Exploring Foreign Language Anxiety among English-Major Undergraduate Students

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Abstract: This study examined the foreign language (FL) anxiety level of Arabic-speaking university level students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia. Fifty undergraduate English-major students participated in this study. Participants completed the Arabic Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire (Al-Saraj, 2014), which is a modified version of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Findings showed that participants experienced an average level of language anxiety. The main sources of language anxiety were speaking in front of classmates, concern about grades, and worry about being lost in class. In addition, results indicated that there was a significant negative relationship between students’ level of anxiety and their test scores. Suggestions about the best strategies to reduce anxiety are offered.

Keywords: Anxiety, Foreign language learning, Language performance.
Juniors, and seniors who spent more years learning Arabic had lower anxiety than freshmen students.

Gender may also have an impact on FLA. Some studies revealed that females have higher levels of FLA than males (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005). However, Kitano (2001) reported opposite findings. His study showed that Japanese male students showed a higher level of anxiety than their female counterparts.

Another variable that is linked to language anxiety has to do with the role played by the teacher in the classroom. Abu-Rabia (2004) explored the relationship between teachers’ attitudes and EFL students’ language anxiety. He concluded that teachers’ supportive attitude helped diminish students’ levels of anxiety. Similarly, Ewald (2007) reported that teachers’ supportive attitudes helped alleviate students’ anxiety. The teacher’s use of unfamiliar teaching methods can also impact students’ anxiety (e.g., Brantmeier, 2005; Stevick, 1980). This finding is especially true in the case of foreign teachers who may use teaching practices not expected among students from another culture (Al-Saraj, 2014). Yan & Horwitz (2008) observed that foreign teachers occasionally shocked Chinese EFL students by establishing an informal student-teacher relationship, which is a deviation from the cultural norms in China. This deviation caused anxiety among Chinese students.

In her study that involved Saudi female college-level students, Al-Saraj (2013) cited teacher-student interactions and teacher behavior as some of the major sources of anxiety among all participants.

The prevalence of anxiety and its effect on student language learning was supported by the findings of a number of studies. MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément. (1997) found that students with FLA have a tendency to underestimate their own abilities, which undermines their performance in class. Bailey (1983) investigated the relationship between anxiety and learners’ achievement and found that a high level of anxiety could negatively affect learners’ performance. The same results were reported by (Atasheneh & Izadi, 2012; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 2000; Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret., 1997; Kondo & Ling, 2004; Tuncer & Dogan, 2015; Yamat & Shirani Bidabadi, 2012).

In another study, Oxford (1999) concluded that anxiety diminishes language learners’ achievement “indirectly through worry and self-doubt and directly by reducing participation and creating overt avoidance of the language” (p.60).

Aida (1994) explored the relationship between FLA and performance among a diverse sample of students. Participants included speakers of several different languages, namely Chinese, English, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish. Results revealed a moderate negative correlation between the participants’ level of FLA and their overall performance as measured by their course grades.

In a study that involved Chinese students of different majors enrolled in English courses at three universities, Lu & Liu (2011) measured the correlation between FLA and performance in English classes. Results showed a significant, moderate negative relationship between FLA and English performance as measured by the course final exam scores. The same results were reported by Kao & Craigie (2010) who examined the relationship between anxiety and course grades in 101 English-major, Chinese students learning English.

There was only one study (Abu-Ghararah, 1999) that examined the effect of foreign language anxiety on English achievement among Saudi students. This study, which involved 240 secondary and university students in Saudi Arabia, demonstrated a negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and the students’ English achievement.

The results of the studies reviewed above were in line with the findings of Horwitz (2001) who reviewed a large body of research and concluded that anxiety is a cause of poor language learning.

The negative impact of anxiety on FL learning is supported by Krashen’s (1982) affective filter hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, learners with low levels of anxiety outperform students with higher levels of anxiety.

Findings of other studies, however, revealed conflicting results suggesting that anxiety can facilitate FL learning. For example, in a study that examined the effect of anxiety on course final scores for Spanish, German, and French classes, Chastain (1975) found a positive relationship between anxiety and students’ grades. The study concluded that while too much anxiety can debilitate language performance, proper levels of anxiety can enhance learners’ language learning. These findings were supported by Bailey...
Introduction

There is a consensus among many researchers that affective factors play an important role in second or foreign language learning (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Research has shown that anxiety can affect language learners (e.g., Bailey, 1983; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Ohata, 2005; Pappamihiel, 2002; Williams & Andrade, 2008; Young, 1991). The bulk of research on the effect of anxiety on foreign language learning focused mostly on students studying foreign languages in the United States and Canada, and more recently on Asian students (Williams & Andrade, 2008). However, studies that examined classroom language learning anxiety among Arab students in the Middle East are lacking. For example, in Saudi Arabia, which is the most populous country in the Gulf region, learning English is very common, but the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety (FLA) among students has not been examined enough (Al-Saraj, 2014) especially the relationship between FLA and language achievement. The few studies on FLA that involved Saudi students set out to explore primarily sources of learners’ anxiety (e.g., Alrabai, 2014; Hamouda, 2013). The present study aims to contribute to this limited research by measuring the level of anxiety experienced by male university-level Saudi students learning EFL. In addition, it investigates the main causes of FLA as reported by participants, and examines also whether there is a correlation between anxiety and language performance. The findings of this study provide suggestions on ways that classroom anxiety can be alleviated.

Literature Review

Gardener & MacIntyre (1993) defined FLA as “the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a foreign language with which the individual is not fully proficient” (p.5). Horwitz et al. (1986) defined foreign language anxiety experienced in the classroom 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) identified three components of FLA: 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 refers to an individual’s level of anxiety when communicating with others. In a recent study that involved 1389 English-major students from four geographic areas in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Alrabai (2014) found that communication was a main source of anxiety. Test anxiety is defined as “the type of performance anxiety resulting from a fear of failure in an academic evaluation setting” (p. 127). It refers to anxiety that learners experience when taking an exam. Fear of negative evaluation refers to the “apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations” (p. 128). Negative evaluation is more global than test anxiety as it involves fear from being evaluated in any setting, not just the classroom. It also does not necessarily mean fear of being evaluated by just the instructor, but also by peers. In a study on EFL international postgraduate students of a Malaysian university, Zhiping & Paramasivam (2013) concluded that fear of negative evaluation caused anxiety to participants.

Variables Associated with Language Anxiety

Researchers argue that learners experience different levels of FLA, which are attributed to personality, age, gender, level of proficiency, and teacher’s role among other variables. For example, Ohata (2005) found that Japanese students experienced different levels of FLA because of their different personalities, language attitudes towards English, and age. The students’ different levels of English proficiency were also reported as a factor that accounted for their difference in anxiety levels.

In a study that examined FLA among 100 EFL students at three different proficiency levels, Liu (2006) found that students with advanced English proficiency tended to be less anxious. The same findings were reported by Elkhafafi (2005) who explored FLA among 233 graduate and undergraduate students learning Arabic in the US. He found that advanced students experienced a lower level of language anxiety than beginning or intermediate students. Elkhafafi (2005) reported the length of language learning as a factor that correlated with FLA. Data showed that sophomores,
juniors, and seniors who spent more years learning Arabic had lower anxiety than freshmen students.

Gender may also have an impact on FLA. Some studies revealed that females have higher levels of FLA than males (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Donovan & MacIntyre, 2005). However, Kitano (2001) reported opposite findings. His study showed that Japanese male students showed a higher level of anxiety than their female counterparts.

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(1983) who argued that anxiety can have not only a negative effect, as mentioned earlier, but also a positive effect in that it motivated her to study harder. Similarly, Young (1986) maintained that while anxiety may diminish performance in foreign language learning, facilitating anxiety can enhance performance. Mills, Pajares & Herron (2006) found a positive correlation between listening anxiety and listening proficiency in French. In other words, students who experienced anxiety were able to achieve high scores in French listening. Ewald (2007), however, questioned the existence of any positive role played by anxiety in language learning. She argued that it is not possible for students who suffer from lack of concentration, difficulty in retaining information, and who avoid coming to class, to perform up to their potential.

Most researchers who tried to measure FLA used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which was developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). This 33-items, self-reported questionnaire describes situations that may cause anxiety among students. It uses a five-point Likert scale with a possible score ranging between 33 and 165. High scores indicate a high level of anxiety. FLCAS has had a high level of internal reliability ranging between .92 and .95 in many of the studies that used this scale (e.g., Aida, 1994; Cao, 2011; Cheng, 1998; Horwitz, 1986). The instrument was developed mainly based on the experience of students learning Spanish in the US. Al-Saraj (2014) argued, however, that this tool does not take into account “anxiety culture-specific variations in anxiety-related experiences” (p.7). Students who study a foreign language in a different educational system and/or in a different culture are likely to experience a different kind of anxiety. Therefore, Al-Saraj (2014), who examined Arab female students in Saudi Arabia, designed a modified version of the FLCAS which she called “the Arabic Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire” (AFLAQ). This new tool includes 33 items on a five-point Likert scale, and was based on an open-ended questionnaire that surveyed female students’ anxiety in a Saudi Arabian college. Four items from the original FLCAS were kept intact. Nine items covered very similar topics in FLCAS but were slightly modified. Five items were similar in content, but were reworded extensively. Finally, AFLAQ includes fifteen completely new items not included on FLCAS. Issues related to self-presentation and embarrassment, which female Arab students in Saudi Arabia tend to experience, were addressed through some of the items included in AFLAQ (see methods section).

**Purpose of the Study**

This present study aimed to explore the FLA level and its primary causes among Arabic-speaking university students learning EFL in Saudi Arabia. It also examined the relationship between the level of foreign language anxiety and language performance. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What is the foreign language anxiety level among English-major undergraduate students?
2. What are the main sources of foreign language anxiety among English-major undergraduate students?
3. Is there a relationship between foreign language anxiety and the participants’ language performance?

**Method**

**Participants**

The original number of participants was 69 students, but 19 students had to be eliminated from the study mainly due to the fact that they failed to respond to the questions on the back of the questionnaire. So the final number of participants was 50 male students (N= 50) enrolled in English courses at a state university in northern Saudi Arabia. They were all English major who needed to take language courses covering basic skills such as: reading, writing, listening, and speaking during first and second year. These courses are prerequisites before they are allowed to enroll in content courses (e.g., linguistics, literature, etc.). Since the educational system in Saudi Arabia is segregated, the researcher only had access to the men’s campus, hence the absence of female participants in this study. Participants’ ages ranged between 19 and 21. All students completed one year at the preparatory school prior to being admitted to the Bachelor’s Degree program in English.

**Instruments**

Questionnaire. Arabic Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire, which is a self-reported measure of Arab students’ anxiety levels in the English language.
classroom developed by Al-Saraj (2014), was used in this study. This questionnaire is a modified version of FLCAS designed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Al-Saraj (2014) argued that the AFLAQ is more suitable to the learning context of Arab students. The researcher decided to use AFLAQ instead of FLACS since the educational setting of this study is similar to Al-Saraj’s study. The modified version of FLACS consists of 33 statements and includes items that are anxiety provocative specifically to Saudi students that were not addressed in FLACS. The questionnaire has four categories: communication anxiety (Items 1, 4, 7, 8, 12, 15, 17, 20, 25, 26, 27 and 33); fear of negative evaluation (Items 2, 11, 23, and 31); test anxiety (Items 14, 16, 24 and 32); and anxiety in English classes (Items 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 18, 21, 22, 28, 29 and 30). The list of the 33 items of AFLAQ is reported in the results section. 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 unless an item is left blank, with lower scores indicating lower anxiety and higher scores indicating higher anxiety. The scale has been shown to be reliable with an alpha coefficient of .89 (Al-Saraj, 2014). In this study, the AFLAQ had a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient reliability index of .81, which makes it a very reliable instrument.

### Achievement Test

An achievement test was developed with the collaboration of a group of experienced ESL professors to measure students’ language performance. The test included 50 multiple-choice items and was divided into four sections: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary. The test was piloted with a group of 20 students who were in the same department and had different levels of proficiency. All students received a score between 0 and 100. The test had a good level of reliability with a Cronbach alpha value of .81. A few adjustments were made to the test based on the feedback received from the instructors who conducted the pilot study.

### Procedure

The researcher sought the permission of the Head of the English Department at the College of Arts and Education to conduct the study. The researcher was granted the approval after the objectives of the study and the AFLAQ questionnaire were personally reviewed by the Head of Department. Students who volunteered to participate in the study were assured that their names would be kept confidential, and that the results of the questionnaire would not affect their final grades. Most of the questionnaire copies were administered to the students at the end of the semester during class time. The students who were absent during class time were given the opportunity to fill out the questionnaire after the final exam. They had about 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Students were encouraged to ask questions about any of the questionnaire items.

### Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations) were used to summarize the participants’ responses to the questionnaire. The Pearson correlation analysis was performed to test the relationships between the AFLAQ and language performance. Three items (8, 12 and 28) were reverse-coded, so that a high score represented high anxiety. For example, a response of “Strongly Disagree” in the 8th item, “I am not nervous speaking the foreign language in front of my classmates”, gets a score of 5, which represents the highest level of anxiety. Since a few items were not answered by participants, Littlès Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) Test was conducted to check if the items were missing in a random way. The results (sig. 23) showed that the items were missing at random. The expectation-maximization (EM) technique in SPSS (version 22) was used to estimate missing values.

### Results

#### Research Question 1

What is the foreign language anxiety level among English-major undergraduate students?

Means and standard deviations (SD) for participants’ responses to each AFLAQ item are reported in (Table 1). The results of this study indicate that participants experienced an average level of language anxiety. Their scores range between 72 and 139, with a mean of 100.06, and a standard deviation of 13.85 (Table 2). Students scored at least 3 in 20 items of AFLAQ, which shows a high level of anxiety. The mean score per item was 3.03.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Statement</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel nervous when I can’t write or express myself in the foreign language.</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I feel anxious when the teacher asks me a question that I have not prepared for.</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>0.866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel nervous and confused when the language teacher is unsuccessful in explaining the lesson.</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I fear speaking or asking the teacher in my foreign language class.</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel anxious when listening to a passage in my listening/speaking class.</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I get nervous when there is a lot of vocabulary that I don’t understand being used in my foreign language class</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I feel nervous using the foreign language outside of the college or class.</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I am not nervous speaking the foreign language in front of my classmates*.</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I get nervous when I arrive late to class or the day following my absence.</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I get anxious when there are too many foreign language students registered in my class.</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I feel anxious when I see classmates better than me in my foreign language class.</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I feel comfortable in speaking with my foreign language teacher*.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>0.903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I feel anxious in reading/writing and grammar class</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I get upset due to the method of testing in the foreign language class</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I get anxious when I feel that I can’t speak well in front of other language students not in my class</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I get nervous when looking at my grades.</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I tremble when I know that I’m going to be called on in language class.</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>0.985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I feel nervous when talking in the foreign language to someone I just met.</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I get nervous when the language teacher gives us a lot of things to do in so little time.</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. I feel overwhelmed by the number of grammatical rules I have to learn in the foreign language.</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>0.957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I fear pronouncing words incorrectly in my foreign language class.</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I fear failing my foreign language class.</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. I feel low self-confidence about speaking the foreign language in front of the class.</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. I feel anxious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I feel nervous when I am around more experienced foreign language users.</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. I don’t feel anxious when learning a foreign language.*</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. I feel anxious when I don’t understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>0.863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. I feel anxious when I want to volunteer to say something but can’t find the proper words to say it in my foreign language class.</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. I feel nervous at English exam time.</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 2

What are the main sources of foreign language anxiety among English-major undergraduate students?

The results of the descriptive analyses indicated that the participants generally experienced feelings of anxiety in learning the English language. The mean and standard deviation of each major category of anxiety, as identified by the participants, are reported in Table 3. The two categories that are highly rated by participants to be major sources of anxiety are Fear of Negative Evaluation Anxiety (M= 3.39) and Test Anxiety (M= 3.25). Analysis of students’ responses revealed four major sources of FL anxiety: speaking in front of the FL instructor, speaking in front of classmates, concern about grades, and worry about being lost in class.

Speaking in front of the FL instructor (Item 12) is perceived to be the biggest source of anxiety (M=3.96, SD= 0.90). Results show that 48% of participants disagreed, and 28% strongly disagreed with this item. Speaking in front of classmates was also found to be a primary source of anxiety in this study as indicated by Item 8 (M= 3.86). This item was reverse-coded. Results reveal that 36% of participants agreed and 28% strongly disagreed with Item 8.

Concern about grades was also a source of FLA as indicated by Item 16 (M= 3.68). Only 22% of the students disagreed while 64% agreed or disagreed with this item.

Finally, worry about being lost in class due to the inability to understand the instructor was ranked as a major source of anxiety. This was indicated by Item 30 (M= 3.70). Only 10% of students disagreed with this item, and 64% agreed or strongly agreed with this item.

Research Question 3

Is there a relationship between foreign language anxiety and the participants’ language performance?

In order to answer the third research question about the relationship between FLA and participants’ language performance, Pearson correlation was calculated, and the findings are reported in Table 4. Results of the analysis demonstrated a significant medium negative relationship between students’ level of anxiety and their test scores, r(48)= -.37, p=008. Students who experienced lower levels of foreign language anxiety tended to have higher language performance scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes of Language Anxiety</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Evaluation Anxiety</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Classroom Anxiety</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Anxiety</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations of the Language Anxieties Reported by Participants in Learning English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Scores</th>
<th>Language Anxiety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>-0.374**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Correlation between Language Anxiety and Language Performance.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

Discussion

This section is devoted to the discussion of each of the research questions in light of the results obtained.
With regard to Research Question 1, which explores the level of FLA, as measured by the participants’ scores on the AFLAQ, the researcher found that the participants experienced an average level of anxiety overall. The participants’ level of FLA was similar to the level reported in other studies. The mean and standard deviation of the AFLAQ (M= 100.06, SD= 13.85) were similar to those found in previous studies (Liu, 2006; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004) that used FLACS to measure language anxiety among ESL learners. In a more recent study that involved 216 English students at a Spanish university, Arnaiz & Guillén (2012) reported that participants also experienced an average FLA with a mean score of 104.12 (SD= 23.53). Other studies that examined foreign language anxiety using FLACS, but in the context of other foreign languages such as Japanese (Aida, 1994) and Spanish (Marcos-Llinás, & Juan-Garau, 2009) also reported participants experiencing an average level of foreign language anxiety. The similarity of these findings of this study to the other studies with different educational and demographic contexts might be explained by the nature of the instrument used. Aida (1994) argues that FLACS primarily measures anxiety related to speaking situations, which provoke more anxiety among learners than any other situations. The current study, which used a modified version of FLACS, is also associated mainly with speaking skill.

Research Question 2 examines the possible main sources of FLA among participants of the study. Results showed that the two situations that most provoked anxiety are related to communication anxiety. Specifically, speaking with the foreign language teacher, or in front of classmates, was frequently mentioned as a source of high anxiety. This finding is consistent with some previous studies, which report that learners experienced highest levels of anxiety while speaking foreign languages in class (Alrabai, 2014; Al-Saraj, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Young, 1990). Speaking the language outside of the college or class, however, was less of a problem, or not a problem at all for most of the participants. Only 6% of participants agreed with Item 7 (I feel nervous using the foreign language outside of the college or class). Al-Saraj (2014) who studied a similar population of Saudi EFL learners argued that culture accounts for the participants’ lack of confidence and difficulty in expressing themselves in class. According to Saudi culture, mistakes cause embarrassment and “loss of face”. Since “loss of face” may result in loss of honor and respect of others, making mistakes has serious consequences. Therefore, speaking in class becomes a risky situation since the individual may make mistakes such as mispronunciation of a word, or simply the failure to speak fluidly (Al-Saraj, 2014). In an earlier study that also involved Saudi students learning English, Al-Saraj (2013) reported students’ concern about facing embarrassment in front of their teacher and their peers while speaking English in class. This finding may explain why participants in the current study also experienced English language anxiety caused by fear of negative evaluation. The majority of participants reported anxiety when the teacher asked them a question they were not prepared to answer. Similar findings were reported by Zhiping & Paramasivam (2013) who found that EFL learners displayed high fear of negative evaluation. Some participants felt anxious about mispronunciation of words, which might provoke embarrassment. Similar findings were found in Al-Saraj’s (2014) study. Within the same vein, Ohata (2005) argued that fear of losing “face” in front of others was found to be a common anxious feeling among language learners. Students tend to be anxious about negative evaluation because they feel the need to prove to their peers that they are good language learners (Salehi & Marefat, 2014). Zhang & Zhong (2012) believe that English language learners possess a trait to compare their performance with that of their peers, which causes more anxiety.

Another major source of anxiety that was found in the current study was test anxiety. Participants experienced an average level of test anxiety. Most students felt nervous just looking at their grades. Overall, participants also felt nervous at English exam time. These results are consistent with those reported by Lucas, Mirañolos, & Go (2011) who found that foreign students studying English in tertiary institutions in the Philippines experienced an average level of test anxiety. Test anxiety experienced by the participants of the current study might also be attributed to the assessment methods. Participants in this study had to perform oral presentations and role play in class to assess their speaking skills. Koch & Terrell (1991) observed that oral presentations, skits, and role playing produced the most anxiety in at least a fifth of the foreign language students in their study. Role playing and oral
presentations are particularly challenging for Saudi students who are not used to this form of evaluation. Al-Misnad (1985) said that the educational system in Saudi Arabia still uses old methods of instruction. Students are required to memorize information. The teachers’ task is to «walk their students through the textbooks, page by page, and this approach continues through higher education» (Al-Saraj, 2014, p.55). Even for students who are used to performing role-play it remains a difficult task. Young (1991) listed role play in front of the class as one of the activities that provoked anxiety as perceived by students. Ohata (2005) maintained that learners feared taking tests because test-taking situations make them anxious about the negative consequences of getting a bad grade. The timing of the questionnaire may account for the level of test anxiety among participants. Approximately half of the questionnaires were administered one week before the final exam. The second half was completed by the students immediately after completing the final exam. The students are usually stressed out during the end of the semester. The results may have been different if the questionnaires were filled out in a different time.

The fourth cause of anxiety experienced by participants is related to the English classroom. Participants rated their inability to understand what the teacher is saying as a primary source of anxiety in the English classroom (M=3.70, SD=.86). Only 10% of the participants did not agree with this statement, which is the third ranked cause of anxiety in the questionnaire. The fourth ranked cause of anxiety in the questionnaire is when there is a lot of vocabulary being used in class that students do not understand (M=3.68, SD=.86). In this regard, Saudi students were similar to other students learning a foreign language in diverse contexts in that they tend to experience anxiety when they feel lost in the classroom. The role of the teacher becomes critical in this situation as he/she needs to find ways to reach each student. For example, presentation methods could be diversified and enhanced with graphic organizers or pictures, if possible. Explaining difficult concepts using animation, for example, is also another option. Furthermore, the instructor should be aware of the students’ level of understanding and address potential issues of concern to help establish a good learning environment in the classroom.

The third research question explored the relationship between FLA and participants’ language performance. Results of the analysis demonstrated a significant medium negative relationship between students’ level of anxiety and their test scores. Students who experienced lower levels of foreign language anxiety tended to have higher language performance scores while those who experienced higher levels of FLA tended to have lower performance scores. The finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Abu-Gharrarah, 1999; Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 1986; Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret, 1997; Kao & Craigie, 2010; Lu & Liu, 2011). There is no evidence in the current study that establishes a causal relationship between foreign language anxiety and language performance. However, the data suggests that FLA impairs language performance (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

**Pedagogical Implications**

A number of implications result from this study. First of all, not only should teachers develop awareness about the negative impact of anxiety, but also the ability to identify students who suffer from high levels of anxiety. This responsibility belongs to school administrators who should provide teaching staff with adequate training. Many schools hire teachers who have no pedagogical training, which can lead to the creation of a classroom environment in which the teacher contributes to students’ anxiety problems. Schools should consider conducting workshops to raise awareness among faculty members about the importance of dealing with student anxiety. Second, teachers should devise a plan to help alleviate anxiety among students. Many educators provided specific suggestions that are practical and beneficial. Undoubtedly, providing a friendly and supportive learning environment (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2004; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013) in which students feel safe when they make mistakes is critical. Students experience less anxiety when they learn in non-threatening language settings (Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2015). Teachers should make it clear that mistakes are part of the learning process (Brophy, 1999; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002) so that students’ participation is encouraged even with flaws (Ewald, 2007). It is also recommended that teachers change their common image from instructors as authority figures, whose job it is to evaluate students, to instructors whose main mission is to promote student learning.
Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Teachers should set expectations that stress the importance of learning and making improvement rather than performing well on assignments (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). It is also important that teachers design activities that boost students’ confidence in their ability to learn a foreign language. Richards & Rodgers (1986) argued that such activities should be interesting and meaningful. Krashen & Terrell (1983) suggested that communicative activities could help students reduce their anxiety and stress in class. Students should be encouraged to work in groups and participate in class discussions (Jones, 2004). Finally, teachers should feel comfortable discussing the issue of anxiety with students and try to ease their tension by reminding them that language learning is a complex process. Also, it takes time to reach perfection, which is not a goal for all learners in and of itself.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First of all, the results of this study are based only on a questionnaire, which may not be the most accurate tool to measure anxiety levels. Interviews might have yielded different results. The presence of the instructor during the questionnaire administration could have influenced the participants’ responses. In other words, participants could have provided biased answers intended to reflect positively on themselves, rather than being honest. Some participants were in a hurry to complete the questionnaire so they may have provided careless responses. This study’s main instrument, the AFLAQ, was used only once in a previous study. Even though it had a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient reliability index of .81, it needs some tweaking to reach a higher level of reliability. Another limitation of this study is the sample size, which included only male participants from one single campus. Therefore, results should be interpreted with caution. A larger sample that includes male and female participants from different campuses, and preferably from different regions in Saudi Arabia, is needed to achieve more generalized, accurate results.

Conclusion

The present study was the second empirical investigation that used a FLA questionnaire tailored to the educational context of Saudi students. The findings indicate that the participants experienced an average level of FLA. The main sources of anxiety reported by most participants were test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The findings of this study reveal that participants who experienced lower levels of FLA tended to have higher FL performance scores.

Future studies should conduct interviews to elicit more accurate data. Second, a more diverse sample should be selected. It should include not only males, but also females who may not have a similar experience. In order to be able to generalize the results, participants should be from different regions of Saudi Arabia as there are major differences between each region. Furthermore, it would be useful to conduct a survey about teachers’ approaches to teaching and explore if the teacher’s style of teaching is correlated to the level of stress experienced by students. Finally, future studies should examine strategies used by Arab students to overcome anxiety and its impact on their learning performance.

References


Al-Saraj, T. (2013). Foreign language anxiety in female Ar-


