Subekti, A. S. (2018). An exploration of learners' foreign language anxiety in the Indonesian university context: Learners' and teachers' voices. *TEFLON Journal*, 29(2), 219–244.  
 DOI:10.15639/teflinjournal.v29i2/219-244

- Tanveer, M. (2008). *Investigation of the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning speaking skills and the influence it casts on communication in the target language* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Glasgow, Glasgow. DOI:[10.13140/RG.2.1.1995.1129](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.1995.1129)
- UK Council for International Student Affairs. (2019, August). International student statistics: UK higher education. Retrieved from <https://ukcisa.org.uk/Research--Policy/Statistics/International-student-statistics-UK-higher-education?msckid=9c79d890cea511ec8e8e7be65c84dd99>
- Wan, H. (2012). *Language anxiety in Chinese learners of English in the UK: Conceptualisation of language anxiety in second language learning and its relationship with other learner variables* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne <https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/handle/10443/2635>
- Woodrow, L. (2006). Anxiety and speaking English as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 37(3), 209–321. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688206071315>
- Zong, J., & Batalova, J. (2018, May 9). International students in the United States. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/international-students>