

The Level of Anxiety on the Achievement of the Saudi EFL Learners

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Abstract

The relationship between the level of anxiety on the achievement of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners has long been a key issue in the second language learning literature (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Chan, & Wu, 2004; Cheng, 2005; Mills, Pajares & Herron, 2006; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2013). The purpose of this study is to investigate whether Saudi students' foreign language anxiety (FLA) affects their achievement in English classes. It also aims to identify the extent to which gender-based anxiety affects FLA in language classes. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) was used as a key research instrument. Seventy-five (24 male and 51 female) Saudi tertiary students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) at King Khalid University (KKU) in Southern Saudi Arabia participated in this study. Based on the *t*-test performed on this study, the findings revealed that gender has no significant effect on students' FLA and English competence. Moreover, the study recommends transforming Saudi English language classrooms into friendlier environments by employing a variety of practical means designed to control learners' FLA and improve their EFL achievement.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Foreign Language anxiety (FLA), Second Language Learning (L2), L2 achievement, gender.

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Introduction

Many Saudi students often experience anxiety while learning English. This feeling of uneasiness may interfere with their learning and ultimately affect their grades in English classes (Alrabai, 2014; Aljafen, 2013; Hamouda, 2012; Asif, 2014; Javid, 2014; Al-Asmari, 2015). Although a considerable amount of research has been conducted in the Saudi EFL context to investigate the prevalent high levels of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) among Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, as well as the causes underlying this phenomenon, few studies have examined the relationship between FLA and language achievement among Saudi tertiary students. Therefore, this paper addressed this relationship and the role of gender in FLA in the study population.

Literature Review

Definition of Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety is considered a significant individual difference in language learning, and researchers have provided various definitions of the construct. MacIntyre (1999) defines FLA as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (p. 27), while Spielberger (1983) states that it is the “...subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of [the] autonomic nervous system” (p. 15). It can also be defined as “...a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horowitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128). Various studies have shown that FLA is a distinct phenomenon and that students experience higher levels of anxiety in foreign language classes than in others, such as math, history, etc. (Horwitz, et al. 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). It is clear from the definitions above that FLA can be distinguished from general anxiety and can affect successful language learning.

Components of Foreign language anxiety (FLCAS)

Based on Horwitz's et al., definition (1986), classroom anxiety includes three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. First, *communication apprehension* is defined as the fear of speaking, such as speaking in public, listening, or learning spoken messages. According to Cubukcu (2007), “Communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear and anxiety about communicating with people.” (p. 50). Second, *test anxiety* is the fear of failure, especially in formal exams. Students with test anxiety often put unrealistic demands on themselves. Finally, *fear of negative evaluation* is a language learner's fear of being evaluated by teachers. Lucas, Miraflores, and Go (2011) also suggest that fear of negative evaluation may include avoidance of evaluative situations, as well as the student's worry in the English classroom, where peer pressure may contribute to increased language anxiety.

Types of Foreign Language Anxiety

FLA has been categorized in various ways. Scovel (1978) classifies anxiety as either facilitating or debilitating anxiety. Facilitating anxiety is beneficial, and occurs when a language learner is exposed to a difficult task that triggers a moderate level of anxiety. This form of anxiety can facilitate language learning (Chastain, 1975; Mills et al., 2006; Young, 1986). By comparison, debilitating anxiety occurs from excessive anxiety, which leads to negative effects such as avoidance of work, lower performance, and frustration. In general, most previous studies

have shown that FLA has a debilitating effect on foreign language learning (Oxford, 1999; Arnold & Brown, 1999; Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Gregersen, 2005; Casado & Dereshiswsky, 2004). Horwitz, et al., (1986) also differentiate this form of anxiety from general anxiety and referred to it as Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), which can be considered situational anxiety in the context of the FL classroom. According to Abu Rabia (2004), the language learner experiences anxiety when s/he is "...usually worried, physically insecure, unable to engage in situational learning" (p.712). Accordingly, Horwitz et. al (1986) classify FLA into three significant types:

1. *Trait Anxiety*: Trait anxiety is an inherent personality characteristic, the person's permanent tendency or predisposition to be anxious. It is a stable feature of personality that refers to a "permanent predisposition to be anxious" (Scovel, 1978; as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 479).
2. *State anxiety*: Ellis (1994, p. 693) claimed that it is "...the apprehension that is experienced at a particular moment in time as a response to a definite situation." It refers to a "transitory state or condition of the organism that varies in intensity and fluctuates over time" (Spielberger, 1966, p.12).
3. *Situational anxiety*: a type of anxiety that is context specific, such as speaking in public or participating in class activities (Ellis, 1994).

Thus, FLCA is considered to be situational rather than a trait or state anxiety (MacIntyre & Gradner, 1991; Horwitz, et al., 1986).

FLA and Language Achievement

For the past several decades, a growing body of research has investigated the effect of anxiety on language success in various contexts and with different languages. In reviewing the findings of previous studies, it is clear that there is a consistent, negative, and significant correlation between FLA and language achievement (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 2001; Demirdaş & Bozdoğan, 2013; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007; Wang, 2011; Liu & Huang, 2011; Awan, Azher, Anwar, & Naz, 2010). According to Geotz and Hall (2013), the level of correlation between anxiety and language achievement ranges from approximately $r = -0.20$ to -0.25 .

In the context in which English is a foreign language, studies so far include that of Wilson (2006), who examined the relationship between FLA (measured by FLCAS) and Spanish learners' oral performance in EFL. His findings revealed a significant, negative correlation between language anxiety and students' oral skills ($r = -0.49$).

Batumlu and Erden (2007) conducted a study on 150 Turkish university students to investigate the relationship between FLA and their English achievement. FLCAS was administered to measure FLA and the students' scores at midterms were used to assess achievement. Their findings also indicated a significant, negative correlation between FLA and English achievement ($r = -0.45$).

Park and Lee (2005) examined the relationship between the mean scores of FLCAS and Korean students' average scores in a speaking course. This study revealed a significant, negative correlation between anxiety and students' oral performances as well ($r = -0.32$).

Various recent studies have been conducted in Pakistan to measure the relationship between FLA and English achievement, measured as grades overall among Pakistani university students. The results again demonstrated a significant, negative correlation between the measures ($r = -0.27$: Awan, et al., 2010; Nazir, Bashir, & Raja, 2014).

In another context with large sample sizes, there has been a considerable amount of research on FLA in Chinese students learning English as a foreign language. Various studies have measured FLA and its relationship to English achievement in large samples of students enrolled in English courses at various universities (Lu & Liu, 2011; Zheng, 2010; Kao & Craigie, 2010, Cheng, 2005). FLA was measured by FLCAS and the students' performance by their grades in English courses. The results of correlation analyses showed a significant, negative correlation between FLA and English achievement that ranged from $r = -0.17$ to -0.45 .

However, to date, only a limited number of studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between FLA and English learning in undergraduate Saudi students (Alrabai, 2014; Aljafen, 2013; Hamouda, 2012; Asif, 2014; Javid, 2014; Al-Asmari, 2015).

The relationship between FLA and English Achievement in Saudi Arabia

Teaching English in Saudi Arabia related is quite different than in other contexts. The outcome of teaching English in Saudi Arabia is poor because of various factors, including overcrowded classes, lack of teacher training, extensive use of first language (L1), and low motivation (Alrabai, 2016). Although the Ministry of Education introduced English in primary schools since 2001, students are still unable to engage in English language professional activities because they have insufficient proficiency in English. Saudi students find it difficult to learn English and lack the proper environment in which to practice their English, especially outside the classroom. In light of these circumstances, some researchers have begun to investigate FLA and its level and sources as a vital reason for the failure to achieve proficiency in English (Alrabai, 2014; Aljafen, 2013; Hamouda, 2012; Asif, 2014; Javid, 2014; Al-Asmari, 2015). They have found that the level of FLA is moderate to high among Saudi students, and thereby affects their learning. Despite the importance of investigating FLA as a factor influential in language learning, almost no studies have been conducted to assess the effects of anxiety on Saudi students' achievement. The only example is Abu Ghararah's study (1999), which evaluated the effects of FLA on the English achievement of university students in King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. FLCAS was administered to measure FLA, and the students' English scores to measure their achievement. The results indicated a significant, negative correlation between FLA and English achievement.

After reviewing the literature, it is obvious that there is a need for more research on FLA and its relationship to English achievement in the Saudi context. Thus, this study was designed to examine the relationship between FLA and students' English achievement in the English Department at KKU in Abha, Saudi Arabia.

Research Questions

To achieve the proposed objective of the study, a set of research questions were constructed as follows:

1. What is the level of FLA among Saudi university students studying English as a foreign Language in a Saudi university?
2. Is there any significant relationship between FLA and English achievement among these learners?
3. Is there a significant difference in the levels of FLA between male and female students?

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 75 (n= 24 male and 51 female) Saudi university students majoring in English at KCU, where English is taught as a foreign language. Males constituted 32% (N=24), and females 68% (N=51) of the total sample Table 1. The participants share the same ethnographic background and are native speakers of Arabic. They also had studied English for approximately 10 years of their formal education in primary, intermediate, and secondary school. The students were selected randomly to complete questionnaires.

Table 1 *Participants' gender*

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	24	32
Female	51	68
Total	75	100

Instruments

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

Horwitz's et al., (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was used to measure the level of FLA. It has been administered worldwide in different languages and various contexts, and demonstrates high validity and reliability. In this study, a translated Arabic version of the FLCAS was used to overcome the participants' poor proficiency in English, and its validity and reliability were assessed (Table2). The results showed that the anxiety scale has an acceptable reliability of $\alpha = 0.870$. With respect to internal validity, Table 3 shows that all the FLCAS items correlated significantly ($r = 0.34-0.74, p < 0.01$).

Following Horwitz's et al. (1986) classification, the scale included three components: 1) *Communication apprehension*, 2) *Test anxiety*, and 3) *Fear of negative evaluation*. The scale is constructed as a five-point Likert scale consisting of 33 items, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5); composite scores ranged from 33 to 165, with higher scores indicating higher level of anxiety and low scores lower levels of anxiety. Some items with negative wording (2,5,8,11,14,18,22, and 32) were included. These items were then reverse scored, with high scores indicating low levels of FLA and low scores high FLA.

Table 2 *Reliability of the anxiety scale (FLAS)*

FLA Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
FLCAS	33	0.78

Table 3 Internal validity of FLCAS

Item No.	Communication Apprehension	Item No.	Test Anxiety	Item No.	Negative Evaluation
1	0.63**	3	0.34**	2	0.39**
4	0.58**	5	0.42**	7	0.74**
9	0.61**	6	0.53**	13	0.57**
14	0.46**	8	0.40**	19	0.57**
15	0.39**	10	0.63**	23	0.71**
18	0.52**	11	0.41**	31	0.67**
24	0.61**	12	0.55**	33	0.58**
27	0.62**	16	0.54**		
29	0.49**	17	0.45**		
30	0.39**	20	0.61**		
32	0.45**	21	0.43**		
		22	0.41**		
		25	0.42**		
		26	0.62**		
		28	0.63**		

** $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed).

Students' English Achievement (GPA)

Students' English achievement was assessed using their grade point average in English courses. The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that included various information, such as their age, gender, years spent studying English, and their GPA in English courses.

Data Collection

At the beginning of February, 2016, the researcher visited students in their English classes. Before distributing the questionnaires, each of the participants received a consent form that explained the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Each participant was asked to sign the form prior to participation in the study. The study took into account ethical issues, and any information and materials related to the participants remained confidential.

Data Analysis

After obtaining all of the data required, SPSS, version.20 was used to analyze the data. Both descriptive (means, standard deviations, percentages) and inferential statistics were conducted. *t*-tests, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Pearson's correlation coefficients were performed to answer the research questions. The mean scores of the sample overall were calculated to investigate the level of FLCAS among the students. The scores ranged from 33 to 165. These scores then were classified according to the three levels shown in Table 4.

Table 4FLA levels

Level	Scores	Level of FLA
1	33–89	Low anxiety
2	90–108	Moderate anxiety
3	109–165	High anxiety

Results and Discussion

Prior to answering the research questions, the reliability and validity for the entire sample were assessed to examine the internal consistency of the 33 items in the FLCAS (Tables 2 and 3).

Question 1: What is the level of foreign language anxiety among Saudi university students studying English as a foreign Language?

Descriptive statistics were calculated to measure the participants' levels of FLA. The mean scores for both males and females were assessed with a *t*-test. The mean level of FLA in the sample was 95.58 (N=75), showing that the students had a moderate level of FLA.

The findings obtained in this study demonstrate the vital role of FLA as a factor that impairs foreign language learning. The English majors at KKU showed a moderate level of anxiety in learning English, a result supported by many previous studies (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Aida, 1994; Lee, 2002). In the context of Saudi FLA research, our study is also supported by most Saudi FLA research (Ashahrani & Alshahrani, 2015; Abu-Ghararah, 1999; Alrabai, 2014; Aljafen, 2013; Hamouda, 2012; Asif, 2014; Javid, 2014; Al-Asmari, 2015).

Question 2: Is there any significant relationship between FLA and English achievement?

We used a *t*-test to answer Question 2 as well. Table 5 shows that there was a negative, significant relationship between total FLA and English achievement ($r = -0.42$, $N = 75$, $p < 0.01$), which was in the direction expected. This indicates that when the level of FLA increases, the level of English achievement decreases. With respect to the FLA scale components, the results indicated that all FLCAS components were correlated negatively and significantly with students' grade point averages in English courses: *Communication Apprehension* ($r = -0.38$, $N = 75$, $p < 0.01$), *Test anxiety* ($r = -0.42$, $N = 75$, $p < 0.01$) and *Fear of negative evaluation* ($r = -0.26$, $N = 75$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 5 Correlation between FLA and English achievement for all participants (N=75)

FLCAS Components	English Achievement (GPA)
Communication apprehension	-0.38**
Test Anxiety	-0.42**
Fear of Negative Evaluation	-0.26*
Total Anxiety	-0.42**

** $p < 0.01$

* $p < 0.05$

Table 5 shows the negative, significant relationship between FLA and English achievements ($r = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$), which was in the direction expected. This indicated that when the level of FLA increased, the participants' level of English achievement decreased. For the FLA scale components, the results showed that all FLCAS components were correlated negatively and significantly with students' GPAs in English.

Principle Component analysis of the FLCAS

We performed an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to assess the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The independent variables were *communication apprehension*, *test anxiety* and *fear of negative evaluation*, while the dependent variable was

GPA. As shown in Table 6, the results indicated a significant relationship between language anxiety and English achievement ($F_{3,64}=5.09, p<0.01$).

Table 6 ANOVA of FLA (FLCAS) and English achievement (N= 75)

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	10.17	3	3.39	5.09	0.00
Residual	42.67	64	0.67		
Total	52.84	67			

a. Dependent Variable: GPA

b. Independent variables: *Communication apprehension, Test anxiety, Negative evaluation*

The FLCAS with its three factors explained 29.2 % of the total variance in English achievement. Items in Factor 1 (*Communication apprehension*) accounted for approximately 2.2% of the total variance; Factor 2 (*Test anxiety*) accounted for 3%, and Factor 3 (*Fear of negative evaluation*) accounted for 4% of the total variance.

Table 7 ANOVA of FLCAS components' effect on English achievement (N=75)

Independent Variables	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig.
Communication Apprehension	-0.03	0.03	-0.21	-1.05	0.30
Test Anxiety	-0.03	0.02	-0.30	-1.98	0.05
Negative Evaluation	0.01	0.03	0.04	0.23	0.82

$R^2=0.192$, Constant= 5.31

For the past several decades, the term FLA has been shown widely to be an influential factor in foreign language success (Al-shboul, Ahmad, Nordin, & Rahman, 2013). Therefore, this study was designed to investigate the relationship between FLA and language achievement in English courses among university students majoring in English at KKU. According to the findings, FLA correlated significantly and negatively with English achievement, indicating that students with high levels of FLA achieved lower GPAs. This finding is supported well by previous studies that also have demonstrated that students with high levels of FLA exhibited lower language performance (Aida, 1994; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Huang, 2012; Riasati, 2011; Horwitz, et al., 1986). This effect is associated with the fact that students who experience high stress, frustration, and fear perform poorly in their English classes. Moreover, this study is consistent with that of Macintyre and Gardner (1991) and Horwitz (2001), who suggest that poor performance and a negative attitude may increase FLA and impair learning significantly. Na (2007) emphasizes that, "Usually, high anxiety can make learners get discouraged, lose faith in their abilities, escape from participating in classroom activities, and even give up the effort to learn a language well. Therefore, the learners with high anxiety often get low achievement and low achievement makes them more anxious about learning" (p.30).

Question 3. Is there any relationship between English language anxiety and gender?

To address this question, the mean scores for males and females were calculated, and *t*-test was used to investigate the differences in the students' levels of FLA and their English achievement by gender. Mean values (Table 6) indicated that there was no significant difference in FLA between males and females: (M= 98.20,N=51) and (M=94.35,N=24), respectively.

Table 8 Levels of FLA by gender

	N	Mean	SD	<i>p</i>
Male	24	98.20	18.56	n.s.
Female	51	94.35	16.27	
Total FLA	75	95.58		

Thus, all of the students in the English Department at KKU exhibited nearly the same level of FLA in English courses (Table 8).

Table 9 The relationship between FLA and English language achievement by gender (N=75)

Gender	N	FL Achievement
Female	51	-0.43**
Male	24	-0.41**
Total Anxiety	75	-0.43**

***p*<0.01 level (2-tailed).

Aida's (1994) study, which also found no statistical difference between FLA and gender in learning Japanese supports the absence of a significant relationship between FLA among males and females and their performance in learning a foreign language, as found in this study. Another supportive study is that of Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley (1999), who investigated the influence of gender on FLA and found no significant correlations. Moreover, Elkhafaifi (2005) found no significant difference in the levels of Arabic listening anxiety between males and females learning Arabic. In another study, Kao and Craigie (2010) investigated the effect of FLA on Taiwanese university students' English performance, and found that FLA is a significant predictor of English achievement regardless of gender.

Conclusion

There has been insufficient research on the relationship between FLA and foreign language achievement in the Saudi EFL context. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to examine the effect of FLA on the English proficiency of Saudi university students majoring in English. This research is one of the few correlational investigations that has demonstrated the association between FLA and foreign language achievement in this population. The findings showed that Saudi university students experience anxiety while learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, the students' levels of FLA had a negative effect on their achievement. With respect to gender, there was no significant difference between males and females' levels of FLA.

The findings of this study will benefit English teachers, educators, researchers, and students themselves. All of those who are involved in learning and teaching foreign language should cooperate to minimize the effects of FLA and create inviting learning environments that will improve the students' performance in learning foreign languages.

Limitations and Recommendations

Despite this study's valuable contributions, further FLA research is needed. Although this study identified the association between FLA and foreign language achievement in the Saudi context, some limitations should be mentioned. First, the findings are limited to Saudi students majoring in English at KKU, and therefore, the results cannot be generalized widely. The study identified the effect of anxiety on students' FL achievement without examining the influence of other variables, including motivation, aptitude, students' attitudes, etc. Third, the findings were based only on quantitative data. Qualitative data should be obtained to achieve deeper data analysis and fuller explanations of the phenomenon. These limitations should be addressed in future studies to enrich our understanding of FLA and its effects on foreign language learning and L2 acquisition.

Future researchers also could investigate other language skills, such as reading and writing, which may contribute to a greater understanding of the nature of FLA and students' achievement in various skills.

It is highly recommended to include students who are not majoring in English in future studies to see if they yield the same findings. Because this study did not address causal relationships, future research also is needed to investigate the direction of the relationship between FLA and language achievement. Specifically, it would be most useful to know whether FLA is a cause or effect of poor language proficiency.

About the Author:

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