

Investigating Foreign Language Anxiety among Moroccan EFL University Students in Face-to-Face and Distance Learning Modes

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Abstract

Since the English language has become a prerequisite for entering most domains, some students are nowadays enrolled in EFL classes, be them face-to-face or online. However, they face some obstacles that impede their learning process. Foreign Language Anxiety is one of these. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to compare the anxiety levels that Moroccan university students experience in two different learning environments (face-to-face vs. distance learning). Furthermore, it attempts to find out the sources from which anxiety stems, as well as to suggest some useful strategies to alleviate students' anxiety levels. To this end, two research instruments were used. A survey that consists of two sets of questions adapted from the Foreign Language Virtual Classroom Anxiety Scale and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale was administered to 100 EFL students from different universities in Morocco to gather quantitative data, and interviews that were conducted with 10 students were used to collect qualitative data. In contrast to a traditional class, the study's findings showed that students in online classes have lower levels of communication anxiety. However, it was discovered that in both learning techniques, students' feelings of test anxiety and dread of a poor grade remained largely unchanged. Overall, the findings indicated that most Moroccan university students find online classes to be less anxiety-inducing. This study filled a gap in the literature by investigating foreign language anxiety among language learners who are studying languages remotely.

Keywords: EFL Moroccan university students, foreign language anxiety, distance learning, face-to-face learning

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Introduction

Globalization and the demands of the twenty-first century necessitate the learning of foreign languages. The latter is a prerequisite for successful communication, as they enable individuals to widen their knowledge, insights and horizons. Accordingly, the English language, being the lingua franca, is becoming nowadays the most important language to learn, to meet different purposes, and be them related to business, technology, medicine, economy, education, or any other domain. In this sense, all educational stakeholders are required to adopt innovative methods and approaches that are conducive to effective learning of English and that create learners who can communicate and use the language in different contexts. Thus, teachers and policymakers are to provide learners with what they need to function successfully in today's world. To this end, it is crucial to take into consideration the affective factors that might either facilitate the process of learning a language or hinder it

To take part in a successful language study, teachers must be cognizant and gain insight into the difficulties learners may find during their learning process. Being knowledgeable about learners' affective variables is no exception. Affective aspects in general and foreign language anxiety, in particular, is demonstrated by numerous researchers to have detrimental effects on learners' performance, for this, it is extremely necessary to investigate the latter in a thorough approach. The levels of pupils' foreign language anxiety in conventional courses have been the subject of extensive investigation. Online classes have taken an important part in today's instructional programs, however, examining the anxiety levels that learners experience in a distance learning environment has not been considered by many researchers. It might be complicated for students to learn a foreign language at a distance, as there will not be enough opportunities for interaction and practice, the thing that might elevate students' feelings of anxiety. At the same time, there might be some learners who find virtual learning environments less stressful and more comfortable. Thus, it is paramountly significant to attain the following objectives: 1) To elucidate the sources of foreign language anxiety. 2) To investigate whether there is a difference in students' foreign language anxiety levels based on their learning environment (face-to-face vs distance learning). 3) To investigate how the three dimensions of foreign language anxiety (communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety) are affected within the two learning modes.

To suggest some strategies to help students overcome foreign language anxiety, this research aims at answering the following research questions:

- What are the triggers of foreign language anxiety?
- What are the differences in students' foreign language anxiety levels based on their learning environment (traditional and distance learning)?
- How are the two forms of learning affecting the three aspects of foreign language anxiety (test anxiety, fear of failure, and communication anxiety)?
- How can foreign language anxiety be reduced in face-to-face learning?

The organization of the current study is as follows: The first section presents the background of the study, as it covers some previous studies that have been done on foreign language anxiety. Section two tackles the methodology part of the research in which samples of the population, research tools, and the procedure and data analysis are presented. Section three presents the findings and the results of the study including the analysis of Moroccan university students' levels of foreign language anxiety according to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and the Foreign Language Virtual Classroom Anxiety Scale questionnaire, and students' interviews. Section four confines itself mainly to discussing the findings and the results. And the final part is a general conclusion which tackles the limitations of the study, the pedagogical implications, the suggestions for further research and the recommendations for students and teachers.

Literature Review

This section will discuss critically some previous studies that have been done on foreign language anxiety. It will define anxiety as a generic condition and identify foreign language anxiety as a distinct subtype of anxiety. It will cover the basic varieties of language anxiety, its three main elements, its causes, manifestations, and some coping mechanisms. It will also clarify the connection between anxiety and academic success as well as the association between anxiety and foreign language distance learning.

In Morocco, a great deal of scholarly interest was given to the duality between distance online learning and face-to-face learning, concerning the promising learning outcomes as well as the rising challenges. Interestingly, existing literature seems to be divided into two lines of thought; studies arguing in favor of the negative impact that anxiety in distance learning has (e.g. Bousfiha & Kadiri (2021) and EL Addouli (2022)), and others reporting that it may have moderate to no negative impact at all (e.g. Elkhayma (2020)), or operating positively in some cases.

Bousfiha and Kadiri (2021), for instance, carried out an interesting research study which reports that online classes provoked high levels of anxiety among learners in comparison to traditional classes. The results of their study indicated a significant increase in communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in distance learning compared to the face-to-face setting.

In brief, their argument arises from the claim that unlike in the past, where switching to digitized institutions and modern approaches to using technologies in teaching and learning were in a way a luxurious option, the worldwide pandemic of Covid-19 unlocked the way to the reconsideration of old methods as well as a necessary adjustment with the suddenly emerging situation (Bousfiha and Kadiri, 2021). Educational technologies and distance teaching and learning were a contingency plan and a key to avoiding a total shutdown. However, given that no one anticipated the sudden shift, the whole process lacked initial planning, necessary training, and required expertise, and a range of challenges emerged. Bousfiha and Kadiri (2021):

This transition was an inescapable necessity as well as a challenge, especially for institutions that used to rely solely on proximate teaching. Since the overwhelming majority of educators in Morocco lack training in online language design and have been put without prior notice under the imperative of teaching in the virtual space (p.15).

Students' performance anxiety and negative feelings towards the target language can trigger foreign language Anxiety among learners even in natural settings where face-to-face learning and interaction are prevailing. EL Addouli (2022) conducted a research study in which he investigated foreign language anxiety (FLA) through the profiles of American students learning Arabic as a foreign language in Morocco. The findings revealed that participants (Both males and females) exhibited average levels of FLA revealing the two factors underlying factors of FLA; class performance anxiety and negative feelings towards Arabic. He reported that the generated results lend evidence to the argument that foreign language learners are not immune to FLA even when given abundant opportunities to practice the target language in an authentic context.

As far as distance learning is concerned, foreign language anxiety among other variables, is described as one of the most challenging facets and taking into account the characteristics of the situation as well as the different student-teacher relationship patterns, it is also noted that anxiety can have diverse repercussions on different aspects of the teaching and learning process (ibid). Gibbs, Habeshaw, and Habeshaw (1989; as cited in Bousfiha and Kadiri, 2021; Laachir, 2019), explain that even though distance learners tend to have very high expectations of themselves, anxiety still causes them to underperform. They tend to fear failure as a result of anxiety which stems mainly from their life experiences, expectations, and assumptions they make as a result. In other words, anxiety about distance learning may emerge as a consequence of negative past experiences of education in the past, and the assumption that distance education may provide just a similar disempowering learning experience.

Concerning the Moroccan context and the previously discussed argument, the case may not apply to most students none the less. In his research study, Elkhayma (2020) investigates the influence of anxiety in language education and its impact on English as a foreign language Moroccan learner. It examines students' speaking and test anxieties and whether it prevents them from engaging in classroom communication activities or not. The generated results showed that students' levels and feelings of anxiety fluctuated as educational and instructional situations change. A positive attitude towards the target language (i.e., English) correlates with low anxiety levels (Elkhayma; 2020).

Defining General Anxiety

Every human being tends to feel anxious from time to time. The temporary adverse feeling of worry and displeasure is common among individuals, they might experience an uncomfortable emotional state due to particular reasons or situations that they perceive as threatening. However, the degree of this feeling of anxiety differs from one person to another and from one situation to another.

In the broadest sense, anxiety is defined as a state of "apprehension, a vague fear, that is only indirectly associated with an object" (Scovel, 1978, p. 134). Spielberger (1983, p.1) defined it as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (as cited in Prastiyowati, 2019, p. 21). And this feeling is usually debilitating, that is to say, it has a negative influence on the subject, as it is a kind of irrational response to a harmless situation, that the individual erroneously believes that they cannot deal with competently and adequately (Sridevi, 2013). This feeling is sometimes manifested as

physical symptoms such as sweating, hand trembling, difficulties in breathing and heart beating (Muris et al., 2010).

Defining Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety, as a specific type of anxiety, represents one of the most powerful affective factors that affect foreign language learners' performance and academic achievement. High levels of anxiety can have negative effects on learners' self-esteem, self-confidence, and risk-taking, as this can adversely affect their academic achievement. FLA is defined "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" (Horwitz, E et al., 1986, p. 128). Unlike any other type of anxiety, foreign language anxiety is an emotion that occurs especially in language classrooms. It is in this particular place that we usually find many students suffer from this kind of nervousness while trying to speak in a language class without being already prepared for it. Alla, Tamila, Neonila, & Tamara, (2020) argued that anxiety here may be ascribed to teachers' control and assessment of students' speech, as a result, they feel uncomfortable and highly nervous about such situations. Those negative feelings may be attributed mainly to the fact that as Alla et al. (2020) put it, no other field or subject requires self-expression more than a foreign language does. This is probably what makes foreign language anxiety more powerful and effective than ordinary learning anxiety.

Types of Anxiety

Trait, State, and Situation Specific Anxiety

Spielberger, Gorsuch, and Lushene (1970) made a significant contribution to anxiety research. They put forward a measure which differentiates between two types of anxiety, state and trait, in an effort to diminish the controversies found in previous research (Scovel, 1978). Trait anxiety is generally defined as the tendency to experience persistent negative emotions of worry and fear in a variety of situations constantly. The latter was clearly defined by Levitt (1980) as "a constant condition without a time limitation" (p.11). Similarly, Scovel (1978) described it as "a more permanent predisposition to be anxious" (p. 137). In the same vein, Spielberger (1966) reported that trait anxiety is an "acquired behavioral disposition that predisposes an individual to perceive a wide range of objectively nondangerous circumstances as threatening" (p.16). It is fair to say that this type of anxiety is a personality trait. One can be characterized by their predisposition to be constantly anxious. On the other hand, Spielberger (1966) defined state anxiety as a "transitory state or condition of the organism that varies in intensity and fluctuates over time" (p.12). Likewise, Scovel (1978) argued that this anxiety is 'momentary'. Thus, unlike trait anxiety, state anxiety is not stable, it emerges as a reaction to specific situations that the subject or the organism perceives as threatening.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

"Apprehension about others' evaluation, avoidance of evaluating circumstances, and the assumption that others would negatively evaluate oneself" are some of the characteristics of fear of negative evaluation. (Horwitz et al. 1986, p. 128, mentioned on page 68 of Wilson's 2006 book) As a result, students who are afraid of receiving a poor evaluation tend to steer clear of assessment situations. Fear of negative evaluation may seem similar to test anxiety, but it is more complicated because students who struggle with this type of performance anxiety also struggle with speaking in foreign language classes, worrying that their performance will be judged by their classmates, and being interviewed, among other situations that could lead to direct or indirect evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986)

Methods

This study uses a mixed-method research design, in which some procedures were followed with the purpose to collect Moroccan university students' information on foreign language anxiety. The data were accumulated using the Foreign Language Virtual Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLVCAS) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire, in addition to students' interviews. The questionnaire was administered to students from different Moroccan universities via different platforms, including Gmail, WhatsApp and Facebook, to find out the sources of anxiety among English language learners, examining whether their levels of anxiety are increased or decreased in an online learning environment, and suggest some strategies that would alleviate students' anxiety levels. The quantitative data gathered through the use of questionnaires helped the researcher to present percentages to deduce the relationship between the variables of the study. Qualitative data were collected using students' interviews, ~~in an effort to~~ back up the findings of the quantitative data and to get more evident information.

Participants

Sampling is generally known as the process of selecting people from different backgrounds to participate in research. In this particular study, convenience sampling was used since 100 students with different levels, who belong to different universities in Morocco (2021/2022) took part in the research completion. The responses were received anonymously for confidentiality purposes. General information about the participants is provided in tables one, two, three, and four below.

As far as interviews are concerned, the participants were 10 students from different backgrounds who experience high levels of foreign language anxiety. The latter shared with us their feelings and experiences with this affective factor and how it blocks their way towards success.

Out of those respondents who disclosed their age, it can be observed from the age distribution table below that 73 of them are between the ages of 18 to 25 years, 17 of them are between the ages of 26 and 30 years and four are between the ages of 31 and 35 years.

Table 1. Summary of questionnaire participants by age

Age	N	%
18-25	73	73.0
26-30	17	17.0
31-35	4	4.0
Missing	System	6
		6.0

As for the gender of respondents, out of the 100 individuals that took part in the survey, 52 of them are males while the remaining 48 are females.

Table 2. Summary of questionnaire participants by gender

Gender	N	%
Male	52	52.0
Female	48	48.0

In terms of proficiency level in English, the distribution of the level of English proficiency of respondents is provided in the table below. It can be observed that 21 of the respondents have a poor proficiency level, 35 have a fair level of English proficiency, 37 have a good level of English proficiency, five have a very good level of English proficiency and two have an excellent level of English proficiency.

Table 3. Summary of the questionnaire participants by level of proficiency in English

Proficiency level in English	N	%
Poor	21	21.0
Fair	35	35.0
Good	37	37.0
Very Good	5	5.0
Excellent	2	2.0

In terms of the number of years spent studying the English language, it can be observed that 61 of the respondents spent five years or less studying the English language, 34 respondents spent between six to 10 years studying the English language, and 4 individuals spent between 11 to 14 years.

Table 4. Summary of the questionnaire participants by the number of years spent learning English

Years spent studying English	N	%
< 5 years	61	61.0

6-10 years		34	34.0
11-14 years		4	4.0
Missing	System	1	1.0

Research Instruments

To reach the objectives of this study, the researcher used a questionnaire as a means to collect quantitative data, and an interview to gather qualitative data to achieve dependable results.

Questionnaire

In this study, an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was used. The latter has been proved by the scholars who constructed it as being reliable. The FLCAS is made up of 33 questions that aim to measure classroom anxiety generated from foreign language learning. However, in this study, we adopted only 13 questions that were slightly modified to meet the research purposes. In addition, we adopted also some questions from the Foreign Language Virtual Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLVCAS) constructed by Kaisar and Chowdhury (2020). The researcher's version is made up of two sets of questions, each set dealing with one learning environment. The first set sought to examine FLA in relation to face-to-face learning, while the second set measured FLA in the distance learning mode. Two open questions were added, which were intended mainly to elicit from participants the sources of their anxiety and the strategies they think would be helpful to reduce anxiety. The total number of questions is 33. Each item offers five-point Likert-type responses, ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree.

Unstructured Online Interview

To support the findings of our research and to have insightful and authentic ideas about the sources of anxiety and whether it is higher, lower or the same in a distance learning environment, as well as to get more information about the ways that might help in reducing it, the researcher interviewed 10 anxious students of different levels, who were invited mainly via Facebook to participate in this study. Six interviewees were female students while only four were males. The participants were given the questions before the interview time, to provide us with clear and comprehensible answers.

Research Procedures

Due to time constraints, the quantitative data were collected at a distance using Google forms. The collection procedure took place during April and May 2022. The researcher was able to get 100 questionnaires filled out. The purpose of the study, as well as its importance, was made clear on the front page of the questionnaire. To obtain authentic and spontaneous responses, the participants were made aware that their feelings and attitudes will be kept confidential. After collecting the quantitative data, the researcher invited some students to take part in qualitative data

collection by conducting an interview. Some of the students were interviewed face-to-face, however, others participated from their locations through phone calls due to some difficulties.

Data Analysis

The data collected for the study were analyzed in terms of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The researcher analyzed the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) 25.0 computer program, for extracting frequencies and percentages. As for the qualitative data, they were analyzed thematically. The latter revolves around FLA, its causes, dimensions and differences with regard to the learning environment (virtual or face-to-face). The key themes were identified and analyzed.

Results

This section is devoted to data analysis and presentation. The data obtained from the two research instruments were analyzed and reported. First, the quantitative data generated from the questionnaire was presented in the form of tables. Then, qualitative results were analyzed thematically and presented in the form of key themes with supporting quotes from participants' responses as they appeared in the interview transcript.

Findings of the Questionnaire

Items five and six clearly revealed that the majority of students (55%) start to feel panic when they have to speak without preparation in a face-to-face class, whereas 42% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed they have the same feeling when it comes to a virtual learning environment. With regard to statements seven and 8, 37% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "it embarrasses me to volunteer answers in a face-to-face language class," while only a meager 25% of the participants reported they feel embarrassed to volunteer answers when they are in a virtual language class. In responses to items nine and 10, a major part of the sample (63%) feel confident when they speak in a virtual language class, compared to 55% of them who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (see item nine) when it comes to traditional learning environment. While a majority of 66% feel their heart pounding when they are going to be called on in a face-to-face language class, only 42% share the same feeling when they attend a virtual class. Again, the majority of 41% agreed or strongly agreed with statement 13, "I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in a face-to-face language class," while only 27% of the sample get nervous and confused when they are speaking in a virtual class (see item 14).

Students' Fear of Negative Evaluation

Referring to table six which displays the frequency distribution of students' fear of negative evaluation, statements 15 and 16 show that students are at mixed feelings when making mistakes in an EFL class: 39% of them agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I don't worry about making mistakes in a face-to-face language class," while 48% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed. Likewise, 40% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that they worry about making

mistakes in a virtual language class. With regard to items 17 and 18, 46% of the sample disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “in my face-to-face language class, I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do,” while 46% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed with item 18 that states, “in my virtual language class, I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.” Similarly, 51% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with statement 19 which states, “in my face-to-face language class, I’m afraid that the teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make,” while 49% of them reported they are not afraid that the teacher is ready to correct every single mistake they make (See item 20). Again, 67% of the subjects stated they are not afraid the students will laugh at them when they speak, compared to 64% of them who share the same view when they attend a virtual classroom (See item 22). As for item 23 which states, “in my face-to-face language class, I get nervous when the teacher asks questions which I haven’t prepared in advance,” a high majority of participants (60%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while only 40% of them who attend a virtual class agreed or strongly agreed that they get nervous when their teacher asks them questions they haven’t prepared for (See item 24).

Table 6. *Frequency distribution of students’ fear of negative evaluation in face-to-face versus virtual FL classrooms*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
15. I don’t worry about making mistakes in a face-to-face language class.	14.0%	34.0%	13.0%	25.0 %	14.0%
16. I don’t worry about making mistakes in a virtual language class.	8.0%	30.0%	22.0%	26.0 %	14.0%
17. In my face-to-face language class, I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	8.0%	37.0%	20.0%	23.0 %	12.0%
18. In my virtual language class, I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	8.0%	38.0%	24.0%	21.0 %	9.0%
19. In my face-to-face language class, I’m afraid that the teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	8.0%	43.0%	22.0%	20.0 %	7.0%
20. In my virtual language class, I’m afraid that the teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	8.0%	41.0%	26.0%	22.0 %	3.0%
21. In my face-to-face language class, I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak a foreign language.	21.0%	46.0%	13.0%	10.0 %	10.0%
22. In my virtual language class, I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak a foreign language.	20.0%	44.0%	19.0%	12.0 %	5.0%
23. In my face-to-face language class, I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven’t prepared in advance.	2.0%	19.0%	19.0%	45.0 %	15.0%
24. In my virtual language class, I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven’t prepared in advance.	2.0%	25.0%	28.0%	35.0 %	10.0%

Providing Positive Feedback and Scaffolding

In relation to the previous subsection, frequent responses suggested that FL instructors should tolerate students' mistakes and help them overcome their anxiety. Providing constructive feedback by avoiding overcorrection and focusing more on meaningful communication stimulate learners to take risks and lowers their affective filter. "Give supportive feedback, refrain from too much error correction, set rigid rules against bullying, provide many opportunities for language practice..." one of the participants suggest, addressing FL instructors. In this vein, the results also show that helping students correct their mistakes by themselves, giving them a wait time to think, rewarding them, and avoiding being judgmental normalize students with making mistakes as part of every learning process and helps them build their self-esteem and confidence to speak and participate without being overanxious about their performance or the accuracy of their language output.

Adapting ELT Materials to Students' Learning Profiles

As revealed earlier when presenting the sources of FL anxiety, complex ELT materials and content that revolve far away from students' needs and interests may continue to feed learners' anxiety and disengagement. Therefore, many participants suggested opting for ELT materials and content that meet the different needs, interests, and learning styles of students. Besides, teachers should "clarify things and avoid complexity." They should ensure that their instructions are clear and well-understood by the learners. Likewise, some participants suggested varying the working modes and allowing students to involve in friendly tasks and group work activities where they can socialize and communicate, freely and comfortably, with their classmates.

Interview Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data revolves around participants' FL anxiety, its causes, dimensions, and differences with regard to the learning environment: virtual or face-to-face. The following key themes were identified, analyzed, and presented with supporting narratives and quotes from the interview transcript:

- a) the effect(s) of FL anxiety on students' performance
- b) the sources of FL anxiety,
- c) FL anxiety-provoking situations and activities,
- d) FL anxiety in a virtual versus a face-to-face classroom,
- e) test anxiety in a virtual versus a face-to-face classroom,
- f) ways to reduce FL anxiety.

Effect(s) of FL Anxiety on Students' Performance

All the participants strongly believe that FL anxiety has negative effects on their performance as FL learners. "When I get anxious, I start making mistakes," one of the participants admitted. Be the mistakes related to grammar, pronunciation, or choice of appropriate words to express themselves, anxiety arises as one of the negative aspects that can affect any FL learner's performance: it creates a kind of complex psychological obstacles, stands as an impediment to students' engagement and participation in class, and can lead to passive reactions from students. "Sometimes, I have a lot to say and explain, but, because of anxiety, I do not finish what I want to say," another participant argues. In short, the more students feel anxious and stressed, the less they speak or participate in class.

FL Anxiety in a Virtual Versus a Face-to-face Classroom

Apart from the two interviewees, all participants believe that FL anxiety is generally reduced when they are in an online session. Online learning makes students feel more comfortable as they can act more naturally and express their ideas freely without having to face their teacher or classmates. "I can say that my anxiety declines when I am involved in online classes than face-to-face classes. Being in online classes gives me more freedom to act in the way I want", one of

the participants said. Being physically absent and turning off the camera during a virtual class makes students feel secure, and that their self-esteem is protected. *“In online sessions, it feels like there's a shield between the 'stressful classroom atmosphere' and I. I'm in my comfort zone, home, which also helps in reducing my anxiety”*, one of them stated, making a resemblance between being in a virtual classroom and being at home. Still, the findings that two interviewees have different standpoint: one of them believe that the question of whether FL anxiety is reduced when students are in an online class (rather than in a face-to-face environment) is hard to answer, and the other one argued: *“it's almost the same to me”*, meaning that FL anxiety may stem from a variety of sources and situations irrespective of whether the learning environment is real or virtual.

Test Anxiety in a Virtual Versus a Face-to-Face Classroom

The findings revealed our interviewees are in mixed positions in regard to their exam mode preferences: online or face-to-face. The majority of them prefer to take their exams online for a variety of reasons. First, online exams help students concentrate on the exam questions rather than being distracted by teachers or classmates. In this way, examiners can perform better feeling more comfortable, less stressed, and less distracted. *“I can choose a comfortable place to help me focus and reduce the pressure”*, one participant said. Showing how online examinations can be less rigid and anxiety-free. Some students, however, opt for the face-to-face mode. They believe that this mode maintains credibility and equality among examiners, because not all students are equipped with the same quality examination tools and technologies, and some students may be distracted by technical issues caused by poor and fewer quality tools. Therefore, one interviewee said: *“both forms are the same for me.”* In brief, the majority of students prefer to take their exams online, because they are less rigid, less anxiety-provoking, and more flexible, yet others opt for traditional exams as they are less demanding for students, and they can guarantee equality and transparency among all examiners.

Ways to Reduce FL Anxiety

Many measures are to be taken by FL instructors to alleviate their students' perceived levels of anxiety. The interviewees suggested that teachers should motivate their students, support them, and never oblige them to take part in a specific task unless they are ready. They should never be bossy and authoritative, but rather friendly and patient. When students make mistakes, they should tolerate them, and raise their students' awareness of the fact that mistakes are signs of active learning. Thus, teachers are required to tailor their plans to match their student's needs and interests, varying their activities (group work, games...etc.) to fit all the different learning styles in the classroom. No learner should be left behind or looked down. *“They are all the same and deserve attention”*, one participant stated. Anxious learners need care, and it is up to teachers to create an anxiety-free environment where learners feel safe and valued, encourage them to take a risk, and tolerate their mistakes by providing constructive feedback, necessary scaffolding, and enough practice opportunities.

To answer the research questions, the results of the study demonstrated that the learners' feelings of anxiety are ascribed to various factors, which can be classified in terms of four categories; psychological sources, cognitive sources (lack of knowledge), interpersonal, and contextual sources. Also, the majority of the participants reported that personality flaws such as a lack of self-assurance and low self-esteem are primarily to blame for foreign language fear. Finally, a lack of conversational ability or general language aptitude may be a contributing factor in those experiencing foreign language anxiety. To put it another way, when students struggle to communicate effectively and appropriately, they become anxious. This anxiety may be caused by a lack of vocabulary or a lack of exposure to the target language.

Discussion

The majority of the participants reported that foreign language anxiety is ascribed mainly to weaknesses in personality, such as a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. This is

consistent with Sridevi (2013) who discovered a high link between self-esteem and anxiety, meaning anxious students are more likely to have low self-esteem. In the same vein, some students continuously compare themselves to others, and this is, according to Bailey (2013), anxiety-provoking. Also, some students always think that their colleagues will laugh at them when they say something incorrectly. This is mainly related to their fear of negative evaluation. Previous negative experiences also were believed to be significant causes of anxiety.

As the findings showed, foreign language anxiety can be related to a lack of communicative competence or alack of proficiency in the language in general. That is to say, learners experience anxiety when they fail to express their thoughts communicatively and appropriately, and this may be attributed to the fact that these learners do not have sufficient vocabulary or are not exposed to the target language. Sparks and Ganschow (2007) demonstrated in their study that the lack of language skills causes anxiety among learners. This is very crucial, students should be given enough opportunities to practice their language and receive sufficient input that will enable them to improve their language skills. This in turn will help in reducing their anxiety. Additionally, students who do not prepare well, and procrastinate their work will end up feeling highly anxious.

As for the interpersonal sources, some respondents believe that interpersonal relationships with students and teachers play an important role in learners' anxiety. For example, one of the participants stated that the authoritative character of some teachers tends to frighten students and make them feel apprehensive and anxious. Also errors, when corrected harshly, might be anxiety-provoking. In addition, the phenomena of bullying and mockery among students can be one of the most important reasons for anxiety, a participant stated.

Few responses reported that the context or the environment where learning takes place is of paramount significance in increasing or decreasing learners' anxiety levels. A friendly environment where students feel a sense of belonging might reduce their anxiety, however, authoritative classrooms as mentioned earlier or classrooms that are too formal might evoke anxiety.

Moroccan university learners' perceived levels of anxiety are generally reduced in distance learning classrooms. It can be observed from item 32 which states "*since I do not have to expose my physical appearance in a virtual class*" that the majority of participants agreed with the statement that they feel relaxed during an online session because they are not physically present. This could apply to all students who suffer from feelings of anxiety, shyness and discomfort when they are around other people. Those feelings are what prevent some students from expressing themselves freely in front of others. Thus, when attending the session hidden behind their screens, these students feel much more comfortable.

We can conclude that learners' communication apprehension is notably increased in traditional learning classes compared to distance learning classes, however, the results revealed that there isn't much difference in students' feelings of test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation between both modes of learning. The results of this study do not correspond with Alla et al. (2020), who concluded that students' communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation increased significantly in a distance learning environment, and their test anxiety decreased to a slight extent. Also, what Bousfiha and Kadiri (2020) found disagreed with the results of the present study. The researchers demonstrated that there is a significant increase in all three dimensions of anxiety during online sessions.

Some strategies to reduce anxiety among learners have been suggested. Creating an anxiety-free atmosphere was the one most cited by students. Teachers must make efforts to make the learning environment as comfortable as possible, that is, they should help students to feel at home in the classroom, by building a good rapport with them and trying to improve and protect their self-confidence and self-image. Teachers should not be authoritative members in the classroom, rather, they have to be friendly, and patient, as they should provide support when needed and facilitate the learning process. This will certainly help and encourage learners to participate and express

their ideas pleasantly. In addition, some participants stated that correcting every error students make will raise their anxiety and inhibit them from participating again. Therefore teachers must be aware that errors are indispensable, as they are a sign that learning is taking place, this being the case, they should be tolerated. Instead, the teacher must provide learners with constructive feedback, and help them correct themselves ~~in an effort~~ to boost their self-confidence and diminish their negative feelings. In the same line of thought, opting for materials that meet learners' needs and interests is of paramount significance.

Conclusion

This study aimed mainly to compare the anxiety levels that Moroccan university students experience in two different modes of learning (Face-to-face and online). Information about learners' perceived levels of anxiety has been elicited through the use of a questionnaire that contains two sets of questions adapted from the FLCAS and the FLVCAS, 100 students participated in the study. In addition, students' interviews helped in getting a clear idea about the problem, as it concerned mainly 10 anxious students. The results obtained revealed that there is a difference in the anxiety levels experienced by students based on the learning environment. Anxiety is generally reduced in a distance learning mode, particularly students' communication apprehension. The majority of students find a virtual classroom more comfortable to express their thoughts. However, there is not much difference when it comes to students' fear of negative evaluation as well as their test anxiety. These two constructs remain the same regardless of the learning environment.

Pedagogical Implications

Teachers and instructors must be aware of their students' anxiety levels to adjust their teaching methods and strategies according to that. It is significantly important that teachers better understand learners' feelings of anxiety, not only in a real classroom but also in a virtual one. This would be highly helpful in terms of finding out the sources of anxiety and the conditions that are more likely to provoke such feelings among students. After discovering the sources, it would be possible to put useful strategies into practice, to alleviate students' anxiety levels, and help them become high achievers in the long run.

Recommendations

Comparing the impact of anxiety on students' learning process in real and virtual classrooms has received only limited attention. Given the fact that distance learning is integrated into different schools nowadays, there is an urge to investigate the correlation between the character of distance education and the anxiety level of students. Thus, more studies are needed to be done in this area. The previous research has highlighted mainly foreign language anxiety and its influence on students' academic achievement in traditional classrooms, so it is significant to study thoroughly the same issue, but in relation to distance learning classes.

It is highly recommended that future research focuses on classroom observation; this would yield more reliable results. As for the number of strategies suggested for minimizing the anxiety levels of students, it would be exceedingly preferable if future researchers consider practically

implementing them in a real classroom, and studying their effects, be they positive or negative, on student's adverse feelings of anxiety.

Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations. First of all, the number of students who were interviewed is limited. Also, the number of informants who answered the questionnaire, although they were 100 students, is not sufficient. We cannot deny that 100 responses cannot represent students from different universities all around Morocco. Thus, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Second, foreign language anxiety is a complex phenomenon, thus, it should be studied in more thorough and reliable ways. For example, through observing students, who are involved either in a real or a virtual language classroom, for a long time to gain a deeper understanding of their foreign language anxiety. Unfortunately, this could not be applied due to some constraints including the limited time we had. Last but not least, this study focused on studying foreign language anxiety in general, this affective factor should be deeply examined in relation to each language skill separately; listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

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Appendices

Frequency distribution of students' communication apprehension in face-to-face versus virtual FL classrooms

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in a face-to-face language class.	6.0%	30.0%	17.0%	35.0%	12.0%
2. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in a virtual language class.	9.0%	35.0%	24.0%	25.0%	7.0%
3. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in a face-to-face language class.	10.0%	31.0%	20.0%	23.0%	16.0%
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in a virtual language class.	12.0%	39.0%	20.0%	22.0%	7.0%
5. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a face-to-face language class.	3.0%	21.0%	21.0%	37.0%	18.0%
6. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in a virtual language class.	1.0%	28.0%	29.0%	35.0%	7.0%
7. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in a face-to-face language class.	10.0%	38.0%	15.0%	25.0%	12.0%
8. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in a virtual language class.	12.0%	38.0%	25.0%	21.0%	4.0%
9. I feel confident when I speak in my face-to-face language class.	5.0%	18.0%	22.0%	40.0%	15.0%
10. I feel confident when I speak in my virtual language class.	4.0%	7.0%	26.0%	45.0%	18.0%
11. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in a face-to-face language class.	3.0%	11.0%	20.0%	43.0%	23.0%
12. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in a virtual language class.	4.0%	23.0%	31.0%	33.0%	9.0%
13. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in a face-to-face language class.	4.0%	29.0%	26.0%	26.0%	15.0%