

The Effects of COVID-19 on EFL Learners' Anxiety at the University of Bisha

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of COVID-19 on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' anxiety at the University of Bisha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The differences between male and female learners and learners of the different study levels in terms of anxiety caused by COVID-19 were investigated. Moreover, the study sheds light on two factors which are the internal factors and external factors that increase learning anxiety during COVID-19 and the strategies used by the learners to decrease the negative effects of COVID-19 on learning anxiety. The data of the study were collected from 80 EFL learners (40 males and 40 females) at the University of Bisha. This study is considerable as it deals with something that is important in the learning and teaching processes these days. The study revealed that COVID-19 causes normal anxiety to the EFL learners at the University of Bisha. It was also revealed that there is no significant difference between the male and female learners in terms of anxiety caused by COVID-19 and external factors. There is a significant difference between them in terms of the internal factors and strategies used by the learners to decrease the negative effects of learning anxiety during COVID-19. Lastly, there was no significant difference between the learners of the different study levels in terms of anxiety, internal factors and external factors that increase negative learning anxiety and the strategies used by the learners to decrease the negative learning anxiety during COVID-19.

Keywords: Covid-19, EFL learners, learning anxiety, University of Bisha

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Introduction

The current era is witnessing several effects and a necessary change in the education system due to the spread of COVID-19, which shifted education from offline education to online education on educational teaching platforms. These effects and changes have caused unbelievable disruption not only in the educational system but also to many several sectors like business, and commerce, tourism, etc. UNESCO (2020) has declared that over “60% of the world’s student population” have been affected because of the effects and changes of Covid-19 on the education system. Also, “Never before have we witnessed educational disruption on such a large scale” declared by UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay (cited in Demuyakor, 2020, p. 133). Till now, there is still a dim view of this battle with Covid-19. Governments worldwide are still uncertain about when regular classroom teaching will go in its standard system. Consequently, the schools and universities are now emphasizing online instruction with all possible means of education and technology. There has been a remarkable surge in the usage of various online teaching and learning platforms (Li & Lalani, 2020). On the other side, COVID-19 has incredible effects on learners’ anxiety who are learning English as a foreign language through these teaching platforms and educational technology. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the effects of COVID-19 on Saudi EFL learners during this pandemic, with hopes to have a significant contribution in this field.

Rationale, significance and questions of the study

As learning anxiety has an essential role in learning second or foreign language, and as COVID-19 is a new pandemic that causes anxiety, there is a need to examine this problem. In KSA, there have been no more studies on learning anxiety caused by COVID-19. So, this study will undoubtedly provide the decision-makers with some vital information and help them know the details of the problem and make decisions accordingly.

The current study tries to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent does COVID-19 cause anxiety on EFL learners at the University of Bisha?
- What are the effects of COVID-19 on EFL learners' anxiety at the University of Bisha?
- Is there any significant difference between male and female learners and the learners of the different levels in terms of:
 - Learning anxiety caused by Covid-19?
 - Internal factors that increase negative anxiety of COVID-19?
 - External factors that increase negative anxiety of COVID-19?
 - Strategies used by EFL learners to decrease or overcome negative anxiety caused by COVID-19?

Objectives of the study

As the title of the study suggests, the general objective of the study is to investigate the effects of COVID-19 on learning anxiety. The study also aims to find:

- To what extent COVID-19 causes learning anxiety, particularly that of EFL learning.
- The differences between the male and female EFL learners in terms of learning anxiety caused by COVID-19.
- The internal and external factors that increase the negative effects of anxiety.
- The strategies used by the EFL learners to overcome the negative effects of anxiety caused by COVID-19 in EFL learning.

Literature Review

Since the early beginning of 2020, Saudi universities have been experiencing an exceptional massive “Shifting” from the normal classes that are face-to-face classes to online classes due to the extensive spread of Coronavirus disease COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the world. During this time, many studies and researches have investigated the effects and the changes that COVID-19 led to the education system. Moreover, in the following paragraphs, the researchers will discuss few of the studies relevant to the effects and changes of COVID-19 on learners' anxiety and the other psychological aspects.

The effects and changes caused by COVID-19 not only affected both learners' strategies and primacies but also their level of concern in joining courses online. Also, while some learners have indicated that they were having good experience with the online classes, whereas others have said that they are facing negative experiences while returning home during the COVID-19 in disturbed family situations (Killian, 2020).

Furthermore, several studies have stated that the psychological impact of COVID-19 such as anxiety, fear, depression, anger, and confusion, etc, have affected many learners especially in the initial stage of COVID-19 outbreak in China (Chew, Wei, Vasoo, Chua & Sim, 2020; Li, Wang, Xue, Zhao & Zhu, 2020; Qiu, Shen, Zhao, Wang, Xie & Xu, 2020; Wang, Pan, Wan, Tan, Xu, Ho & Ho, 2020). Similar results of these studies were always noted in studies by (Cao, Fang, Hou, Han, Xu, Dong & Zheng, 2020; Wang & Zhao, 2020) that college learners have experienced many levels of psychological stress, health anxiety and depression.

Another study by Arënliu and Bërxulli (2020) investigated the psychological distress of the COVID-19 on learners belonging to different departments. The study revealed that 11.4 % of the learners said that they face very abnormal psychological distress, 13.3% said temperate psychological distress, 24.7 % stated slight psychological distress, whereas 50.6% did not state any psychological distress.

Wang and Zhao (2020) elaborated the early effects of the COVID-19 including its effects on anxiety and stress; these effects were related to some factors like home restrictions and health concerns. Among other factors, they reported that learners underwent extra stress, anxiety, and sadness than those who are not learners. Numerous researchers have expected that physical distancing and universal anxiety feelings over the COVID-19 have originated a wide-ranging collection of effects and challenges in classes together with poor academic presentation (Rundle, Park, Herbstman, Kinsey & Wang, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

In the Saudi context, Moawad (2020) explored the effects of stress on online learning among Saudi university learners. The researcher carried out his exploration on 2271 male and female learners at King Saud University. He observed that a total of 514 learners were fearful of the sudden shift from the old-style face-to-face classes to online classes. They were scared of exams, homework, internet connectivity, lecture timing, etc. Furthermore, Rahman (2020) conducted a research on the various challenges of online EFL teaching during COVID-19 at Qassim University. His study revealed that there were promising results in online EFL teaching during COVID-19 at Qassim University. On the other side, there were some discrepancies. The study concluded that during the quarantine, online teaching had repaired some of the damages to

education caused by COVID-19. However, questions remain unanswered regarding whether online EFL teaching can meet the learners' needs and desired goals.

Another study in Saudi EFL context by Mahyoob (2020) investigated the online learning challenges and problems during COVID-19 faced by EFL learners at Taibah University. The study revealed that learners faced difficulties in accessing the Blackboard platform. Further, around 30% of the learners could not attend the classes and other assignments using Blackboard, and they moved to other applications during online learning. Moreover, there were significant challenges like technical issues faced by the EFL learners. Finally, it is revealed that the EFL learners' satisfaction with online learning is low (less than 50%) and "and 43 % of learners are not fully supporting continuing online education if there is no crisis" (Mahyoob, 2020, p. 360).

Despite the hard work of these previous studies on the effects and challenges of COVID-19 and on learners' anxiety, there is still no vast of studies conducted mainly on investigating the effects of COVID-19 on EFL learners' anxiety at the Saudi universities. Therefore, this study is conducted to investigate the effects of COVID-19 on Saudi EFL learners' anxiety.

Method

This study is a cross-sectional study that was conducted in 2020, i.e. during COVID-19 pandemic. A questionnaire was designed to collect demographic information and data from respondents about learning anxiety caused by COVID-19. The questionnaire was reviewed by some experts in questionnaire designing and statistical analysis. Their feedback led to some changes in the questionnaire and a pilot study was suggested to be done. The pilot study was conducted on 30 learners and some modifications were made.

The questionnaire was distributed among the undergraduate learners of the Department of English at the University of Bisha as a Google form in December 2020. After collecting the data, the data were inserted into SPSS (Version 22.0) for analysis. The tools that were used in the analysis were descriptive statistics, One-Way ANOVA and Kruskal Wallis H test.

Participants

Eighty respondents of the EFL learners at the University of Bisha were taken randomly out of 98 respondents. Eighteen female respondents were dropped out of the study because the researchers intended to take the male and female learners' respondents equally as the gender factor is essential in this study. Forty male learners and forty female learners were taken for the study. All the participants are Saudi citizens. Their ages are nearly ranged between 18 years and 26 years. They have almost the same educational background living accommodations.

Instruments

In this study a questionnaire was used to collect the data. The final version of the distributed questionnaire was of two sections. The first section intended to elicit demographic information (profile) of the respondents. The second section that is of 20 items of 5-point Likert scale ranging 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' intended to elicit data from the respondents about their learning anxiety caused by COVID-19, the internal factors that increase their learning anxiety, the external factors that increase their learning anxiety and the strategies that they use to decrease the negative effects of anxiety on their language learning.

Results

Before analyzing the data, reliability of the data of the second section of the questionnaire was tested and it was found that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.829 as shown in Table (1). This indicates that the consistency of the data is highly reliable.

Table1. *Reliability statistics*

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.829	20

The results show that the EFL learners experience learning anxiety during COVID-19. The descriptive statistics, as shown in Table two shows that the mean is (3.35) indicating that learning anxiety is normal and it is not high.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics of anxiety among EFL Learners*

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Anxiety Statements	80	267.80	3.3475	.37753
Valid N (listwise)	80			

It was found that the respondents have anxiety and fear about their learning during COVID-19 but it is noticed that this anxiety does not decrease their ability to learn. The results show, as shown in Table three, that the means of four statements related to anxiety were above (3.5), the mean of the statement that elicited information about whether COVID-19 anxiety decreases the learners' ability to learn or not was (2.33). This means that most EFL learners have a belief that COVID-19 anxiety does not decrease their ability to learn.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics of the responses on learning anxiety*

Items	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I anxiously think about English learning during COVID-19	80	283.00	3.5375	.72816
I feel uncomfortable with English learning during COVID-19	80	293.00	3.6625	.96710
I worry that COVID-19 may prevent me from learning English	80	294.00	3.6750	1.04063
I have a worry of my learning activities during COVID-19	80	282.00	3.5250	.67458
I believe that COVID-19 anxiety decreases my ability to learn English	80	187.00	2.3375	.95392

Using One-Way ANOVA test to calculate the difference between the male and female learners, as shown in Table four, the analysis does not approve a significant difference between the male and female learners on the level of anxiety ($P = .597 > .05$). The analysis of the statement "I worry that COVID-19 may prevent me from learning English" shows a significant difference between the male and female learners ($P = .017, < .05$). As there is a significant difference between the male and female learners in the statement, Kruskal Wallis H test was used

to calculate the mean ranks and it shows that the female learners are more worried about the possibility of preventing their learning by COVID-19 than the male learners.

Table 4. ANOVA between the male and female learners in terms of anxiety caused by Covid-19

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.041	1	.041	.282	.597
Within Groups	11.219	78	.144		
Total	11.260	79			

As shown in Table five, it was found that there is no significant difference between the learners of the different study levels in terms of anxiety ($P = .386$).

Table 5. ANOVA between the learners of the study levels in terms of anxiety

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.068	7	.153	1.078	.386
Within Groups	10.191	72	.142		
Total	11.260	79			

Internal Factors That Increase the Learners' Negative Anxiety about Learning during Covid-19

The internal factors that may increase the learners' negative anxiety towards learning during COVID-19 were also considered and tested. Table six reveals that there was an agreement that the internal factors play a role in increasing the negative anxiety of COVID-19 towards EFL learning (Mean = 2.93).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the internal factors of anxiety during Covid-19

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Internal factors of anxiety	80	234.20	2.9275	1.03128
Valid N (listwise)	80			

By comparing males and females on the level of the internal factors that increase the learners' negative anxiety towards learning during COVID-19, as shown in Table seven, it was found that there is a significant difference between the male and female learners ($P = .001 < .05$). Using Kruskal Wallis H test to calculate the mean ranks, as shown in Table (8), it was found that, during COVID-19, the female learners' learning anxiety is increased by internal factors more than that of the male learners.

Table 7. ANOVA between male and female learners on the level of the internal factors of anxiety

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	10.805	1	10.805	11.511	.001
Within Groups	73.215	78	.939		
Total	84.020	79			

Table 8. The mean ranks of male and female learners in the internal factors of anxiety

Gender	N	Mean Rank
Female	40	54.08
Male	40	26.93
Total	80	

Comparing the learners' levels of study, there is no significant difference between the respondents' internal factors that may increase the learners' negative anxiety about learning during COVID-19 ($P = .098 > .05$).

Table 9. ANOVA between the study levels in term of the internal factors of anxiety

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	12.576	7	1.797	1.811	.098
Within Groups	71.443	72	.992		
Total	84.020	79			

External Factors That Increase the Learners' Negative Anxiety towards Learning during Covid-19

The external factors that may increase the learners' negative anxiety towards learning during COVID-19 were considered and tested in this study. As shown in Table (10), the mean of the respondents' responses is 3.76. This indicates that the external factors play a critical role in increasing the learners' anxiety about their learning during COVID-19. The external factors that play such role are like hearing and reading about COVID-19, seeing the preventive measures and social media news. These factors prove negative effects on the learners' anxiety towards EFL learning.

Table 10. Descriptive statistics of the external factors of anxiety during Covid-19

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
External Factors of anxiety	80	301.00	3.7625	.50022
Within Groups	71.443	72	.992	
Total	84.020	79		

Tables 11 and 12 reveal no significant difference ($P = .690$) between the male and female learners in terms of external factors that may increase learning anxiety about learning during COVID-19. Also, there is no significant difference ($P = .139$) between the learners of the different levels of study in terms of external factors that increase learning anxiety during COVID-19.

Table 11. ANOVA between male and female learners in terms of the external factors of anxiety

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.041	1	.041	.160	.690
Within Groups	19.727	78	.253		
Total	19.768	79			

Table 12. ANOVA between the respondents' levels of study in terms of the external factors of anxiety

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.713	7	.388	1.636	.139
Within Groups	17.055	72	.237		
Total	19.768	79			

Strategies Used by EFL Learners to Overcome/Decrease the Negative Learning Anxiety Caused by Covid-19

As there are anxiety, internal factors and external factors that increase anxiety, there is a response by the learners. The reaction is using a strategy to decrease the negative effects of such anxiety. When testing the strategies used by the EFL learners and analyzing the results, it was found that there is an agreement that the learners use strategies like “enthusing themselves to learn”, "ignoring social media news about COVID-19", "trying to be hopeful and cheerful during COVID-19", etc. to decrease the negative effects of internal and external factors that increase their anxiety and fear about learning during COVID-19. As shown in Table (13), there is a significant difference between the male and female learners in using the strategies to decrease the effects of COVID-19 anxiety on their EFL learning($P = .004$). Using Kruskal Wallis H test to calculate the mean ranks, it was found, as shown in Table (14), that the female learners use more strategies than male learners to decrease the negative effects of learning anxiety caused by Covid-19. Only one strategy is used more by male learners than female learners that is "trying to be hopeful and cheerful during COVID-19 to continue learning".

Table 13. ANOVA between male and female learners in using strategies to decrease negative anxiety

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.800	1	1.800	9.034	.004
Within Groups	15.542	78	.199		
Total	17.342	79			

Table 14. The mean ranks of male and female learners in using strategies to decrease negative anxiety

Gender	N	Mean Rank
Female	40	47.63
Male	40	33.38
Total	80	

As shown in Table (15), there is no significant difference between the learners of the different levels of study in using strategies to decrease the negative effects of anxiety on their learning ($P = .175$).

Table 15. ANOVA between the learners of the study levels in using strategies to decrease negative anxiety

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.800	1	1.800	9.034	.004
Within Groups	15.542	78	.199		
Total	17.342	79			

Discussion

This study found that the EFL learners have learning anxiety caused by COVID-19 pandemic. This seems to be normal among the learners. They are anxious about their study. It is normal that they have "fear of academic year loss" (Hasan & Bao, 2020, p. 1). This seems to be normal among the learners. This goes in line with many studies (Sundarasan et al., 2020) that found 92% of 983 respondents had normal anxiety and like (Aqeel, Shuja, Abbas, Rehna, & Ziapour, 2020) that found 77.3% of the respondents had normal, mild and moderate anxiety and 22.7% had severe level of anxiety.

Although it was found that there is no significant difference between male and female learners in terms of anxiety caused by COVID-19, there seems to be tendency to present higher levels of anxiety by female learners than male learners. Silva, Brito and Pereira (2020) found that "female participants ($M= 2.59, SD= .81$) presented higher levels of anxiety regarding COVID-19 than men ($M=2.21, SD=.77$)." (p. 4)

It was found that external factors play a role in increasing the negative effects of anxiety caused by COVID-19. These results are aligned with the results of (Martínez-Lorca, Martínez-Lorca, Criado-Álvarez, & Armesilla, 2020) and other studies. That is why WHO suggested "minimize watching, reading or listening to news that cause you feel anxious or distressed" (World Health Organization, 2020, p. 1). Not only external factors have negative effects on learning anxiety but also internal factors have negative effects in increasing learning anxiety. This was proved by Sood. S. (2020). This was stated as "The swift rise of fear and anxiety among people due to uncertainty of the disease are coupled with essential yet socially disruptive measures like lockdowns and quarantines. ...These can lead to ... anxiety. Predisposing factors include ... misinformation on social media". (Sood, S. 2020, p. 23).

The EFL learners use some strategies to decrease the negative effects of learning anxiety caused by COVID-19. As it was found that the female learners are in general more anxious about their learning than male learners, it was found that they use more strategies to diminish or reduce the negative effects of anxiety caused by COVID-19.

Conclusion

It is noticed and proved that anxiety has negative effects on second or foreign language learners. It can hinder the learners from learning a language. As it is known and proved, COVID-19 caused learning anxiety for learners in all the countries that have experienced the pandemic. Saudi Arabic is one of these countries and the Saudi learners are anxious. So, the researchers tried to examine the dimensions of this problem that may affect EFL learning.

After analyzing the data collected from the sample taken from the University of Bisha, this study gives evidence that the EFL learners have been suffering from anxiety during COVID-19. It was concluded that Saudi EFL learners showed normal anxiety towards their learning during COVID-19. In general, female learners had anxiety more than male learners. Moreover, the study revealed some internal factors and external factors that increase the negative effects of anxiety on EFL learning during COVID-19. Moreover, the EFL learners try to use some strategies to decrease the negative effects of anxiety on EFL learning during COVID-19. The study concludes that female learners are more affected by internal factors than male learners. So,

female learners use more strategies to decrease the effects of anxiety on learning during COVID-19.

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Appendix: Students' Questionnaire

Name: (optional)

Gender: Male Female

College: Department:

Level:

Table 16. *The questionnaire distributed to the study sample*

	Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I anxiously think about English learning during COVID-19.					
2	I feel uncomfortable with English learning during COVID-19.					
3	I worry that COVID-19 may prevent me from learning English.					
4	I have a worry of my learning activities during COVID-19.					
5	I believe that COVID-19 anxiety decreases my ability to learn English.					
6	Thinking about COVID-19 decreases my ability to learn English.					
7	During classes, I find myself thinking about COVID-19 more than learning English.					
8	The more I think about COVID-19, the more confused I get in learning English.					
9	Thinking about COVID-19 makes me careless about learning English.					
10	I feel nervous when I think that COVID-19 will hinder me from fulfilling my objectives of learning English.					

11	I worry about my English learning when the teachers/classmates speak about COVID-19.					
12	I feel that hearing or reading about the spread of COVID-19 decreases my attention to learning English.					
13	When I see more COVID-19 preventive and preventive measures done by people, I get more worried about my learning of English.					
14	More social distancing during COVID-19 increases my anxiety about learning English.					
15	Social media news about COVID-19 increases my fear about my learning of English.					
16	I think government will apply the procedures that will help me overcome the negative effects of COVID-19 on learning English.					
17	I enthuse myself to learn English actively during COVID-19.					
18	I try to ignore social media news about COVID-19 to care about my English learning.					
19	I follow the strict preventive measures which make me feel safe of COVID-19 to keep learning English actively.					
20	I try to be hopeful and cheerful during COVID-19 to continue my English learning actively.					