

## Foreign Language Anxiety of EFL Students: Examining the Effect of Self-Efficacy, Self-Perceived Proficiency and Sociobiographical Variables

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### Abstract

The present study aims to explore the link between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and self-efficacy, English self-perceived proficiency, and three sociobiographical variables (gender, knowledge of a third language, and experience abroad) among 261 Arabic university students learning English. Data were collected using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) and an Arabic version of the Foreign Language Self-Efficacy Scale (Torres & Turner, 2016). The findings revealed that this sample of Arab English as a foreign language (EFL) students experienced an average level of anxiety with female learners suffering more from anxiety than their male counterparts. Regression analyses revealed that self-efficacy, self-perceived proficiency in English, and gender were predictors of FLA. The results suggest that participants who were self-efficacious and felt more proficient in English were significantly less likely to suffer from FLA. However, even though knowledge of a third language and experience abroad were correlated with FLA, they had no effect on participants' anxiety.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language, experience abroad, foreign language anxiety, self-efficacy, self-perceived proficiency, sociobiographical variables

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## Introduction

There is a consensus among many researchers that affective factors such as anxiety and self-efficacy, along with other variables, play an important role in second or foreign language (FL) learning (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Affect has been found to influence learning, with positive affect enhancing achievement and negative affect inhibiting achievement (Bandura, 1986; MacIntyre, 1999). While anxiety as an independent construct has been widely researched (e.g., Bailey, 1983; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Ohata, 2005; Pappamihel, 2002; Williams & Andrade, 2008; Young, 1991) the construct of self-efficacy is still quite underexplored in the domain of second and foreign language acquisition (Shi, 2016). Increasing students' self-efficacy is important since it enhances learning experiences and is linked with higher achievement (Byer, 2001). Furthermore, learner's variables such as gender (e.g., MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002; Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Dewaele, 2007; Park & French, 2013), knowledge of a third language (Dewaele, 2007, 2010; Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; Thompson & Khawaja, 2015), experience abroad (e.g., Allen & Herron, 2003; Coleman, 1997; Shapson, Kaufman, & Day, 1981), and self-perceived proficiency (e.g. Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Dewaele & Al Saraj, 2015; Liu & Chen, 2013; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007) may have an impact on achievement in another language. Since these variables are inter-related (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997), there is a need to explore their relationship with anxiety. Analysis of the connection between anxiety and other learner characteristics can unveil the type of language learners who are more prone to feeling anxiety vis-à-vis on second language learning and communication, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the variables provoking FLA (Tóth, 2007). Therefore, the aim of the present study is to examine how FLA is related to five learner variables: self-efficacy, English self-perceived proficiency, gender, knowledge of a third language, and experience abroad. These independent variables may interact with each other to provoke anxiety situations.

## Literature review

### *Foreign language anxiety*

Horwitz et al. (1986) have defined the phenomenon of 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). Horwitz et al. (1986) have identified three types of anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is defined as “a type of shyness characterized as fear of, or anxiety about communicating with people” (p. 127). It is related to an individual's level of anxiety when interacting with other speakers. Many studies have concluded that communication apprehension is a major source of anxiety (Al-Saraj, 2014; Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Young, 1990). Test anxiety is defined as “the type of performance anxiety resulting from a fear of failure in an academic evaluation setting” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127). It refers to anxiety that students experience in an exam situation. Tests are a source of anxiety (Koch & Terrell, 1991; Ohata, 2005; Young, 1991). Fear of negative evaluation refers to the “apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.128). Negative evaluation involves fear from being evaluated by the instructor as well as by peers (Aida,

1994; Horwitz, 1986; Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret, 1997; Kao & Craigie, 2010; Lu & Liu, 2011). Young (1991) avers that learners tend to experience classroom anxiety provoked by different factors including learner and teacher beliefs about language learning, teacher-learner nature of interactions, and classroom management. Several studies (e.g., Abu-Rabia, 2004; Al-Saraj, 2014; Brantmeier, 2005; Yan & Horwitz, 2008) have emphasized the role of the teacher in either increasing or decreasing the levels of anxiety among students.

### ***Self-efficacy***

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' "judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1997, p. 391). This means that individuals' success in completing a given task is determined by their level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). In other words, people with high levels of self-efficacy have better performance than people with lower levels of self-efficacy. Therefore, Mills, Pajares, and Herron (2007) posit that learners' level of self-efficacy can be a predictor of success in completing tasks. Students may experience different levels of self-efficacy depending on their perception about the level of difficulty of a specific task (Torres & Turner, 2016).

Bandura (1997) argues that there is a correlation between FLA levels and self-efficacy beliefs. Learners with lower levels of self-efficacy tend to experience higher levels of anxiety because they underestimate their ability to learn a foreign language. His claim was supported by several empirical studies. In a study involving Turkish students learning EFL, Cubukcu (2008) reported a negative correlation between the participants' self-efficacy and FLA. Learners with lower levels of self-efficacy had higher levels of FLA while students with lower anxiety had higher levels of self-efficacy. Within the same vein, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) aver that self-efficacy, FLA, and motivation are interrelated. Learners with higher levels of confidence experience lower anxiety levels. Consequently, they gain the ability to be high achievers in foreign language learning. Conversely, learners with lower levels of confidence tend to doubt their ability to learn a foreign language.

### ***Self-perceived proficiency in the foreign language***

Self-perceived proficiency in the FL has been found to be one of the predictors of FLA (e.g. Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Dewaele & Al Saraj, 2015; Liu & Chen, 2013; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007). Learners who feel proficient in the target language typically experience lower levels of FLA, while those who perceive themselves less competent tend to exhibit higher levels of anxiety. In their study, Dewaele and Al Saraj (2015) reported that self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of anxiety among Arab EFL students from different countries. Participants who felt more proficient in oral English were significantly less likely to suffer from FLA in English. However, there has been concern about the validity of self-perceived competence measures (DeKeyser, 2006). Anxiety may bias learners' perception of their true proficiency as reported by research. In their experiment involving Anglo-Canadian students learning French as a second language, MacIntyre, Noels and Clément (1997) found that students' self-perceived proficiency of French was influenced by their anxiety; anxious students underestimated their proficiency while less anxious students overestimated their proficiency in French.

***FLA and gender***

Research conducted on the impact of gender on FLA has yielded inconsistent results. Some studies found evidence that male students exhibited higher levels of anxiety than their female peers (Campbell & Shaw 1994; MacIntyre et al, 2002). Other studies reported opposite results as female students scored higher on FLA than their male counterparts (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Dewaele, 2007; Park & French, 2013). Some researchers have found that gender had no effect on FLA. Alshahrani (2016) did not find gender differences in FLA among tertiary Arab EFL students in Saudi Arabia. The same results were reported by other studies (Aida, 1994; Dewael et al., 2008; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Kao & Craigie, 2010; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004).

***FLA and multilingualism***

Research examining the correlation between FLA and multilingualism has been scant (Thompson & Lee, 2013). A few studies have linked multilingualism and lower levels of FLA than bilinguals (Dewaele, 2007, 2010; Dewaele et al., 2008). For learners who manage to reach a high level of competence in a third foreign language, anxiety ceases to be an issue (Dewaele, 2010). Dewaele (2007) found that learners who learned more languages seem to carry little anxiety. Trilinguals exhibited lower levels of anxiety in their second language. This could be attributed to the fact that “trilinguals and quadrilinguals have become better communicators as a result of their multilingualism, and that their self-confidence, as well as their self-perceived competence has grown as a result” (Dewaele, 2007, p.404). These findings were corroborated by the results of a more recent study by Thompson and Khawaja (2015) involving Turkish university students. The researchers reported that multilingual learners of English had lower levels of anxiety than their bilingual counterparts. Cenoz (2013) asserts that lower levels of anxiety are due to the fact that learning additional languages grants multilinguals a broader linguistic repertoire and more experience. Multilingualism also helps acquire better communication skills (Dewaele, 2010). Santos, Cenoz and Gorter (2015), however, aver that the evidence is still limited. Therefore, the relationship between FLA and multilingualism should be further explored.

***FLA and experience abroad***

Several studies found that experience abroad decreases the level of FLA (e.g., Allen & Herron, 2003; Coleman, 1997; Shapson, Kaufman, & Day, 1981). In a more recent study, Thompson and Lee (2014) found that experience abroad helps reduce FLA among Korean learners of English as a foreign language. The impact included different facets of FLA: English class performance anxiety, confidence in communicating with native speakers of English, and fear of ambiguity. Thompson and Lee (2014) assert that when exploring the impact of experience abroad on anxiety, language proficiency level should be considered. In other words, having experience abroad may not decrease FLA without a certain level of foreign language proficiency. Allen and Herron (2003) posit that the relationship between study abroad and affective variables, such as motivation and anxiety, and linguistic gain, is complex. They contend that further research is needed to “investigate whether linguistic and affective outcomes are maintained after SA [study abroad]” (p.383).

In summary, several variables that are linked to FLA have been identified in the research literature. There were mixed results since some variables seemed to have different impacts on FLA. Some researchers have called for further research as the puzzle of the characteristics of anxious foreign language learners is still incomplete (Dewaele & Al Saraj, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this study is twofold. The first is to examine the level of anxiety in a group of male and female Saudi university students and find out whether their level is similar to the level of other foreign language learners reported in previous studies. The second aim is to investigate how FLA is related to the following variables: self-efficacy, English self-perceived proficiency, knowledge of a third language, and experience abroad. No research has yet, to our knowledge, combined these variables with FLA especially in the Saudi EFL context.

The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What are the anxiety levels of EFL students? Do male and female students experience similar anxiety levels?
2. Are there effects of self-efficacy, English self-perceived proficiency, and other learner variables (gender, knowledge of a third language, and experience abroad) on FLA?

## Methods

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were 261 Arab EFL students enrolled in lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced English courses in three public universities in Saudi Arabia. Table 1 provides basic information about the participants. The majority were male (n = 144) and aged 18-22 (n = 240). Approximately 63% of participants have learnt French as a third language. Most of participants (76.6%) were majoring in languages and translation. The rest were majoring in other areas of study, namely business administration, computer science, and human resources. All participants self-rated their proficiency in English on a scale from 1 to 10 for listening, speaking, reading and writing. The same scale was used in previous studies (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2008; Santos, Cenoz & Gorter, 2015; Thompson & Lee, 2013). The average scores are reported in Table 2.

*Table 1 Summary of Participants' Characteristics*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	117	44.8
	Male	144	55.2
Age	18-22	240	92
	23-38	21	8
Major	English	200	76.6
	Non-English	61	23.4
Year in college	Freshman (first year)	44	16.9

Sophomore (second year)	69	26.4
Junior (third year)	59	22.6
Senior (fourth year)	51	19.5
Experience abroad English speaking country	54	20.7

Table 2 *English Self-perceived Proficiency Levels*

Skill	Mean	SD
Listening (max = 10)	5.95	2.39
Speaking (max = 10)	5.32	2.19
Reading (max = 10)	7.91	2.33
Writing (max = 10)	5.56	2.29
Total (max = 40)	24.77	

### Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study: Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), designed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and Foreign Language Self-Efficacy Scale (FLSES), developed by Torres and Turner (2016). Both surveys were pilot-tested prior to the onset of this study experiment.

#### *Foreign language anxiety scale*

An adapted version of FLCAS was used to measure anxiety levels among participants. The phrase *foreign language* was replaced with *English language* because participants in the current study were EFL learners. FLCAS is a self-reported measure of learners' anxiety in the foreign language classroom created by Horwitz et al. (1986). It is the most commonly used scale to measure FLA. It consists of 33 statements. Each item on the scale is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The mean scores in the FLCAS range from 33 to 165, with lower scores representing lower anxiety and higher scores representing higher anxiety. Twenty-four of the items are positively worded; nine are negatively worded. The scale has been shown to be reliable with an alpha coefficient of .90 and above (e.g., Sevinç & Dewaele, 2016; Thompson & Khawaja, 2015). In the present investigation, the FLACS yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability index of .88. This figure reveals high internal reliability.

#### *FL self-efficacy scale*

To measure students' self-efficacy, an adapted Arabic version of Torres and Turner's (2016) Foreign Language Self-Efficacy Scale (FLSES) was employed. The items comprise statements about the students' confidence to perform tasks related to the major skills of FL

learning (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). There are 4 items for each sub-scale, for a total of 16 items. A rating scale of 0–100 where 10 = not able to do the task at all, and 100 = able to do the tasks very well, was used, in increments of 10 following previous self-efficacy studies. Bandura (2006) asserts that self-efficacy scales should range from 0 to 100 due to research demonstrating that these scales are more appropriate for psychometric measures. The mean scores in the FLSES range from 10 to 100, with low scores indicating lower self-efficacy and high scores indicating higher self-efficacy. Torres and Turner's (2016) reported high alpha coefficients for all subscales with an average of .91.75 (Cronbach's alpha) for their 24-item scale. The scale used in this investigation had an internal consistency score of  $\alpha = .96$ .

## Results

This section presents the findings for each research question.

*Research Question 1: What are the anxiety levels of EFL students? Do male and female students experience similar anxiety levels?*

To measure the level of FLA among the participants of this study, means and deviations for participants' responses to each FLACS item were calculated (see Table 3). The mean anxiety score for all participants was 93.04 ( $SD = 19.60$ ). As displayed in Table 4, the range of scores in the present study was 48-152. Following Arnaiz and Guillén's (2012) scale, participants had three levels of anxiety. The overwhelming majority of students (88.12 %) experienced low to average levels of FLA. About 28% had low levels of anxiety and about 60% experienced medium levels of anxiety. Only 12% of students suffered from a high level of anxiety (see Table 4).

Table 3 *FLA scores on FLCAS*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class.	2.72	1.254
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.*	2.98	1.323
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in English class.	2.57	1.253
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.	2.82	1.329
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.*	3.54	1.374
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the English course.	2.68	1.232
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	2.62	1.211
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	2.82	1.254
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	2.96	1.321

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10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	2.73	1.449
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.*	3.07	1.259
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	3.07	1.355
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	2.77	1.228
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.*	3.21	1.335
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.06	1.329
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	2.37	1.118
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.	2.34	1.194
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.*	3.19	1.287
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.64	1.265
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	2.70	1.236
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	2.49	1.338
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.*	3.38	1.326
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	2.69	1.187
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	2.70	1.235
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	2.45	1.161
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	2.31	1.199
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	2.63	1.266
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.*	3.36	1.193
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	2.92	1.300

<b>30.</b> I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.	3.02	1.228
<b>31.</b> I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	2.51	1.311
<b>32.</b> I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.*	3.25	1.289
<b>33.</b> I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	3.03	1.293

\*Items are reverse-coded

Table 4 *Anxiety levels for participants*

Scores	Level of FLA	Frequency	Percentage
48-79	Low	73	27.97
80-117	Moderate	157	60.15
118-134	High	31	11.88

The descriptive statistics associated with male and female participants' FLCAS scores are reported in Table 5. To examine differences between the male and female groups on the FLCAS scores, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The independent-samples *t*-test indicated that scores were significantly higher for the female participants ( $M = 100.30$ ,  $SD = 19.17$ ) than for the control group ( $M = 87.14$ ,  $SD = 17.95$ ),  $t(259) = 5.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .71$ . These results suggest that female participants suffered higher levels of FLA than their male counterparts.

Table 5 *Descriptive Statistics of FLCAS Scores for Males and Females*

Gender	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Male	144	87.14	17.95
Female	117	100.30	19.17
Total	261	93.72	18.56

*Research Question 2:* Are there effects of self-efficacy, English self-perceived proficiency, and sociobiographical variables (gender, knowledge of a third language, and experience abroad) on FLA?

Tables 6 presents the correlations between self-efficacy and each of the selected learner variables - gender, knowledge of a third language, experience abroad, and English self-perceived proficiency – and total FLACS score. Results of Pearson correlation reveal that all of the pairwise correlations established are either significant or very significant.

Self-efficacy had the largest correlation with FLACS score. In fact, there was a moderate negative correlation between FLA and self-efficacy,  $r(259) = -.459, p < .001$ . Students who experienced lower levels of FLA tended to have higher levels of self-efficacy. In other words, the more positive the learners' self-perceptions were, the lower their scores on the anxiety scale.

English self-perceived proficiency had the second largest correlation with FLACS score. An inverse relationship was found between students' anxiety scores and their English self-perceived proficiency,  $r = -.40, p < .001$ . This result indicates that the higher a learner's English self-perceived proficiency was, the lower his/her anxiety levels. Similarly, English self-perceived proficiency had the largest correlation, a moderate one, with self-concept score  $r = .50, p < .001$ .

Gender had the third largest correlation with FLACS score as well as with self-concept scores. The magnitude of the relationship between gender and the two constructs is weak ( $r = -.33, p < .001, r = -.33, p < .001$ ).

Participants' knowledge of a third language was also significantly correlated with FLACS score,  $r = -.19, p < .005$ . Participants who have learnt a third language had a tendency to experience lower levels of FLA than their peers who have learnt only two languages (Arabic and English).

Finally, there was a significant weak correlation between experience abroad and FLCAS scores ( $r = -.13, p = .026$ ). This correlation suggests that participants who traveled to English speaking counties experienced lower levels of anxiety than participants who have not traveled.

Table 6 *Differences in anxiety on self-efficacy, English self-perceived proficiency, and selected learner variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Anxiety	1.					
2 Gender	.33**	1.				
3 Knowledge of a third language	-.19**	-.05	1.			
4 Experience abroad	-.13*	-.31**	-.037	1.		
5 English self-perceived proficiency	-.40**	-.24**	-.126*	.079	1.	
6 Self-efficacy	-.46**	-.33**	.298**	.169**	.50**	1.

Note.  $N = 261$ . \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

In order to examine the simultaneous effect of the five learner variables (self-efficacy, gender, knowledge of a third language, experience abroad, and English self-perceived proficiency) on the participants' levels of FLA and self-efficacy, regression analysis procedures were conducted. Results (see Table 7) show that the presented model is significant as there was a significant relationship between the learner variables and anxiety ( $R^2 = .282$ ;  $R = .531$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). The  $R$  value (.531) for the model indicates a medium linear relationship between the five learner variables and FLA.  $R^2$  was .282, which means self-efficacy, gender, and English self-perceived proficiency combined to explain 28.2% of the variance in the participants' anxiety. According to Cohen's (1988) criteria for assessing the predictive power of a set of independent variables, this indicates a small effect size.

However, as evidenced by Table 7, of the five learner variable only three contributed significantly ( $p < .0005$ ) to the prediction of FLA: self-efficacy, gender, and English self-perceived proficiency. The other two variables (knowledge of a third language and experience abroad) did not make any significant contribution. Among the useful predictor variables, self-efficacy had the highest relative impact on anxiety with  $t$  value of -4.049, followed by self-perceived proficiency with  $t$  value of 3.486. Gender was found to be the weakest predictor with  $t$  value of 3.215.

Table 7 Regression Model for Predicting FLA

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>P</i>
Self-efficacy	-.015	-.267	-4.049**	.000
Gender	7.393	.188	3.215**	.001
English self-perceived proficiency	-.539	-.214	-3.486**	.001
Knowledge of a third language	-2.963	-.073	-1.312 (n.s.)	.191
Experience abroad	-.736	-.015	-.272(n.s.)	.786

Model  $R = .535$ ;  $R^2 = .287$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .273$ ; Std. Error = 16.714;  $F = 20.499$ ;  $p < .0005$ , \*\*  $p < .0005$

## Discussion

This section is devoted to the discussion of each of the research questions in light of the results obtained. The first research question explores the level of FLA, as measured by the participants' scores on the FLACS. Results show that the EFL students experienced an average level of FLA overall. The participants' level of FLA was similar to the level reported in other studies. The mean and standard deviation of the FLACS ( $M = 93.04$ ,  $SD = 19.60$ ) were similar to those reported in previous research (e.g., Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Horwitz et al., 1986). The findings are also aligned with the outcomes reported by previous experiments involving EFL Saudi students (e.g., Alshahrani, 2016; Ashahrani & Alshahrani, 2015; Alrabai, 2014; Hamouda, 2013).

Regarding the potential impact of gender on anxiety levels, the current study found that female participants experienced higher levels of FLA than their male peers. This outcome corroborates other findings in the literature (e.g., Abu-Rabia, 2004; Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Clark & Trafford, 1996; Dewaele, 2007; Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005; Park & French, 2013). In the case of British students learning French, German and Spanish, Clark and Trafford (1996) argue that the differences of the levels of anxiety between males and females were due to the fact that female students are more sincere and frank than male students when they reported their feelings of anxiety. Another explanation that may be applicable to the current study is provided by Park and French (2013). These researchers cite sociocultural factors as the main reason for higher levels of FLA among female Korean students. They maintain that in a male-dominated society where females culturally have a predisposition to embrace a submissive role, they argue that the females are more inclined to be stressed out when asked to express their personal thoughts.

The second research question explored the relationship between five learner variables (self-efficacy, English self-perceived proficiency, gender, knowledge of a third language, and experience abroad) and levels of anxiety. Results revealed that self-efficacy had the largest correlation with FLACS score. The negative relationship between self-efficacy and anxiety suggests that students with low self-efficacy are more prone to experience higher levels of anxiety. This result corroborates the findings reported in previous studies (e.g., Tóth, 2007; Torres & Turner, 2016). It is worth mentioning that Tóth's study explored only first year English majors. However, Torres and Turner's (2016) experiment involved learners of Spanish from different levels. It is a unique study since it examined the correlation between students' levels of FL skill-specific anxiety and FL skill-specific self-efficacy. The results showed that when Spanish learners experienced higher levels of anxiety in each of the FL major skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), they indicated lower levels of FL self-efficacy in the specific skill. The correlation between anxiety and self-efficacy underscores the strong role an individual's beliefs about oneself can play in the amount of anxiety he/she can experience (Tóth, 2007).

Gender has been found a significant predictor for FLA. The literature on whether gender could be a predictor to FLA shows contradictory results. Findings in the current study are consistent with research carried out by Arnaiz and Guillén (2012) and Stephenson (2007) who found that gender was a predictor of FLA among EFL learners in Spain. However, they are not aligned with the outcomes of other studies involving Arab EFL learners (Bensalem, 2017) who found that gender was not a significant predictor of FLA.

The finding that self-perceived proficiency appeared as a predictor of FLA was expected as it was consistent with previous research (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Liu & Chen, 2013; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007). Learners who perceive themselves as less competent at performing specific tasks tend to experience higher levels of anxiety than those learners who perceive themselves as more competent (Clément, Gardner, & Smythe, 1980; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985; Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels,; Kitano, 2001; MacIntyre et al., 1997). However, self-perceived proficiency in this study was not the highest predictor; in Dewaele and Al Saraj's (2015) study, self-rated oral proficiency in English was the strongest

predictor of classroom anxiety among Arab EFL learners. Nevertheless, this result is in line with previous research reporting negative correlations between self-perceived proficiency and anxiety level, and supporting the theory that self-perceived proficiency has proven to be a better predictor of anxiety level than achievement tests (e.g., Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Cheng, 2002; Clément et al., 1994; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

It was an unexpected finding of the study that knowledge of a third language and FLA scores was not a predictor to FLA even though it was correlated to FLA. This finding appears to contradict the findings of previous research, which has shown that the knowledge of more languages is linked to lower levels of FLA/FLCA across languages (Bensalem, 2017; Dewaele, 2010, Dewaele et al., 2008; Thompson & Lee, 2013). The current study found the same results reported by Dewaele and Al Saraj (2015) who did not find any link between anxiety and knowledge of languages. One of the possible explanations for this outcome is that most of the participants had a low level of third language proficiency. All students have studied French for only a couple of semesters.

### **Implications**

Helping students be more self-efficacious and less anxious is a key to success in learning a foreign language. Many studies have demonstrated that a large number of students underachieve in FL courses because of anxiety (Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2003). Therefore, it is important for language instructors to play a major role in reducing students' anxiety in the classroom. The learning environment that an instructor creates can influence learners' levels of self-efficacy (Fencl & Scheel, 2005). Therefore, teachers should establish a safe learning environment where the focus is on learning rather than on testing since students tend to view learning a foreign language as a long series of examinations (Horwitz et al., 1986). It is important to stress that performing well on assignments is less important than learning and making improvements (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). For instructors who lack teaching experience, they should receive training in implementing anxiety-reducing techniques that boost students' self-efficacy. Examples of such techniques include communicative activities (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), group work, and class discussions (Jones, 2004) where making mistakes is not stigmatized. Torres and Turner (2016) have argued that instructors are responsible for providing positive learning experiences for students. To this end, they have suggested using FLAS and FLSES as formative assessment tools to measure students' levels of anxiety and self-efficacy throughout the course. A more realistic approach is to open channels of communication with students where the issue of anxiety is discussed, and use persuasion to raise students' level of efficacy.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

This study has limitations that should be addressed. The instruments used may have overlooked cultural subtleties that may have skewed the results. The FLACS, for example, was designed to measure anxiety originally in a Western context. Al-Saraj (2014) has argued that the translation of instruments might result in culturally inappropriate or irrelevant instruments, hence the need to adapt questionnaires that fit the target population. The researcher has tailored the FLSES towards the EFL learners in Saudi but more improvements may be needed. Furthermore, FLACS focuses primarily on anxiety related to speaking. Anxiety related to other skills such as writing and reading

have not been accounted for in this study. Youngsang (2001) has argued that learners may experience FL anxiety and self-efficacy related to specific FL skills. Therefore, future research should explore the relationship between self-efficacy and other learner variables with FLA, not as unitary constructs, but independent skills. No single study has explored that line of research in the context of EFL.

### Conclusion

The present study investigated the levels of anxiety among Arab EFL learners who experienced average levels of FLA with female learners feeling more anxious than their male peers. Furthermore, this investigation examined the link between self-efficacy, self-perceived proficiency in English, and three sociobiographical variables (gender, knowledge of a third language, and experience abroad) on FLA of Arabic learners of English using FLCAS and FLSES. Results revealed that self-efficacy, self-perceived proficiency in English, and gender were predictors of FLA of Arab EFL learners. The results suggest that participants who were self-efficacious and felt more proficient in English were significantly less likely to suffer from FLA. However, even though knowledge of a third language and experience abroad were correlated with FLA, they were found to have no effect on participants' anxiety.

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