

Foreign Language Anxiety among Students Studying Foreign Languages

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Abstract: Background: Learning a foreign language is multi-dimensional and considered a source of stress. The purpose of the present study is to investigate foreign language classroom anxiety among university students in Jordan. The study makes use of a cross-sectional correlation design to collect data from 488 university students, employing a self-reported questionnaire of Foreign Language Anxiety. Results: 63.4% (n = 310) of the 488 students suffer foreign language classroom anxiety; mean score for communication apprehension is 54.7 (SD = 11.0), while the mean score for fear of negative evaluation is 22.8 (SD = 5.6), and mean score of test anxiety is 17.7 (SD = 3.1). The analysis shows that the highest anxiety level is experienced in terms of fear of negative evaluation and testing, while communication apprehension has the lowest level of fear. Conclusion: University students of foreign languages in Jordan have a high level of anxiety, which is undoubtedly associated with the level of academic performance.

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1. Introduction

The psychological and social well-being of university students is becoming a topic of interest for mental health professionals and researchers. Related literature shows that university students suffer a number of psychosocial disturbances and are overwhelmed with social and economic demands (Hamdan-Mansour, 2010; Hamdan-Mansour, Halabi, & Dawani, 2009; Kitzrow, 2003). Changes in social, economic, familial, and demographic factors have increased the challenges and stressors that university students are exposed to on a daily basis (Kitzrow, 2003). In fact, the psychological stability of students has a direct influence on their achievement and performance. Andrew and colleagues (2004) state that anxiety and stress exhibit passive attitudes in students' lives, which negatively affects their interest in learning and reduces their academic performance in exams and assignments.

Learning a foreign language at the university level is in itself one of the sources of stress and anxiety for students. It is a multi-dimensional approach that covers learners' behavioral, cognitive, social and affective attributes. According to Capan and Simsek (2012), achievement among foreign language learners is significantly influenced by foreign language anxiety. The concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has been introduced by

Horwitz and colleagues as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the (foreign) language learning process" (1986, p. 128). FLA is considered to be a situational anxiety experienced in the well-defined situation of the foreign language classroom. It has also been acknowledged as one form of trait anxiety that makes students anxious in any situation (Casado, Matt, & Dereshiwsky, 2001). FLA can be observed in many language learning activities, such as speaking, listening and in class participation (Ellis, 2008). According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1991), FLA is related to students' communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation.

Studies investigating FLA have proven an associated relationship between FLA and certain socio-demographic and academic variables. FLA is also found to be associated with age, gender, and personality traits (Aida, 1994; Bailey, Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 2000). Horwitz and colleagues (1991) have also associated FLA with academic performance (1986). FLA is also stated to have negative impact on students' self-confidence, language errors, and the use of avoidance strategies (Gregerson, 2003). Moreover, anxiety among learners of foreign languages interferes with

students' ability to recall acquired competencies and employ them in their volunteer answers in a classroom (Liu, & Jackson, 2008).

Despite research evidence related to the effects of FLA on students' performance, Arabic literature is dearth in studies that emphasize this issue. In Jordan, where Arabic is the native language, English is taught as a foreign language at school starting from the first grade; at the university level, English is the main language of instruction in scientific areas. Nevertheless, no previous Jordanian or Arabic study has investigated anxiety in connection with the use of foreign languages in classroom. In other words, studies dealing with FLA at a university level in the Arab World are nonexistent, in spite of the fact that most learners are compulsorily introduced to studying foreign languages.

The present study is meant to address this issue, investigating the factors related to anxiety in a foreign language classroom. Therefore, the main *purpose* of this study is to investigate foreign language classroom anxiety among university students in Jordan. The research questions are:

- What is the level of foreign language classroom anxiety among university students in Jordan?
- What are the differences in Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) related to academic and demographic characteristics among university students in Jordan?

2. Methods

This is a cross-sectional descriptive correlation study that aims at exploring the prevalence of FLCA among university students in Jordan. Data has been collected using a self-reported questionnaire by university students in private and state universities.

Sample and setting: 488 university students have completed and submitted a battery of two self-reported questionnaires. The students represent two universities: one state and one private university selected randomly among all universities in Jordan. Inclusion criteria are: (1) Student enrollment at a Jordanian university, and (2) ability to read and write in Arabic. Exclusion criteria includes students whose native language is not Arabic.

Data collection procedure: Prior to data collection, the primary investigator obtained ethical approval from the research committee at the targeted universities. After announcing the need for participants at the students' advertisements boards at the targeted universities, a package of self-administered questionnaires, in addition to the author-developed demographic profile, were sent to the interested students. The package included a cover page introducing the purpose and significance of the

study; it also informed the participants that the questionnaire was anonymous. The cover letter also provided the contact information of the principal investigator and instructions of where to submit the questionnaires. 650 packages were distributed out of which 488 were submitted with a 75% response rate. Data was collected in the period between November 2013 and January 2014. Personal information of the subjects was kept confidential, and all electronic versions of the projects were kept in the primary investigator's computer.

Instruments: Data was collected using an Arabic version of the instruments. Certain procedures were used to determine the reliability and validity of the instruments. The instruments were first translated into Arabic by a research assistant, then back-translated into English by another independent research assistant as described by Brislin (1970) and Chapman and Carter (1979). The two English forms (the original and the translated) were compared in terms of conceptual rather than literal meaning of the items. The translator and the back translator cooperated to examine the differences in the two forms. Pilot testing was conducted using bilingual university students ($n = 15$) who were requested to provide their appraisals for the appropriateness of the translation.

The instruments are: The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCA) of Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, (1991). FLCA is used to assess the degree to which a respondent feels anxious in a foreign language classroom based on the construct of foreign language classroom anxiety being a composite of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. The scale is a 33-item 5-point Likert scale which includes 24 positively worded and 9 negatively worded items. Responses ranged from (1) 'strongly disagree', to (5) 'strongly agree'. The total score ranges from 33 to 165, with higher scores indicating a higher level of anxiety. The literature suggests adding the points of the 33 item five-point Likert scale after reversing the negative items. In the present study, the score of 99 was the cut-off line (Piniel, 2006), with scores lower than 99 denoting lower levels of anxiety, and scores higher than 99 denoting higher levels of anxiety. The scale has a high reliability factor, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.95 (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1991). In Cronbach's study, alpha is 0.88.

Demographic profile: information such as gender, age, student's faculty, university academic year, GPA, working status, smoking status, were obtained from an investigator-developed checklist.

3. Analysis Plans

FLCA is described using the central tendency measures (means, and medians) and the dispersion measures (standard deviation and ranges). Pearson correlation Coefficient (Pearson r) are used to test the correlation between selected factors. The t-test for two-independent samples is employed to test the differences in FLCA among university students in relation to selected demographic and academic performance.

4. Results: Demographic Characteristics

Six hundred and fifty students were targeted representing all students in the college of Foreign Languages and Linguistics. 488 students agreed and returned the survey representing a 75% response rate. The analysis (see table 1) showed that the mean age

of students was 20.2 years (SD = 1.47) ranging from 17 to 32 years. 50% of the students were 19 years old or less. The majority of the students were females (91.0%, $n = 444$), while only 9.0% ($n = 44$) were males. Students were almost equally represented in regards to academic year level, as about 50% ($n = 244$) were in their second and third years, compared to 5.7% ($n = 28$) in their 5th year or higher. Students in this study came from nine language specialties. However, a quarter of them were students of English, ($n = 122$); 19% ($n = 95$) were students of Italian, and 17.5% ($n = 85$) were students of Spanish. Most of the participants in this study received their high school education in governmental schools (64.6%, $n = 316$), while 33.3% ($n = 163$) studied in private schools and 2.0% ($n = 10$) in international schools.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of Jordanian university students studying languages (N = 488)

Variable		n	%	M	SD	Md.	Min	Max	P ₂₅	P ₇₅
Age				20.2	1.47	20.0	17.0	32.0	19	21.0
GPA				2.82	.50	2.84	1.00	4.0	2.5	3.10
Gender	Male	45	9.2							
	Female	444	90.8							
Academic level	1 ST	57	11.7							
	2 ND	124	25.4							
	3 RD	121	24.7							
	4 TH	158	32.3							
	5 TH or higher	28	5.7							
Specialty	English	122	24.9							
	Dutch	54	11.1							
	French	52	10.6							
	Spanish	85	17.5							
	Italian	95	19.5							
	Korean	8	2.0							
	Chinese	13	3.0							
	Russian	22	5.0							
	Turkish	37	7.5							
Type of high school	Governmental	316	64.6							
	Private	163	33.3							
	International	10	2.0							
Did you choose your specialty	Yes	272	55.6							
	No	218	44.6							
Working status	Yes	53	10.8							
	No	437	89.2							
Smoking status	Yes	39	8.0							
	No	450	92							

Regarding students' academic performance, the mean grade point average (GPA) was 2.82 out of 4.0 (SD = .50) ranging from 1.0 to 4.0. of the students, 50% of the students had a GPA of 2.5 or higher. Moreover, the analysis showed that the majority of students were not working (89.2%, $n = 437$), and not smoking (92.0%, $n = 460$).

Foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA)

The analysis of students' foreign language anxiety level, (see table 2) shows that the mean score for students' anxiety is 99.6 (SD = 17.2) ranging from 40 to 156. Out of them, using the cut point of 99, the analysis indicates that 63.4% ($n = 310$) of students suffer FLCA. As for the domains of FLCA,

the analysis shows that the mean score for communication apprehension is 54.7 (SD = 11.0), while the mean score for fear of negative evaluation

is 22.8 (SD = 5.6), and the mean of test anxiety is 17.7 (SD = 3.1).

Table 2. Description of foreign language classroom anxiety among university student attending foreign language classes in Jordan (N = 488)

Variable	M	SD	Md.	Min	Max	n	%
Total scale	99.6	17.2	99.2	40	155		
Communication apprehension	54.8	11.0	54.8	22	104		
Fear of negative evaluation	22.8	5.6	22.8	8	38		
Test anxiety	13.7	3.1	13.7	4	20		
Anxiety level							
	Anxious					310	63.4
	Not anxious					179	36.6

Using item analysis, collapsing the agreement responses into one category and disagreement responses into one category, the analysis (see table 3) shows that the highest agreement response, presenting the highest level of anxiety is observed in item 15 (agreement rate = 69.1%, n = 333): "I often feel like not going to my language class" and item 10 (agreement rate = 69.1%, n = 333): "I worry about

consequences of failing my foreign language class". While the highest disagreement responses are observed in item 5 (disagreement rate = 65.6%, n = 321): "it won't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes" and in item 22 (disagreement rate = 62.4%, n = 305): "I don't feel pressure to prepare very well to language class."

Table 3. Item analysis of foreign language classroom anxiety scale among university students attending foreign language classes in Jordan (N = 488)

Item	Agree to strongly agree		Neutral		Disagree to strongly disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Items with Highest agreement response						
I often feel like not going to my language class	333	69.1	82	16.8	65	13.3
I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class	333	69.1	56	11.5	97	19.8
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class	274	58.0	105	21.5	105	21.5
I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance	278	56.9	45	19.4	101	20.7
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language	274	56.8	102	21.9	105	21.5
Items with higher disagreement response						
It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes	85	17.4	77	15.7	321	65.6
I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class	85	17.4	88	18.0	305	62.4
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class	112	22.4	104	21.3	264	54.0
I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class	107	21.9	137	28.0	235	48.1
I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language	85	17.4	176	36.0	220	45.0

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that the highest anxiety level is experienced in terms of fear of negative evaluation and testing, while communication apprehension has the lowest level of fear.

This has been clearly observed in the highest report of agreement in items related to fear of evaluation and items of test anxiety compared to lower level of agreement and high level of disagreement in items related to communication apprehension. This indicates that students do not suffer anxiety while using the foreign language for communication unless students feel they are being

evaluated for their foreign language use or being tested for their foreign language use.

Differences in FLCA related to academic performance and demographic characteristics

To examine whether FLCA differs in relation to academic performance and demographic characteristics, the analysis shows that there are significant and positive correlations between students' GPA and total score of anxiety scale and all three domains of anxiety scale. The highest correlation has been observed in terms of fear of negative evaluation ($r = .32, p < .001$), then with total score ($r = .28, p < .001$) and test anxiety ($r = .27, p < .001$), and last with communication apprehension ($r =$

.23, $p < .001$). The results indicate that students with a higher grade point average are more likely to experience anxiety than those with lower GPA, which infers the positive association between academic performance and anxiety among students studying foreign languages. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that there have been no significant differences in FLA related to their academic level ($p < .005$). This indicates that students in their first, second, third, and fourth years are statistically different in their anxiety level.

Regarding demographic characteristics, the analysis shows that there have been significant and negative correlations between students' age, total anxiety score ($r = -.10$, $p = .002$), and test anxiety ($r = -.17$, $p < .001$), while communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation has no significant correlation. The results indicate that older students are less likely to experience anxiety than younger ones particularly in terms of testing anxiety. Moreover, the analysis using t-test for two independent samples shows that there has been a significant difference in testing anxiety between female and male students ($t = -2.35$, $p = .019$) with the mean score for females (13.8, $SD = 3.0$) higher

than the males' (12.7, $SD = 3.1$), while all other forms of anxiety have no significant differences.

Regarding the students' choice of their specialty, the analysis using t-test for two independent samples (see table 4) shows that there have been significant differences between those who have chosen to study foreign languages than those who have not. The analysis shows that students who have chosen to study a foreign language have a higher level of anxiety in all forms than those who have not ($p < .001$). The analysis also shows that there are no significant differences in anxiety related to working status ($p < .05$), although non-working students have a higher mean score than working students in total anxiety score, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. As for the differences in anxiety related to smoking status, the analysis also shows that there are no significant differences ($p < .05$). The analysis demonstrates that the mean score for total anxiety score and communication apprehension has a higher mean score among smokers than nonsmokers, while nonsmokers have a higher mean score of fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety than smokers. However, as mentioned above, the differences have not been statistically significant.

Table 4. Differences in foreign language classroom anxiety related to demographic characteristics

Variable		M	SD	Test Statistics		
				t-test	p	
Gender	Test anxiety	Male	12.7	3.1	- 2.35	.019
		Female	13.8	3.0		
Specially selection	Total scale	Yes	102.3	16.7	6.21	< .001
		No	91.1	18.3		
	Communication apprehension	Yes	56.4	10.6	5.96	< .001
		No	49.7	10.9		
	Fear of negative evaluation	Yes	23.7	5.5	5.91	< .001
		No	20.3	5.3		
	Test anxiety	Yes	14.3	2.8	7.40	< .001
		No	12.0	3.2		

Regarding differences in anxiety related to students' type of high school and using ANOVA test, the analysis shows that there are significant differences among students related to their type of school. The analysis also shows that there is a significant difference in the total anxiety score ($F_{2, 488} = 9.8$, $p < .001$), communication apprehension ($F_{2, 488} = 14.9$, $p < .001$), and fear of negative evaluation ($F_{2, 488} = 6.2$, $p = .005$). However, test anxiety shows no significant differences. Using post hoc comparison (Scheffe) to detect differences related to the type of high school, the analysis shows differences between students coming from governmental and private high

schools ($p < .001$), while there are no differences related to those coming from international schools.

5. Discussion

Psychological disturbances have a negative impact on university students' academic performance (Hamaideh&Hamdan Mansour, 2014). According to Dörnyei (2005), students are more likely to experience higher level of anxiety in foreign language lessons than in lessons on other subjects. This might be related to the students' ability to sustain communication ability in a non-native language. The present study demonstrates that Jordanian students studying foreign languages have a high level of anxiety. In fact, about two-thirds of

them have a high level of anxiety. The study also reveals that students have a high level of anxiety across all forms of anxiety; communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and testing anxiety. While the results, in general, correspond with previous international outcomes that learning a foreign language causes anxiety among students (Liu, 2006; Gregerson, 2003), the present study adds that although students have chosen to study foreign languages, they still have a high level of anxiety.

The inter-correlation between FLA and certain demographic and academic variables has some controversial reports in the literature. In the present study, we have revealed that there are no significant differences between male and female students regarding anxiety level, and that younger students experience a higher level of testing anxiety and communication apprehension. However, the international reports are controversial in regard to the relationship between gender and FLA. For example, Abu-Rabia (2004) and Donovan and MacIntyre (2005) maintain that females have higher levels of FLA, others (Cheng, 2002; Dewaele, 2002; Capan, & Simsek, 2012; Matsuda, & Gobel, 2003) report no relationship between gender and FLA levels. On the other hand, Kitano (2001) states that males have a higher level of FLA than. The inconsistent reports of gender differences in FLA may be related to gender issues. According to Williams (1996), male students are more reluctant to report their anxiety compared to their female counterparts. In this context, culture is an important determinant for such behavior. In collectivistic cultures such as Jordan, males consider that admitting anxiety is perceived as a sign of weakness. This infers that culture plays a significant role in determining the level of FLA among students in Jordan.

Another significant finding of the present study is that students with a higher level of academic performance (measured by GPA) are more likely to experience anxiety than those with lower levels. The results do not support previous ones that there is no statistically significant correlation between general FLA level and the grade level of students (Capan, & Simsek, 2012). This study adds to the body of knowledge that students who struggle for academic improvement are more likely to experience anxiety than those who do not. This can be explained in terms of students' psychological needs. Distinguished students may experience a high level of self-awareness; their self-esteem and perception are closely related to the process of achievement. This causes students to be more sensitive to negative evaluation and more concerned about communication apprehension for fear of committing errors. Thus, students with a low GPA are more likely to

experience all forms of FLA than those with a higher GPA. The results are also supported by another finding of this study that there is no significant difference in FLA related to students' academic year which indicates that students' academic performance is a more influential factor than progression in the program. One limitation of this study is that the results have been obtained from a cross sectional survey. A follow up study may be informative.

6. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that two thirds of university students studying foreign languages in Jordan have a high level of anxiety and those with high academic performance are more likely to suffer from anxiety than those with low academic performance. The study has implications for mental health professionals and faculty members. The findings call for a more active role of faculty personnel in motivating students, and employing strategies to help students overcome foreign language anxiety and increase foreign language performance. The study recommends initiating efforts that aim at creating a healthy nonthreatening learning environment which increases positive factors for students' performance. Furthermore, there is a need for collaborative efforts at Arab universities - targeting students of foreign languages- to employ innovated teaching and learning strategies that maintain the psychological stability of students and help them to overcome classroom anxiety.

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