

Does High Anxiety Decrease Motivation for Learning English as a Foreign Language?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between the level of foreign language anxiety experienced by Saudi female English learners at a Saudi university and the level of their motivation in learning English as a foreign language. The participants were 40 female second-year university students. The instruments the researchers used to gather the data were two questionnaires: Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Gardner's (2006) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). The data were analyzed by calculating the percentages of students' responses to each item. The findings revealed that Saudi female English learners at King Saud University experienced high levels of foreign language anxiety. The findings also revealed that the learners were highly motivated to learn English. This demonstrates that a high level of motivation to learn English does not prevent the occurrence of a significant level of anxiety. That is, motivation can control foreign language anxiety and assist anxious learners in their determination to learn English.

Key words: Foreign Language Motivation, Foreign Language Anxiety, FLCAS, AMTB, Saudi Female Learners

INTRODUCTION

The English language was first introduced in the Saudi educational system in the late 1920s (Al-Shabbi 1989; Baghdadi 1985; Niblock 2006). Even though most Saudis recognize the importance of English in modern life, few master the language. In fact, Saudis are the second lowest achievers on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in the Middle East. According to the latest statistics, released in the third edition of *The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test* (ETS 2009, 435), the average TOEFL result in Saudi Arabia is 57 out of 120. Khan (2011, 3) claimed that Saudis' low proficiency of English can be attributed to several psychological factors, among which is anxiety. Research on anxiety indicates that Saudi students experience high levels of anxiety in English classes; accordingly, these levels of anxiety hinder the effective acquisition of English (e.g. Al Saraj 2014; Balla 2017).

The aim of the present study was to explore the role of motivation in controlling foreign language anxiety (FLA) experienced by Saudi females learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at a Saudi In other words, the study sought to explore whether high levels of anxiety discouraged the students from learning English. First, the study examined the learners' levels of FLA using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), then it examined the students' level of motivation

to learn English using the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), developed by Robert Gardner (2006). Finally, the study investigated the relationship between learners' levels of anxiety and the levels of their motivation to learn English. In the Saudi context, little research, to our knowledge, has been conducted on the role of motivation in controlling EFL anxiety among Saudi female learners of English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign Language Anxiety

Language learning anxiety is one of the affective factors that has been claimed to hinder the learning of a foreign or second language (Dewaele and Thirtle 2009; Horwitz et al. 1986; Horwitz 2001; Liu 2016; MacIntyre 1995). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, 284) defined it as the "feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning." Horwitz et al. (1986, 128) specified this unique type of anxiety experienced in language classes as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA); they defined it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning process."

A great number of empirical studies have shown the negative effect of anxiety on language learning performance. Horwitz et al. (1986), for example, conducted a study to

identify anxious students in foreign language classes. They identified three components of FLA: apprehension in communication, anxiety related to testing, and fear of negative evaluation by classmates and teachers. They then developed a standardized instrument that reflects the three components mentioned above, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), to precisely measure FLA. Employing this instrument, they discovered that many foreign language learners experienced significant levels of FLA that negatively affected their performance in the foreign language.

Dewaele and Thirtle (2009) conducted a study of adolescent English students enrolled in foreign language classes in a school in London who had the choice to pursue or abandon the study of foreign languages. Their study revealed that those who chose to abandon the further study of foreign languages were those who suffered significantly high levels of FLA.

Similar results were also obtained by Doğan and Tuncer (2016), who conducted a correlational survey study, one of the aims of which was to investigate the correlation between foreign language classroom anxiety and foreign language achievement. The participants were Turkish university engineering majors taking compulsory English classes. The instrument they used was the FLCAS. The results of the study revealed a negative correlation between foreign language classroom anxiety and foreign language achievement.

Liu (2016) also investigated foreign language anxiety in listening and its association with strategy use. Specifically, the study aimed to explore the predictive effects of foreign language listening anxiety and strategy use on test performance. The participants were high- and low-proficiency Chinese university EFL learners. The researcher found that in English listening, the low-proficiency group were more anxious than the high-proficiency group and less confident in their English listening proficiency. These findings are in line with Krashen's (1985) view that difficulty in processing meaningful input and producing responsive output are widely found among anxious students.

Motivation

Motivation is another affective factor that has an impact on L2 learning. Harmer (2007, 51) defined motivation as "some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something." In L2 learning, Dörnyei (2005, 65) defined motivation as the "primary impetus to initiate FL learning and later the driving force to sustain [the] language ... learning process." The positive impact of motivation on foreign language learning is undeniable. Successful foreign language learning is enhanced in those learners who possess the right level of motivation. Gardner (2006, 241) noted that "students with higher levels of motivation will do better than students with lower levels." A number of empirical studies have confirmed this positive relation between language learning and motivation. For instance, Abdul Samad, Etemadzadeh, and Far (2012) investigated the relationship between motivation and language proficiency among Iranian EFL learners. The two aspects of motivation, instrumental (learning L2 for one's career) and integrative

(learning L2 to integrate into the L2 community), were taken into consideration in their study. The participants were classified as high achievers if their International English Language Test System (IELTS) scores were above 6 and low achievers if their IELTS scores were below that. To examine the two aspects of motivation, Gardner's (2006) AMTB was used. The results revealed that high achievers in language proficiency were correlated with high levels of motivation, especially integrative motivation.

Another study that confirmed the positive relation between language learning and motivation was conducted by Busse and Walter (2013). The study investigated potential changes in levels of students' intrinsic motivation, i.e., internal reward, in learning another language. The participants were British first-year university students studying German as a foreign language in two U.K. universities. The students started the German course with a high level of intrinsic motivation because of their strong desire to become proficient in that language. When the students started engaging with language learning tasks in the different language skills, they found it less enjoyable and became less confident in their ability to communicate in German. As the year went on, the students' levels of intrinsic motivation declined, which paralleled a decline in their efforts to learn the language.

Motivation and FLA

Several studies have investigated the relationship between motivation and anxiety within the foreign language learning context. For instance, Liu (2012) investigated the relationship between foreign language anxiety, learning motivation, autonomy, and language proficiency. The participants of the study were first-year, non-English major undergraduates, who were placed in different levels based on their English proficiency. The FLCAS showed that foreign language anxiety was prevalent among the students. The findings also revealed that foreign language anxiety was negatively correlated with learning motivation, listening proficiency, reading proficiency, and learner autonomy. A similar conclusion was reached by Tahernezhad, Behjat, and Kargar (2014), who investigated the relation between anxiety and motivation among Iranian EFL learners. The two questionnaires they employed were the FLCAS and the AMTB. The findings of their study indicated that participants with lower levels of anxiety were more motivated to learn English than those with higher levels of anxiety.

Conversely, a few studies have indicated that anxiety does not play either a major or a direct role in language learning. Trang, Moni, and Baldauf (2012), for instance, examined the effect of anxiety on students' determination to learn English. The findings of their study suggested that anxiety did not affect their determination to learn English directly or indirectly. In fact, the students' awareness of the importance of English played a major role in their determination to learn it. According to them, some of the participants in their study continued to learn English despite the fact that all of them were rated as either high- or medium-anxiety learners, based on their scores on the FLCAS.

Tóth (2007) and Khodadady and Khajav (2013) obtained similar results in their investigation of the relationship between FLA and motivation. Tóth examined the relationship between FLA experienced by Hungarian advanced EFL learners and six individual differences, among which was strength of motivation. He found that strength of motivation, along with FL aptitude and perfectionism, was not a predictor of FLA. Khodadady and Khajav conducted their study in an Iranian EFL context. The participants were EFL learners at a private English institute whose proficiency levels were lower intermediate and intermediate. The questionnaires they used were the FLCAS and Language Learning Orientations Scale (LLOS). The results showed that the learners' reasons for learning English determined the students' levels and types of anxiety.

Since not enough research has explored the relationship between motivation and foreign language anxiety in the Saudi female context, the present study aimed to investigate this relationship among Saudi female students majoring in English Language and Literature. Two standardized questionnaires, the FLCAS and the AMTB, were employed. The participants of the study were limited to females because the institution where the authors work is for women only.

Research Questions

- (1) To what extent do Saudi female EFL learners experience FLA in language classrooms?
- (2) Are Saudi female EFL learners motivated to learn English?
- (3) Is there any relationship between Saudi female learners' levels of anxiety and motivation?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the study were 40 Saudi female second-year undergraduate students majoring in English Language and Literature. They were admitted to the department after finishing their preparatory year with a C or B level in English, which indicates advanced to intermediate EFL learners, respectively. All the participants speak Arabic as their native language and are studying English as a foreign language. They all attended standardized English classes at intermediate and high schools before entering university, and on average they had eight years of formal English learning experience. Their ages ranged from 20 to 24, and they were attending linguistics and literature classes, in addition to language classes. The participants were selected through random sampling from two sections of the same language class, and all the participants gave their consent to participate in the study.

Instruments

The researchers employed two questionnaires to gather the research data: Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS and Gard-

ner's (2006) AMTB. The first questionnaire included 33 statements to be answered by the participants on a 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix, Table 1). The statements described language learning situations where students might experience anxiety. Nine statements indicated low levels of anxiety, whereas the rest of the statements indicated high levels of anxiety. The original version of the second questionnaire, the AMTB, contained 26 items, each with six responses; however, this questionnaire was modified to include only five responses and allow for adequate correlation between the two instruments (see Appendix, Table 2). Eight items indicated no level of motivation to learn English, whereas the rest of the items expressed a positive desire and motivation to learn English.

Procedure

The FLCAS was administered to examine the degree of anxiety among the participants. The researcher made sure that the participants took their time to answer the questions adequately. The researcher assured the participants that their answers would not affect their language class performance at all and that they were only to be used for research purposes. Once they had finished answering the FLCAS, the other questionnaire, the AMTB, was then distributed to the participants to measure their motivation. The participants were asked to provide adequate answers to the items. After excluding incomplete questionnaires, the collected data was codified and analyzed by calculating the percentages of students' responses to each item.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

The total percentages of students' responses to each item on the FLCAS are reported in Table 1 (see Appendix). The findings reveal that a strikingly high proportion of participants showed varying degrees of anxiety about learning English. Nearly half of the items, 16 out of 33, reflected the existence of a considerable level of anxiety among the participants. The total percentages on eight of the items that are indicative of anxiety were 50% and above and between 40 and 49% on the other eight. For instance, 40% of the participants selected *agree* and *strongly agree* on Item 9, "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class." Almost 50% of the participants chose *agree* and *strongly agree* when asked whether they worry about failing their language course, Item 10. Additionally, 45% of the participants indicated high anxiety in language classes, even when they had prepared well, Item 16. More than half of the participants expressed their agreement with Item 26, "I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than I do in my other classes." This item has been considered by Horwitz et al. (1986, 130) as "the single best discriminator of anxiety." For the last item, "I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions for which I haven't prepared in advance," an overwhelming majority of the participants, about 86%, selected *agree* and *strongly agree*.

On the other hand, almost two thirds of the participants disagreed with Item 5, "It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes." In addition, almost 43% of the participants selected *disagree* and *strongly disagree* when answering Item 22, "I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class." Thus, the answer to the first research question, "Do Saudi female EFL learners experience FLA in language classrooms?" is that most Saudi female EFL learners in this study possess high levels of foreign language anxiety. As shown in Table 1, they are nervous, stressed, and overwhelmed in language classes.

Motivation

The results of the AMTB questionnaire revealed that the participants possessed a positive desire to learn English. As Table 2 shows (see Appendix), the results on more than two thirds of the items that are indicative of positive motivation were above 70%, indicating that the learners were highly motivated to learn English. For instance, 90% of the participants selected *agree* and *strongly agree* when answering Item 2, "Learning English is really great." and 92% did the same on Item 16, "I love learning English." Additionally, 80% of them recognized the significant role of English in the school program, Item 24, and 70% of them expressed a strong desire to learn all aspects of English, Item 23. Also, more than half of the participants were motivated enough to rely on themselves to find solutions to their language questions, Item 21. On the last item, 80% of the participants indicated that they work hard to learn English. A great number of the participants also claimed that they were extrinsically motivated to learn English, i.e., their parents pushed them to learn it, Items 3 and 17, amounting to about 73% and 67%, respectively. The percentages of answers indicating motivation on the rest of the items ranged between 40 and 68%, which is still a good indication of motivation. Therefore, the answer to the second research question, "Are Saudi female EFL learners motivated to learn English?" is that the learners are definitely highly motivated to learn English.

The Relationship between Motivation and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

The findings of the present study revealed that although the participants were highly anxious about learning English, they persisted in learning it. As shown in Table 3 (see Appendix), on the measure of anxiety, the FLCAS, the participants were found to be more tense and nervous in language classes compared to other classes, yet, as the measure of motivation, the AMTB, shows, they would rather spend more time in English classes because they like English. So, the answer to Research Question 3, "Is there any relationship between Saudi female learners' levels of anxiety and motivation?" is that there is a positive relationship between motivation and anxiety, indicating that motivation can control foreign language anxiety, i.e., learners who possess a high desire to learn English do not let anxiety prevent them from doing so.

To this end, the present study supports Trang et al.'s (2012, 6) findings that "anxious students would be more

likely to abandon EFL learning if they didn't perceive its importance." In fact, the highly anxious learners in the present study selected *agree* and *strongly agree* on Item 14 of the AMTB, "Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a good job," amounting to 90%. They also chose *agree* and *strongly agree* on Item 19 of the AMTB, "Studying English is important because other people will respect me more if I know English," amounting to 50%. In other words, because they recognized its importance, the anxious learners in the present study did not abandon learning English.

It is clear from these results that a high level of motivation to learn English does not prevent the occurrence of a significant level of anxiety. Whereas other studies (i.e., Liu 2012; Tahernezhad et al. 2014) found that a high level of anxiety predicted a low level of motivation and vice versa among EFL learners, the present study contradicts this claim, as the participants were both highly anxious and yet highly motivated to learn English.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study investigated the role of motivation in controlling foreign language anxiety among 40 Saudi female EFL learners. It first examined the level of anxiety with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCAS, and then examined the level of motivation among participants using Gardner's (2006) AMTB. Lastly, it examined the relationship between the participants' level of anxiety and the level of their motivation to learn English. The findings indicate that the participants experienced high levels of FLA; nevertheless, those learners were highly motivated to learn English. Thus, it can be said that FLA is not a negative predictor of learning motivation. In fact, both anxiety and motivation coexisted among the participants. This paper also suggests that motivation can manage FLA. Whereas highly anxious learners are expected to stop learning the foreign language, the present study suggests that if they are highly motivated to learn English, their anxiety will not prevent them from pursuing their goal.

Pedagogically, the findings of this study can help teachers and students of English by raising their awareness of the importance of English. In turn, FLA can be managed by a strong desire to learn English. In other words, anxiety will not hinder the learning of a foreign language if motivation is high among EFL learners.

However, it might be premature to claim the generalizability of such findings, given the limited number of participants. A large-scale study is needed to enhance these findings. Future research is also needed to assess the relationship between motivation and anxiety among non-English major students or among English major students at lower English proficiency levels. In addition, future research should also focus on how to motivate language learners, given the importance of motivation in managing FLA.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Total percentages of students' responses to individual items about learner anxiety

The items	SA	A	NAD	SD	D
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	10	30	30	15	15
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.	20	20	25	12.5	22.5
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.	12.5	17.5	45	15	10
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language	15	17.5	27.5	20	20
5 It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.	10	7.5	17.5	35	30
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	2.5	22.5	35	15	25
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.	15	20	15	27.5	22.5
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.	12.5	27.5	45	10	5
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	10	30	25	12.5	22.5
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	20	30	22.5	12.5	15
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.	7.5	5	30	22.5	30
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	15	22.5	12.5	20	30
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.	15	17.5	30	20	17.5
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.	25	25	25	7.5	17.5
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	15	42.5	17.5	10	15
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	10	35	20	15	20
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.	5	10	37.5	17.5	30
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.	20	25	32.5	7.5	15
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	15	30	17.5	22.5	15
20 I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.	7.5	15	47.5	12.5	17.5
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.	7.5	17.5	40	17.5	17.5
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	5	32.5	20	17.5	25
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	20	15	27.5	20	17.5
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students	27.5	20	35	7.5	10
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	12.5	22.5	17.5	20	27.5
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	12.5	40	32.5	5	10
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	15	25	17.5	17.5	25
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	15	17.5	47.5	10	10
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	17.5	17.5	15	20	30
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language	23.5	27.5	20	7.5	12.5
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	10	25	30	17.5	17.5
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.	7.5	12.5	20	23.5	27.5
33 I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions I haven't prepared in advance.	44	42	3	5.5	5.5

The items in bold indicate low levels of anxiety.

SA – strongly agree; A – agree; NAD – neither agree or disagree; SD – strongly disagree; D – disagree

Table 2. Total percentages of students' responses to individual items about learner motivation

The items	SD	D	NAD	SA	A
1. I don't get anxious when I have to answer a question in my English class.	12.5	12.5	10	25	40
2. Learning English is really great.	2.5	2.5	2.5	47.5	45
3. My parents try to help me to learn English.	7.5	2.5	17.5	27.5	45
4. My English class is really a waste of time.	57.5	10	15	2.5	15
5. Knowing English isn't really an important goal in my life.	70	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5
6. I hate English.	80	5	5	2.5	7.5
7. I would rather spend more time in my English class and less in other classes.	5	2.5	20	45	27.5
8. My English teacher is better than any of my other teachers.	7.5	2.5	15	47.5	27.5
9. I really enjoy learning English.	5	5	5	50	35
10. I think my English class is boring.	50	21.5	12.5	5	20
11. I enjoy the activities of our English class much more than those of my other classes.	7.5	7.5	10	40	35
12. I am calm whenever I have to speak in my English class.	23.5	32.5	12.5	7.5	15
13. My English teacher has a dynamic and interesting teaching style.	2.5	2.5	12.5	45	37.5
14. Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a good job.	2.5	5	2.5	62.5	27.5
15. To be honest, I don't like my English class.	57.5	15	10	7.5	10
16. I love learning English.	2.5	2.5	5	52.5	37.5
17. My parents think I should devote more time to studying English.	7.5	10	15	20	47.5
18. My English teacher doesn't present materials in an interesting way.	22.5	20	27.5	17.5	12.5
19. Studying English is important because other people will respect me more if I know English.	17.5	22.5	10	15	35
20. I would feel uncomfortable speaking English anywhere outside the classroom.	37.5	7.5	15	15	25
21. When I have a problem understanding something in my English class, I always ask my teacher for help.	17.5	5	25	27.5	25
22. I feel confident when asked to speak in my English class.	25	30	35	7.5	2.5
23. I have a strong desire to know all aspects of English.	5	10	15	37.5	32.5
24. English is a very important part of the school program.	12.5	0	7.5	57.5	22.5
25. It worries me that other students in my class seem to speak English better than I do.	25	7.5	17.5	25	25
26. I really work hard to learn English.	5	2.5	12.5	47.5	32.5

The items in bold indicate negative desire and motivation to learn English.

SD – strongly disagree; D – disagree; NAD – neither agree or disagree; SA – strongly agree; A – agree.

Table 3. Relationship between FLA and motivation

The items	SA	A	NA/D	SD	D
Anxiety (FLCAS)					
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.	10	30	30	15	15
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.	5	10	37.5	17.5	30
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.	23.5	27.5	20	7.5	12.5
Motivation (AMTB)					
7. I would rather spend more time in my English class and less in other classes.	45	27.5	20	5	2.5
14. Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a good job.	62.5	27.5	2.5	2.5	5
15. To be honest, I don't like my English class.	7.5	10	10	57.5	15

SA – strongly agree; A – agree; NAD – neither agree or disagree; SD – strongly disagree; D – disagree