

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY: WHAT IS THIS?

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When a student cuts class, fails to prepare for class or to do homework, or is unable to answer even simple questions about the topic being studied in-class, it is clear that the student is not learning well, and teachers and educators may wonder why. There may be many causes of these types of behaviour. In an attempt to better understand why some language learners have more difficulty acquiring a target language than other learners do, there has been a relatively recent increase in research into potential relationships between foreign language acquisition and affective variables (see Gardner, 1997). Specifically, in her 2005 work, Rebecca Oxford suggested that foreign language anxiety (FLA), or the experience of anxiety when an individual is working towards attaining a foreign language, is one of them. According to a variety of researchers (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991a, 1991b), FLA can be a predictor of success in learning the foreign language.

FLA is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the (foreign) language learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). FLA is distinct from state anxiety, which occurs within specific, temporary situations and fades when the threat (or situation) disappears (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). FLA is also distinct from trait anxiety, which is a permanent, individual difference. People with high levels of trait anxiety have a general tendency to become anxious in any situation (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Ellis, 2008; Scovel, 1978; Spielberger, 1972). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), FLA is distinct from these types of anxiety and is classified as situation-specific anxiety. This type of anxiety is prompted by specific set of conditions for example public speaking or participating in class (Ellis, 2008). FLA is unique in that it occurs specifically in the unique foreign language learning context.

Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the most commonly used tool for assessing FLA, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The FLCAS is a 33-item individual self-report Likert scale that reflects three things: communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of

negative evaluation. Numerous researchers (e.g., Daly, 1991; Horwitz et al., 1986; Price, 1991; Young, 1990) concur that anxiety in foreign language learning manifests itself primarily in listening and speaking in the foreign language. Horwitz et al. (1986) provided a detailed report of the methodology they used to produce the FLCAS using beginning language class students (mainly learning Spanish) at the University of Texas. By understanding the methodological basis for the construction of the FLCAS, researchers can make an informed determination about whether the FLCAS is an appropriate tool for use with students in different contexts or whether it needs to be adapted. Woodrow (2006) determined that a questionnaire sensitive to issues in the Asian language learning contexts was needed and developed the Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (SLSAS) for use with her subjects from China, Korea, and Japan. According to Woodrow, the majority of previous research on anxiety has been conducted in Western settings.

FLA research (e.g., Oxford, 2005) has also suggested that anxiety-related behaviour differs from culture to culture. The Saudi Arabian culture creates an interesting social and cultural setting for examining FLA for multiple reasons. In Saudi Arabia, the educational system is free for all levels ranging from primary school to university. Boys and girls, and later men and women, are separated, typically attending entirely segregated schools at all levels as well as colleges or universities.

The study of English in Saudi Arabia is increasing in importance and prevalence. As the world is changing and becoming more global, it has brought change to the Saudi educational system; of privately funded colleges and universities where classes are taught in English have been established. These private English medium colleges, which bring with them adapted, Western-based educational systems, are being established rapidly. The combination of factors – the importance of learning English, the changes in the educational system, and the conservative culture – create a unique and intriguing environment for studying anxiety related to studying EFL. Coming from the traditional Saudi high school system to these EFL programs is a big change for the students, in terms of teaching methods, context, and tasks. To ease the transition from all-Arabic schools to all-English private colleges or universities, English as a foreign language (EFL) programs have been developed within newly developed private higher education programs. These EFL programs help the students to gain the English skills necessary so that, once they leave the EFL programs, they can integrate into the mainstream college or university.

The research presented in this thesis utilizes a case study design that draws on multiple sources of information to investigate the experiences of female college students who are learning English in a private college's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program in Saudi Arabia. The primary questions driving the research in this study are as follows:

1. What is the nature of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), from the students' perspectives, in female-only EFL classrooms in this English-medium college in Saudi Arabia?
2. What are the students' perceptions of how FLA affects their behaviour in this setting? And what are the consequences?
3. How can knowledge gleaned from this research inform understandings of FLA more generally?

To gain insight into the learner's perspective of how FLA operates in the EFL classroom and to create a model of EFL learning that is consistent with the students' experiences, questionnaires, individual and group interviews, and classroom and informal observations were used. Data collection and observation were conducted for an entire semester of the program. To identify concerns or potential causes of anxiety for students in the EFL program in Saudi Arabia, the Arabic Foreign Language Anxiety Questionnaire (AFLAQ) was developed. The AFLAQ is a self-report questionnaire that utilizes a Likert response scale for students to rate how anxious or nervous they feel in a variety of situations (e.g., class, speaking with native speakers). For the current study, the newly developed AFLAQ was administered to the majority of students in Level 1 (new students) and Level 3 (students with at least one semester of experience in the program) of the EFL program.

Taking into consideration classroom observation and accompanying field notes, questionnaire responses, and group and individual interviews, specific anxiety-provoking situations were identified for students in Level 1 and in Level 3. In Level 1, anxiety-provoking situations included the environment, the teacher, and the content of material in the class. In Level 3, anxiety-provoking situations included the teacher, the social context and communication style within the classroom, social situations including classmates and group dynamics, and the tasks or work they were required to perform for class (e.g., in-class presentations). Specifically

related to the teacher, students expressed anxiety and concern related to teaching methodology, favouritism, and feedback or criticism within the class.

The majority of Level 1 and Level 3 participants point out the teacher's characteristics and student-teacher interactions as major causes of anxiety. The majority of the students in both levels describe their teachers as at least contributing to the level of anxiety experienced by students in the classrooms. Some of the students discuss specific issues, such as teachers' explaining a subject in a way that does not make sense, teachers over-correcting students when they speak, and teachers showing favouritism. Consistent with these students' claims that the teachers are partially responsible for their students' anxiety, Price (1991) argued that the teacher plays a significant role in increasing or decreasing student anxiety in the foreign language classroom. The students need for the teacher to offer encouragement, support, and attention to their efforts without being excessively critical of the students' errors.

Students in Level 3 appeared to be very strongly affected by their anxiety about giving presentations. Indeed, case study participants in Level 3 attempted to avoid giving live presentations, opting instead to pre-record their presentations, despite the fact that practice speaking is necessary in learning a new language. Only one student actually gave a live, in-class presentation as her final presentation of the semester, and she said that she was anxious, but gave the presentation nonetheless. However, participants from Level 1 did not identify giving presentations as a significant anxiety-provoking situation. This difference is likely due to the fact that in-class presentations were common for Level 3, but participants in Level 1 were not required to give an in-class presentation until the end of the semester, and then they gave only one.

The findings of this study are useful in that they might help build a greater understanding of the impact of FLA in language learning within Saudi Arabia. The findings also suggest a variety of changes that teachers and educational institutions might implement in order to reduce students' experience of FLA and, as a result, improve the students' language learning. Teachers and educators might improve their understanding of students' experiences, be better able to identify anxious students in class, identify causes of anxiety, and adapt teaching strategies to reduce anxiety. The AFLAQ itself might also serve as a useful tool for educators and students because it could facilitate the teacher and student exploring possible causes of anxiety.

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