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Foreign language anxiety in female Arabs learning English: case studies

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Foreign language anxiety in female Arabs learning English: case studies

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A case study design was used to examine the experiences of female college students learning English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia, where English is becoming an increasingly necessary skill and the culture is undergoing immense changes. Ten participants who reported experiencing moderate to high anxiety, five from the beginning level (Level 1) and five from a more advanced level (Level 3) of the college English programme, were examined. A multimethod approach – including questionnaires, classroom observation with field notes, and individual and group interviews – was used to gather information regarding the students' perspectives and behaviour. Particular attention was paid to the students' own perspectives on their experiences of anxiety. Each participant's experiences were examined individually, then compared and analysed in the context of existing research literature. Although some factors, such as teacher-student interactions and teacher behaviour, appeared nearly universally anxiety-provoking among all participants, others factors varied between participants in the beginning versus more advanced stages of study. Practical implications for teachers are discussed.

Keywords: language anxiety; EFL; foreign languages; language learning

Steinar Kvale offered a disarmingly simple challenge:

If you want to know how people understand their world and their life,

why not talk with them? (1996, 1).

For researchers seeking to understand students' experiences, including emotional and other internal challenges, studying a foreign language, talking to students is a straightforward strategy. Nonetheless, foreign language students' voices are conspicuously absent from research purported to investigate their experiences, even of affective variables known to be important, such as anxiety. The research in this area often uses only quantitative measures (e.g., the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, or FLCAS; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986). As recently as 2008, Yan and Horwitz argued that students' voices should be a source of information. Students' perspectives may be particularly important for understanding under-studied populations, such as students in non-Western cultures, whose cultural backgrounds differ from those of the Western students who have dominated the research literature thus far.

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Literature review

Many factors shape how well an individual learns, including individual differences like cognitive ability, personality characteristics, learning styles, meta-cognitive differences, social contexts and affective aspects (Tallon 2009). Researchers attempting to gain insight into why some language learners have particular difficulty in acquiring a target language have looked at relationships between foreign language acquisition and affective variables. Of the affective variables that impact language learning, Tallon points to anxiety as the most important. Anxiety is known to have a deleterious impact on cognition (e.g., Dvorak-Bertsch et al. 2007; Eysenck 1979; Eysenck et al. 2007; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Vytal et al. 2012; Vytal et al. 2013). Anxiety also affects emotions, behaviour and physiology (see Eysenck et al. 2007; Young 1999).

Foreign language anxiety (FLA)

Students' experiences of anxiety when studying a foreign language are distinct from general anxiety. These experiences have merited a label – FLA (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, 128) defined FLA as 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process'. FLA is a situation-specific anxiety experienced only from learning a second or foreign language. It may include specific feelings towards or behaviours during language learning that facilitate learning, but is more likely to debilitate learning and prevent, hinder, or impede successful language acquisition.

Anxiety in language learning is more strongly implicated in formal than naturalistic language learning (Clément et al. 1977) and can profoundly impact foreign language learning in the classroom (e.g., MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Young 1991; Phillips 1992). To improve students' learning and experiences, teachers must be able to recognise FLA symptoms and identify students likely to be negatively impacted (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1991). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) reported that approximately one-third of foreign language students experience FLA. Most or all students experience at least some anxiety to different degrees and different ends. Even high-achieving, successful students may suffer the debilitating effects of FLA when they must perform (e.g., speak, write) in a foreign language (MacIntyre 1999). Batumlu and Erden (2007) found that learners at all academic levels showed a significant negative relationship between FLA and English language achievement. Some studies have indicated that high anxiety has a negative impact on language learning (Gregersen 2003; Krashen 1985; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Price 1991), but mild concern or worry, paired with interest in learning the language, motivates students (Bailey 1983).

In the context of foreign language learning, causes and consequences of anxiety are not fully understood. FLA can be provoked by many situations, such as not knowing the meaning of a word and speaking in front of peers (e.g., Bailey 1983; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Phillips 1992; Young 1991). FLA can also be related to personal and interpersonal anxieties, students' beliefs about learning, instructors' beliefs about teaching, instructor-student interactions, classroom procedures and testing (Young 1991). Low self-esteem and competitiveness have been noted as related to high anxiety in foreign language students (e.g., Bailey 1983; Young 1991).

Mastering a language requires using it to communicate, but struggling to express ideas in the new language has been described as psychologically unsettling (Guiora 1983) and can threaten adults' views of themselves as intelligent and skilful communicators

(e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986). Adults, who normally see themselves as reasonably intelligent and socially adept, may find they do not know how their attempts to communicate in the target language are perceived, evaluated or interpreted. Indeed, anxiety in foreign language learning manifests primarily in listening to and speaking in the foreign language (Daly 1991; Horwitz et al. 1986; Young 1990). In Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) study, students reported being relatively comfortable answering drill questions or delivering rehearsed speeches, but froze when extemporaneous speaking was required (i.e., in role-play situations). In a qualitative, interview-based study that brings some methodological diversity, Price (1991) found that the most frequently reported source of anxiety was speaking in the target language in front of peers. Students were afraid they would be laughed at or they would make fools of themselves when speaking the target language (Guiora 1983; Price 1991).

Students might be particularly prone to anxiety during the early phases of learning, like when starting beginners' language classes. All of the students in Price's (1991) study reported that the transition from relatively easy high school language courses to demanding college courses was stressful. This pattern was also observed in 62 native English speakers learning French in an intensive summer school, where more advanced students indicated experiencing less anxiety (Gardner, Smythe, and Brunet 1977; reviewed by MacIntyre and Gardner 1991).

FLA and culture

That which is known about FLA has primarily come from research in the United States (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986) and Canada (e.g., MacIntyre and Gardner 1991), but a handful of studies have been conducted in other regions. In the context of FLA, this is important because education systems around the world differ, and each exists within a broader cultural context. According to Brown (2007), a culture is 'ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time' (380). When people identify as members of a social group, their interactions with other members of the same social group (e.g., family, school, religious group) reinforce shared views (Kramsch 2001). Behaviours indicative of FLA (like those of general anxiety) are culturally nested (Oxford 2005). Cultural norms dictate expected behaviour for students in a classroom. Whether results from studies of FLA conducted in North America generalise to accurately describe language learners in other countries must be carefully considered.

Based on her review of existing research studies, Horwitz (2001) concluded that FLA varies across cultural groups. Meaningful regional and cultural differences have been found in studies examining FLA in non-Western students. For example, the language-learning experiences of a sample of 532 Chinese university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Shanghai revealed that even regional differences within a country can be related to differences in experience and behaviour (Yan and Horwitz 2008). Specifically, a major theme the authors identified was regional differences in and around China. This came as a surprise to Yan and Horwitz, who noted that students' regions of origin or geographic backgrounds had never been discussed as significantly related to anxiety. In their study, however, they noted that cultural differences between regions of China appeared substantial, and they highlighted parental influence and students' feelings of superiority or inferiority based on the province or region from which they came.

FLA's causes and relationship with performance were examined in a study of 47 Asian international students (from China, Japan and Korea) learning academic English at a university in Australia (Woodrow 2006). Specifically, Woodrow wanted to evaluate the major causes of second language anxiety and the relationship between anxiety and second language performance. According to Woodrow, the tools that existed for assessing FLA (e.g., the FLCAS) were not suitable for use with this population of students or in their language environment, and so a new questionnaire – the Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale, or SLSAS – was constructed. In her research, she conceptualised second language anxiety as a two-dimensional construct, including communication within the classroom and outside the classroom in everyday communicative situations, which were particularly important for the population she studied, because they were living in a country where their target language was the common language.

Methods for exploring FLA

The majority of FLA research, such as studies using the SLSAS (Woodrow 2006) and FLCAS (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986), has been quantitative. FLA is considered a situation-specific form of anxiety, and so it makes sense that researchers have focused on specific situations, such as those easily addressed in questionnaires. However, using mixed methods (e.g., qualitative and quantitative) affords many benefits (Dörnyei 2007). Using diverse methodologies can offset the weaknesses of any single method, thereby increasing the strength and accuracy of research. Brown (2007) suggested that observational research, interviews and indirect assessment to assess anxiety are preferable and more accurate than using questionnaires alone. Mixed methods afford opportunity for multilevel analyses and the development of a deeper understanding of issues examined. Furthermore, mixed methods improve validity by bringing together converging evidence and corroborating findings (Dörnyei 2007). In recent work, Yan and Horwitz (2008) reiterated Kvale's (1996) suggestion to ask individuals about their experiences, arguing that students' own voices should be a source of information. Using mixed methods and, in particular, incorporating qualitative methods makes it possible to develop an understanding of FLA based on the students' experiences and perspectives in the context of their own culture.

The present research

The research presented here is a novel exploration of the anxiety-related experiences of 10 young, Arabic-speaking female students studying EFL in Saudi Arabia. In this study, an under-studied population with a relatively short history of formal education is examined. Furthermore, the present research is informed by the ideals and recommendations of previous studies, using mixed methodology. The goal of this research is to understand students' anxiety-related experiences while learning English. Two specific research questions are addressed: (1) What is the experience of FLA in EFL students in this programme? (2) What are commonly identified prompts of anxiety, from the students' perspective? and (3) How do behaviour, FLA and anxiety prompts differ as related to students' experience level and EFL proficiency? Additionally, implications for how to improve students' classroom experiences and learning, and reduce FLA, will be considered.

Following recommendations (e.g., Yan and Horwitz 2008) and responding to Kvale's (1996) call, this research utilised the innovative approach of listening to students' own

voices in open-ended interviews about the experience of learning EFL. Young Saudi students have a unique perspective to share, having witnessed educational reform that continues to challenge complex social and cultural norms in Saudi Arabia. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has gone through large-scale changes due to economic development from oil business and an influx of technology, and has seen the return of students who obtained higher education abroad. Pressures from inside Saudi Arabia (e.g., government's drive to have a presence in the global market) and from outside (e.g., increasing prevalence of English in technological fields and increasing importance of global trade) are pushing for changes, including the development of new English programmes and the improvement of existing programmes (Donn and Al Manthri 2010).

To meet this need, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education has legalised privately owned, post-secondary institutions. In 1999, Effat College (which was expanded to a full university in 2009) and Dar Al-Hekma College, colleges for women in Jeddah and Prince Sultan College, a college with separate campuses for men and women in Riyadh, were among the first of this type of post-secondary institutions to open. (As tradition and law dictate in Saudi Arabia and most neighbouring Arab countries, men and women always attend separate schools.) Since then, more private colleges and universities have opened across Saudi Arabia. These private, English-medium colleges are more like American colleges in terms of culture than they are like the existing Saudi colleges; the new colleges have debate teams and other extracurricular clubs, which do not exist in Saudi colleges but are commonplace on American college campuses.

The students who took part in the current study were attending a private, all-female, English-medium college in Jeddah. They were enrolled in a College Preparatory Programme (CPP) to improve their English before entering the main college, where classes were taught in English. The study took place for one full semester, spanning from September through February. Due to a three-week break from school for Ramadan in October, the data collection began at the end of October. The researcher who conducted this study is female, and so working with a women's college facilitated the research, because women are not allowed to enter men's colleges. The college where this research took place is very similar in curriculum to other private colleges (for men and women) in Saudi Arabia and in neighbouring Arab Gulf countries.

Methods

Drawing from the work of Brown (2007) and Dörnyei (2007), the research design for the current case studies employs multiple methods, including both traditional, quantitative methods and more fluid and meaning-focused qualitative methods. Consistent with Kvale's (1996) challenge and Yan and Horwitz's (2008) recommendations, I sought to gain information and insight into students' experiences through their voices, including a qualitative approach to understanding FLA means emphasising the qualities and meaning of the experience in ways that are not measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). As Denzin and Lincoln highlight, this sort of inquiry strategy puts the relationship between the researcher and subject, as well as the context or situation, at the centre of the study. It also provides an opportunity for students' voices to be heard. Case studies and a qualitative approach allows development of an in-depth, holistic examination of the matter under investigation in a way that would not be possible through numerical analysis alone (e.g., Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007; Merriam 1988).

Analysis of the case studies involved triangulation of information with an eye for recurring themes across assessments (see Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007; Denzin 1970; Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2007). A questionnaire, classroom observations (with field notes), and transcripts of individual and group interviews were used. I transcribed the interviews, which were then translated from Arabic to English by an independent, professional translator. I then reviewed the translated transcriptions, comparing them to the original, audio-taped interviews, to ensure the translations accurately reflected the content.

The questionnaire

Questionnaires have strengths and weaknesses. A questionnaire can be used to tap into participants' knowledge, opinions and experiences (e.g., McDonough and McDonough, 1997; Robson, 2002; and Wallace, 1998). Furthermore, questionnaires provide a simple method for gathering information about attitudes, values, beliefs and motives. Of particular importance to the current study, questionnaires are easy to quickly administer to large groups.

Many of the disadvantages associated with questionnaires can be overcome if the questionnaires are supplemented with other data collection methods. The quality and depth of information collected using questionnaires alone is limited by the questions included. In using a self-report to assess anxiety, the validity of the data depends on the degree to which the individual completing the questionnaire has consciously, accurately identified and accepted the experience of anxiety (Williams 1991). The person must also admit anxiety (i.e., not be dissuaded by self-presentation biases). For the present study, a quantitative questionnaire was paired with extensive qualitative methods.

The Arabic FLA Questionnaire, or AFLAQ (Al-Saraj, manuscript submitted for publication), which was designed in an earlier study of the same population, was used. The new scale was developed specifically drawing from the experiences of students in Saudi Arabia so that the students would be able to relate to the anxiety prompts described in each item. The AFLAQ contains 33 items and utilises a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly disagree' (1) to 'Strongly agree' (5). Scores on the questionnaire fall into five categories: very un-anxious (mean score of 1–1.7), un-anxious (1.8–2.5), moderate (2.6–3.4), anxious (3.5–4.2) and very anxious (4.3–5). Although all of the anxiety prompts addressed in the AFLAQ can also be experienced by students in other cultures, the proportion of items addressing each topic and the particular issues (e.g., Listening and Speaking class) are tailored to the Arab student population. Specifically, the questionnaire has a particular focus on prompts of anxiety and stressors prevalent in this population, including practised and spontaneous public speaking and a particular fear of negative evaluation. The AFLAQ was administered to students in October after students returned from the Ramadan holidays and during the third week of classes.

Observations

Observations were used to construct an understanding of the EFL classroom and to provide reference points for interviews. The goal of observations was to identify factors that trigger FLA. All observations were conducted in Listening and Speaking classes between the first week of November (when students returned to classes after Ramadan) and last week of January. The CPP, like other EFL programmes in the Arab region, divides classes by skill area into Listening and Speaking, Reading and Writing and

Grammar. Listening and Speaking class was chosen for observations because it was hypothesised to be both the most interactive (and thus useful to observe) and the most anxiety filled due to the anxiety-provoking nature of public speaking.

Field notes

Field notes are used to create a thorough, accurate record of observed situations (e.g., Lynch 1996). Using field notes allowed me to keep careful records of classroom observations and related thoughts or questions. Field notes informed analyses of the case studies and questions asked during interviews.

Interviews

Interviews allowed students to voice feelings and perspectives regarding their classroom experiences and studies. I conducted interviews individually (weekly) and in groups (fortnightly) from the beginning of November (after Ramadan) through the end of January. I used a combination of unstructured and semi-structured formats to take advantage of the strengths of each (Gubrium and Holstein 2002; Maykut and Morehouse 1994; Roulston, de Marrais, and Lewis 2003). During semi-structured interviews, I prompted students by asking them about their AFLAQ responses and classroom situations I had observed.

Participants

Participant selection

Students were recruited for participation based on several criteria. Potential participants were students categorised as moderately to very anxious by AFLAQ scores. Two subsets of students were recruited: (1) five students from Level 1 who had just completed high school (and therefore lacked college experience) and had relatively weak English skills; and (2) five students from Level 3 who had at least one semester in the college EFL programme (and were therefore familiar with the environment and teaching methods). A total of ten students were randomly selected from the students who met the inclusion criteria. The five participants from each level attended class together, enabling observations and group interviews.

FLA assessed by AFLAQ

During the second week of the semester, all Level 1 and 3 students gathered in an auditorium for an explanation (in their native language, Arabic) of this research. The potential benefits of participating were explained. Students were told participating was fully voluntary; it was their choice to participate by completing the AFLAQ or to opt out. A total of 75 students (22 from Level 1, 53 from Level 3) completed the AFLAQ. The students completed the AFLAQ early in the semester, prior to having much experience in their classes or receiving substantial feedback from teachers.

Case study participants

Potential participants were invited to participate in the semester-long case study. Students were told the research would involve the questionnaire they had already completed, classroom observations and notes, and audio-recording of individual and group

interviews. They were informed that participation was voluntary and would have no impact on their grades. In addition, pseudonyms would ensure confidentiality. It was stressed that the research was student-centred and nothing that the students disclosed would be shared with their teachers. Students who agreed to participate were given consent forms to review and sign.

Analyses

AFLAQ responses, observations, field notes, and individual and group interviews were combined to construct an understanding of each participant's experience. Special attention was given to the students' perspectives regarding how they experienced FLA and what caused them anxiety in learning English. Results from participants were considered, by level, to identify repeating patterns and themes.

Results

Level 1

There were 23 students in Level 1, all in one section. The five Level 1 students who participated in this research were given the pseudonyms Hind, Maha, Sabah, Samaher and Zakia (see Table 1). All five were from Saudi Arabia and had come to the college directly from high school. All the students in Level 1 were approximately the same age (18–19 years). Of the 23 students in Level 1, two did not attend for the full semester and three others failed. Of the five case study participants, four passed Level 1, and one (Maha) stopped attending class.

AFLAQ

Of the five Level 1 case studies, the average AFLAQ score was 3.87 (SD = 0.92), or 'anxious' (see Table 1). Samaher had the lowest score (3.15, or 'moderate') and Hind had the highest score (4.30, or 'very anxious'). The students were concerned about their performance. As indicated by the mean score of five (SD = 0) on item 24 (see Table 2), all five students participating in the Level 1 case studies feared failing their language class.

In response to items 11, 15 and 27 (listed in Table 2), four of the students indicated strong agreement. For each of these items, a single student (different for each item) responded with 'agree' instead of 'strongly agree'. These responses indicate the students

Table 1. Level 1 participant information.

Pseudonym	Age	Previous education	Past CPP semesters	AFLAQ Score Mean	Category	Final grade
Samaher	19	Private	0	3.15	Moderate	B+
Sabah	18	Public	0	3.82	Anxious	B
Maha	18	Public	0	3.94	Anxious	Withdrew
Zakia	18	Private	0	4.16*	Anxious	C+
Hind	18	Public	0	4.30	Very Anxious	C+

Note: All schools are unique public or private high schools.
*Zakia's score is averaged across 32 items; she did not provide a response to item 6 of the questionnaire

Table 2. AFLAQ items associated with highest anxiety scores for Level 1.

Item		Mean	SD
24.	I fear failing my foreign language class.	5.00	0.00
11.	I feel anxious when I see classmates better than me in my foreign language class.	4.80	0.45
15.	I get anxious when I feel that I cannot speak well in front of other language students not in my class.	4.80	0.45
27.	I feel nervous when I am around more experienced foreign language users.	4.80	0.45
2.	I feel anxious when the teacher asks me a question that I have not prepared for.	4.60	0.55
26.	I feel anxious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.	4.60	0.55
29.	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	4.60	0.55
33.	I feel nervous when standing or giving a presentation in front of the class.	4.60	0.55
3.	I feel nervous and confused when the language teacher is unsuccessful in explaining the lesson.	4.60	0.89

Note: In cases in which the mean scores are the same, all items with that mean score are presented; they are ordered by mean, then by the standard deviation associated with that mean.

were concerned about being compared to their classmates (item 11) or other English speakers (item 27), and speaking in front of others (item 15).

Group demeanour

Generally, the Level 1 students (including case study participants and the other students) seemed hard-working and keen to learn English. They appeared to respect or even revere their teachers, as illustrated by their quiet attendance to what the teachers said. Students in Level 1 very rarely questioned and never challenged anything a teacher said.

The students in Level 1 were shy and hesitant to speak, typically talking quietly and only to each other. The students generally stayed together, sitting together in the cafeteria and in the hallways, and also stayed in touch when away from school. Hind stated, '… even when we go outside of the college, we all go out together or we send mobile text messages to each other. We always have some kind of communication'. In staying together and expressing concern when classmates struggled, the Level 1 students appeared supportive of one another and concerned for each other's welfare.

Level 1 students' perspectives on anxiety-provoking issues

The same issues and concerns appeared repeatedly in AFLAQ responses, classroom observations and interviews (see Table 3). Students often identified and discussed the teacher as a source or cause of anxiety, as in the below passage from the first group interview during the fifth week of classes (in the first week of November).

Hind: I feel that the teacher plays a leading role in making the students feel anxious or not anxious. For example, I get anxious quickly… Another example is that in the Listening and Speaking class, I don't get anxious; but in my Reading and Writing class, I feel very anxious. Therefore, I think anxiousness depends on each student's interaction with the teacher and the teacher's interaction with the student. This may increase or decrease the student's anxiety.

Researcher: And what do you all think?

Maha: I agree. The teacher plays a role in students' feeling anxiety or not.

Table 3. Summary of anxiety-provoking situations for Level 1.

Student	Anxiety-provoking issue or situation
Samaher	• Speaking in front of students or teacher (concern over negative evaluation) • Teacher/power/grades • Teaching methods • Instructor/learner interactions
Sabah	• Teacher • Topic studied • Speaking out loud
Maha	• Teacher • Harder content • Competitiveness • Teaching methods
Zakia	• Answering questions • Student familiarity • Naturally immune to anxiety
Hind	• Instructor/ learner interactions • Competitiveness • Specific topics

Researcher: And what do you think about the subject? Doesn't the subject have an effect on the students?

Maha: The subject itself does not affect the students' feeling anxiety as much as the teacher herself.

Sabah: I feel that both of them together have an effect on the student.

Researcher: What do you mean by that?

Maha: The subject being studied could be easy; but if the teacher is unsuccessful in explaining the lesson to the students, students begin to feel the anxiety… which will then lead the students' to lose their concentration in the lesson and the subject.

Students showed mild to extreme avoidance behaviours (e.g., skipping class on test days). The participants talked about the negative consequences of their actions, but still showed avoidance behaviours and other behaviours that interfered with learning. For example, Zakia knew she needed to participate in class and interact with other students to get better grades, but she failed to participate in class at the beginning. During the first group interview, Zakia discussed her experience of attempting to participate.

Researcher: Zakia, when your turn came to answer the question in the class, what did you feel?

Zakia: I don't know. I felt that I knew what to say, but I forgot how to read.

Researcher: Even though it was in front of you, and you were the one that wrote it?

Zakia: Yes…but I forgot.

Later, once Zakia was familiar with her classmates, she began to participate more. Zakia's anxiety was not static and permanent, but rather it decreased after time spent in the EFL

classroom and after getting to know classmates. The snapshot of her anxiety level very early in class and in the first interview did not represent her anxiety level by the end of class.

Maha stands out from other students because she stopped attending class. While she was attending, she took part in a few group interviews. In the first group interview, Maha said she was ill-prepared for studying English and in particular that her high school programme had not prepared her to learn and understand English at the college level.

> The students all the way from seventh grade to twelfth grade used to only memorise what's in these papers [study guides handed out by the teacher] without understanding what these words mean. Therefore, all the students could not grasp the English language, for they were dependent on memorising and not understanding. (Maha, in group interview)

In Maha's view, the content and subject being studied does not provoke as much anxiety as the teacher herself does. She believed that anxiety begins when students do not understand a teacher's explanation of a concept or subject and the students begin to feel lost and confused. Given that Maha never attended an individual interview, she and I did not have time to sit together and discuss her situation, other than during the first and second group interviews. After Maha stopped attending the CPP, one of her teachers called her home to check on her. Later, other participants from Level 1 informed me that Maha wished for me to call her. I suggested Maha come to my office at the college to talk, but she said that she could not, because she could not enter the college. Maha believed her circumstance was what would literally translate from Arabic as a 'bad eye', which could be called a jinx. When someone has a 'bad eye', something negative is happening. Maha believed that she was having bad experiences because others envied her attending a relatively prestigious college. She did not recognise that she was experiencing anxiety, and instead considered her experience to be fully due to the 'bad eye'. Maha explained that she had met with an Islamic religious figure to read parts of the *Quran* in an attempt to remove the jinx. Maha stated that because she had this jinx, she could not enter the college. 'No, you don't understand', she said (translated from Arabic), 'I cannot step into this college'. When I asked her why, she described her experience of attempting to come to the college:

> The minute the driver [women do not drive in Saudi Arabia] pulls up to the college, I feel my chest is, my heart is pumping so hard as if my heart was coming out of my chest. I start to panic. I can't enter. I tell the driver to go around again, and then I tell him to take me back home.

Maha's experiences and behaviours (e.g., failing to attend class) are classic symptoms of anxiety. Maha's description of her severe, acute experience closely matches the description of the physiological experience of anxiety or fear (Oxford 2005; Ehrman 1996). The description includes sweaty palms, a buzzing sound in one's ears, and a racing heart. Maha had discussed these experiences, and they were so strong for her that they were prompted by coming near the college so that she would not even step inside the college. Maha insisted during our phone call that she wanted to continue in the CPP, but she could not. In more conventional or quantitative FLA research, this very profound and personal experience would have gone undiscovered. Indeed, Maha's anxiety level on the AFLAQ was only 'anxious', perhaps because the AFLAQ was earlier in the semester, or Maha may have underreported her own anxiety level because she, though from the Western perspective clearly was experiencing extreme anxiety, attributed her experience to a culturally embedded phenomenon (the 'bad eye').

In the second group interview, the students focused on talking in class and the teachers as causing anxiety.

Hind: For me, just seeing a microphone and hearing my voice out loud makes me anxious.

Researcher: What about you? [referring to the other students in the interview]

Sabah: We feel anxious in class activities because we are not used to speaking English out loud.

Researcher: But all of the students who are listening to your presentations are your classmates, and you all know each other…?

Sabah: Yes.

Researcher: Even though you have been friends for some time now…

Hind: For me, no.

Samaher: I get anxious because of the teacher.

Researcher: The teacher?

Samaher: Yes, she [the teacher] makes me anxious more than the other students in class.

Researcher: Why?

Samaher: Because she is in control of everything, for example, our grades.

Through the course of the semester, Samaher made progress in learning English and in taking part in class. In the beginning, Samaher described herself as stuttering when she spoke in English because she was afraid, even going on to say that it was as if she did not know how to talk (in English). When asked to describe herself during an interview three weeks before the end of the semester, after five months in the programme, Samaher said, 'I am normal. <pause> I like to depend on others a lot. <pause> This is what I see'. The college environment requires students act and learn somewhat independently. The students themselves must learn to speak and express their own thoughts. By the end of the semester, Samaher, who avoided speaking at all in the beginning of the semester, had begun to ask questions during class instead on relying on other students to ask the questions and get the information or clarification she needed. 'Now, I am dependent on myself', she stated. Samaher's increased independence and self-confidence, and her decreased stuttering, all appeared related to the English language skills she gained through the course of the semester.

Level 3

All Level 3 case study participants had attended private high schools. All five participants were 18–19 years old at the time of the study. The pseudonyms used for Level 3 participants were Farida, Noura, Sara, Tamara and Youssra (see Table 4). Three of the participants were Saudi Arabian, one student (Noura) was from Yemen, and the father of one student (Tamara) was Turkish, though her mother was Saudi Arabian. Of the 17

Table 4.   Level 3 participant information.

Pseudonym	Age	Previous education	Past CPP semesters	AFLAQ Score Mean	AFLAQ Score Category	Final grade
Noura	19	<u>Private</u>	1	3.15	Moderate	Failed
Tamara	19	Private	2	3.58	Anxious	C
Sara	19	Private	1	3.61	Anxious	B
Youssra	19	<u>Private</u>	2	3.85	Anxious	Failed
Farida	18	<u>Private</u>	2	3.88	Anxious	Failed

Note: All schools are unique private high schools, as indicated, except those that are underlined; the underlined listings refer to a single private school that had been attended by two students.

students in the observed section of Level 3, four students were dropped (for not attending) and three failed. All three students who failed were case study participants.

AFLAQ

Of the five case studies from Level 3, the average AFLAQ score was 3.61 ($SD = 0.83$). Of the Level 3 case studies, Noura had the lowest AFLAQ score (3.15, or 'moderate') and Farida had the highest (3.88, or 'anxious'; see Table 4).

All five Level 3 students strongly agreed with item 21, 'I get nervous when the language teacher gives us a lot of things to do in so little time' (see Table 5). The students also had concerns about communicating ideas, indicated by responses to AFLAQ items 1, 2, 15 and 33. A global fear of failing the class (item 24) was also expressed.

Group demeanour

Overall, students in Level 3 appeared confident and willing to adopt the culture of the college. They did not shy away from the main college and instead tried to blend in with the mainstream college students. Like many women in the main college, many women in Level 3 wore Western clothes and hairstyles within the walls of the college. However, not all of the women in Level 3 adopted the Western culture of the college.

Table 5.   AFLAQ items associated with highest anxiety scores for Level 3.

Item	Mean	SD
21. I get nervous when the language teacher gives us a lot of things to do in so little time	5.00	0.00
1. I feel nervous when I can't write or express myself in the foreign language	4.80	0.45
24. I fear failing my foreign language class	4.80	0.45
6. I get nervous when there is a lot of vocabulary that I don't understand being used in my foreign language class	4.60	0.55
2. I feel anxious when the teacher asks me a question that I have not prepared for.	4.40	0.89
15. I get anxious when I feel that I can't speak well in front of other language students not in my class	4.40	0.89
33. I feel nervous when standing or giving a presentation in front of the class.	4.40	0.89

Unofficially, the women in section 1 of Level 3 were divided into two social subgroups. One group was a higher status in-group. The in-group students had been placed directly into Level 3 upon entering the college, and so none met the experience-related criterion for participating in the case studies. They were typically somewhat proficient in English due to travel, English-speaking nannies and/or media exposure. However, their informal English acquisition was evident in that they were able to speak English but lacked comparable writing skills. Most of them were upper middle class; their parents were relatively wealthy, well educated, liberal minded and well travelled. In many cases, the students' parents had pushed them to attend college. They stood out in terms of appearance because they wore designer clothes. This in-group consisted of girls who were self-confident almost to the point of being arrogant, and they constantly disrupted the class.

The out-group included six girls who were more modest in dress (preferring traditional Saudi attire) and behaviour. They appeared shy and only socialised with others students in Level 3. The five case study participants from Level 3 were all from this out-group. Women belonging to the out-group constantly complained (discussed below) about the in-group's disrupting class.

During the second week of classroom observations, about two months into the semester, it was apparent that these two groups did not mingle:

'The Group' [in-group] is sticking together and doesn't want to be split-up… when one of my participants asked one of the members of 'The Group' to join them in their team, the member of 'The Group' refused impolitely and turned to join her usual 'Group' team.

It may be that the out-group student, one of the case study participants, wanted to be part of 'The Group'. A desire to join with the group might have motivated the student's asking one of the in-group or popular students to be her partner for the project, or she may have had other reasons. The case study participant was not forced or under any pressure to suggest anyone to work with her on the project; the teacher allowed the students to choose their groups for the class project.

Level 3 students' perspectives on anxiety-provoking issues

Common trends were noted among the five Level 3 participants (see Table 6). The participants frequently indicated the teacher was largely responsible for student anxiety, and the students (Sara, Youssra) discussed about seeking but not receiving feedback, correction and support from the teacher. Many of the students avoided completing their work. Level 3 participants had anxiety focused on specific teacher–student social interactions and teacher behaviours (e.g., favouritism) and the specific classroom tasks (e.g., presentations).

All of the Level 3 students, including both the in-group and the quieter out-group, were assertive in class and about how they wanted to be taught. During interviews, Level 3 participants discussed specific examples of things the teacher could do to make the class better, make them feel supported and reduce their anxiety. Sara wanted the teacher to allow more time for listening tasks. All five students believed they would benefit from more constructive (not overly critical or negative) feedback and encouragement from teachers. Youssra conveyed that she wanted to receive printed copies of the questions the teacher would ask regarding listening tasks so she could figure out which parts of a recorded conversation to focus on.

Table 6.   Summary of anxiety-provoking situations for Level 3.

Student	Anxiety-provoking issue or situation
Noura	• Speaking in class (concern over negative evaluation) • Teaching methods • Classroom presentations
Tamara	• Answering questions • Fear of negative evaluation • Speaking out loud/in front of new students • Classroom presentations • Teacher: favouritism, not receiving feedback from teacher, no encouragement
Sara	• Teacher • Fear of negative evaluation • Listening/need more time to gather thoughts • Need feedback from teacher • Classroom presentations
Youssra	• Speaking in front of new students in class • Classroom presentations • Teacher: favouritism, not receiving feedback from teacher, clarification, support, lack of encouragement • Competitiveness: grades, comparison
Farida	• Speaking in front of new students in class and in front of teacher • Classroom presentations • Teacher: lack of attention, lack of encouragement, manner (monotonous), no clear instructions • Different teaching methods used

The Level 3 case study participants also expressed concerns that they were not being taught adequately during their Listening and Speaking class because of interruptions from their classmates (the in-group). The students identified favouritism towards the in-group as a problem that negatively impacted their learning. Partway through the semester, the students dreaded attending class, as discussed during a group interview.

Youssra: … Plus she [the teacher] only concentrates on them.

Sara: Yes. She targets the conversation during the explanation of the lesson to them only.

Researcher: And how do you feel about that?

Youssra: This depresses us to a degree that we do not want to go in to our English class.

Noura: This does not lift our spirit.

Youssra: I began to feel burdened to enter the English class.

Farida: I started hating my English class.

The students showed avoidance behaviours that appeared to be in reaction to their anxiety about studying English. For example, they chose not to complete their assignments on time, did not prepare oral presentations, and generally avoided doing live presentations (e.g., audio taped themselves reading the presentation from a script and played the tape in

class). Students said that they preferred taping oral presentations so that they would not make mistakes and suffer through being judged by the teacher and other students.

Discussion

In comparing and contrasting the student participants from Levels 1 and 3, patterns can be identified. Below, these similarities and differences are expounded. Then, students' experiences of anxiety are discussed with regard to existing research and practical implications.

Social dynamics

Students in Level 1 felt and appeared as though all students in their class were close and supportive. All students in Level 1 were in regular contact (i.e., by mobile phone). The students in Level 1 all appeared to be from the same socioeconomic class and had similar English language skills and experience, thus allowing them to be a cohesive group. In contrast, Level 3 students' discussion during interviews and my observation of their class highlighted the social division of the class. The talkative in-group in Level 3 received attention from the teacher and dominated the class. The students in Level 3 were from different socioeconomic backgrounds, had different types of experience with English, and were even in the college for different reasons (some students' attended the college for its reputation or prestige status within the community, while others for genuine gain of education). These differences created a clear division between the students, with the talkative group being from wealthier and more privileged families with less pressure on them to perform well. Level 3 students who took part in case studies expressed a great deal of frustration with the in-group and the teacher's preferential treatment of them.

In Level 3, the in-group made it difficult for other students to learn. In addition to teacher favouritism, off-topic discussions (sometimes in Arabic), and, eventually, feelings of dread and dismay about attending class interfered with the out-group's learning and, they felt, with the flow of the class. The divided group dynamic in the specific context of education has been discussed before. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) explain that if conflict, rebellious attitudes, or unwillingness to cooperate emerges in the classroom, the language class becomes an unpleasant environment. Even the most driven student will lose motivation. The students' interactions in Level 1 and in Level 3 likely started the patterns of group dynamics that emerged in each, but the teachers' leadership encouraged or supported the disparate and, in the case of Level 3, detrimental dynamics.

Experience of anxiety

Relationships to previous research

The first research question addressed in this study regarded the nature of students' experience of FLA. Overall, from classroom observations to individual and group interviews, participants in Levels 1 and 3 all experienced anxiety. For some students, the anxiety was a surmountable challenge. For other students, such as Maha, this anxiety was so severe as to be debilitating, and it drove her away from theprogramme.

The second research question addressed in this study regarded prompts of anxiety. Some anxiety prompts were common (e.g., the teacher, teacher-student interaction, concern over negative evaluation), and others were not shared across all students. Using mixed methodology to examine prompts of anxiety allowed the present study to identify

themes that recurred for each student. These findings are consistent with previous researchers (e.g., Ellis 2008; Horwitz 2001), who have found that different individual learners find different specific situations anxiety-provoking. It is likely the case that some students are simply more prone to anxiety (e.g., Maha) and others to recovering from or adapting to challenges (e.g., Zakia).

The third research question addressed the difference between students in Level 1 versus Level 3 relative to FLA. Based on the AFLAQ scores alone, the case study participants in Level 1 may have been slightly more anxious (mean = 3.87; *SD* = 0.92) than the participants in Level 3 (mean = 3.62; *SD* = 0.83). The case study participants were selected based on their having moderate to high levels of anxiety according to self-report on the AFLAQ. During class, the participants showed anxiety in the situations they listed as prompting anxiety. Their anxiety-related behaviour was consistent with symptoms of language-related anxiety discussed by Ehrman (1996), Oxford (2005), Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), and others. Furthermore, the consistency of behavioural observations and self-reports bolsters confidence in the accuracy of each.

Level 1 case study participants were understandably anxious. They were in a new environment, encountering unfamiliar teaching methods, and navigating demands in a new college. Such circumstances prompt anxiety (e.g., MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Price 1991; Tallon 2009). The difference between English language courses in high school and the CPP was dramatic and may have resulted in culture shock (as defined by Horwitz 2008). Both Hind and Maha felt ill-prepared for college, because they had learned only very basic English in high school. Price (1991) suggested that students who experience high anxiety actually do have weaker language skills than their classmates. Hind, who had received the highest score of all the case study participants on the AFLAQ (4.30, very anxious), worked very hard in her classes and achieved an average grade of a 'C+' at the end of the semester. However, the course work was quite difficult for her and she may have been accurate in seeing her own language skills as weaker than those of her peers.

In Level 3, the case study participants' anxiety came not so much from the task of learning English, but from the social context of classroom. Anxiety was prompted by the teacher, classmates, group dynamics and the giving of presentations. This finding is consistent with research from Price (1991) and exemplifies Block's (2003) argument that the social setting in which learning occurs plays a significant role in the language learning process.

Students in Level 3 had more experience with the programme and English. Previous research has found that advanced learners may have high levels of anxiety but still perform well (Marcos-Llinas and Garau 2009), but findings from the current research contradict that observation. In the present study, more advanced learners (in Level 3) also experienced anxiety, perhaps even as much anxiety as students in Level 1, but for different reasons. Level 3 students' continued anxiety may have negatively impacted their performance; three of the five case study participants from Level 3 failed the semester.

The majority of the students in both Levels 1 and 3 described teachers as contributing to the level of anxiety experienced by students in the classrooms. Some of the students discussed specific issues, such as a teacher's explaining of a subject in a way that does not make sense (Maha), over-correcting students when they speak (Sara), and showing favouritism (Farida). It has been previously argued that the teacher plays a significant role in increasing or decreasing student anxiety in the foreign language classroom (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003; Gregersen 2003; Price 1991; Wu 2010). Students need a teacher to offer encouragement and support without being excessively critical of errors.

Although some of the teachers in the CPP came from America and others were from Arab countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Lebanon), all utilised Western teaching methods (e.g., group projects instead of only individual work, in-class presentations) that were dissimilar from those used in Saudi high schools. Student-teacher interactions were a major source of anxiety for students, and this might have been because the interactions were in the context of unfamiliar expectations and assignments. Students might have had unrealistic expectations, that teachers used teaching methods that were unfamiliar, or that teachers behaved in ways that were atypical within the Saudi Arabian culture. The impact that teachers have on students when they violate social norms and when they use novel teaching methods warrants further research.

Practical implications

A final goal of this study is to learn from what the students have shared and convey that information in a useful way to teachers and classrooms in order to possibly improve learning and decrease anxiety. Excess anxiety can interfere with students' learning, and so teachers might be able to improve students' learning and in-class performance by helping the students to have lower levels of anxiety. In Krashen's (1982) model of how anxiety interferes with language learning, which can be seen as a metaphor, anxiety leads to a barrier or a dense 'affective filter' that will not allow information to pass through so that it can be absorbed by the student. If the teacher is to engage the students in the learning process, the teacher must ensure the students are receptive. If the anxiety level becomes too high, it may become debilitating (Scovel 1978) or cause the raising of such a filter.

The interviews and perspectives of students in this research might allow teachers insight into students' experiences. Teachers' understanding of the classroom could be bolstered by their seeing it as a social setting (Curran 1961; Tallon 2009; Wu 2010). In the current study, students reported seeing teachers as having authority, and students also looked to teachers for feedback and encouragement. According to the case study participants, the teacher should not interrupt the students while they give presentations (a particularly stressful task), but should give each student or group personalised feedback privately so that students are not criticised or embarrassed in front of classmates. Other issues Level 3 case study participants identified as anxiety-provoking can also suggest ways teachers might modify their classroom behaviour to reduce the students' anxiety. For example, Sara stated that she needed the teacher to allow more time for her to formulate her answers to questions. Other students suggested teachers could pass out written questions before listening exercises to help students figure out what to focus on when overwhelmed by listening.

In early stages of language learning, students may be going through major life changes (i.e., from high school to college, with the accompanying changes in teaching methodology, expectations and environment). The students may be under significant stress and identify the teacher as a cause of their anxiety when, indeed, multiple factors are involved. The students most likely point to the teachers as causing their anxiety, because the teacher is at the centre of the classroom and is making demands on the student. In high school, students in Saudi Arabia may become accustomed to having rather little interaction with their teachers. It is the norm in the high school setting that the teacher supplies information, which the students attempt to absorb (or memorise). However, high school teachers are less likely to push the students to talk in class and to participate by giving in-class presentations.

A great deal of the anxiety that was experienced by students who took part in these case studies was likely due to the American teaching methods utilised in the CPP and the mismatch between those unfamiliar teaching methods and the students' previous experiences. In order to learn English and be able to speak in English, however, the students must practise using the language, a skill unfamiliar to most students who have learned English only in a classroom setting in Saudi Arabia. In the CPP, the teachers tell the students that they must participate in these anxiety-provoking activities. The students might enter the college unprepared to ask questions of the teacher, and especially unprepared to speak in English in beginning English classes. The teachers could improve the students' overall learning experience and potentially reduce their anxiety by recognising the significant differences between the students' college EFL experience and how the classroom culture places novel demands on the students. Teachers might ease students' anxiety by normalising the experience or discussing how anxiety is common, and by encouraging the students to continue on despite anxiety. Teachers could also reduce their students' anxiety by taking specific steps, including allowing students time to speak and allowing them to speak in their native language at the beginning of the class and helping the students to rephrase and repeat their ideas in the target language (as suggested by Curran 1961 and discussed by Wu 2010).

Conclusion

The study presented here was pioneering in that it examined FLA in a population outside of the West, but in a population that is also very underrepresented in the academic research literature: women of the Arab world. Furthermore, this study was innovative in that students' voices were sought, heard and respected as a source of information about their own experiences in learning EFL. Findings from this study that are similar to findings in other studies of FLA, such as anxiety over negative evaluation and speaking in a foreign language, are interesting in that they show these experiences might be relatively universal. Findings that are unique to this study, such as Maha's understanding that a 'bad eye' or jinx prohibited her from entering the college, highlight the importance of respecting cultural differences. This study's unusual multimethod design facilitates greater confidence in the findings, which were not a remnant of any one method of collecting data. The newly developed AFLAQ, designed specifically for working with students in the Arab world, was useful in identifying students with high levels of anxiety. However, perhaps most important are the students' own voices, a simple, valid and valuable source of information about what students go through when striving to learn a new language.

Notes on contributor

Taghreed M. Al-Saraj, PhD, is currently a research fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. She earned her PhD from the Institute of Education, University of London in 2011. She received her Undergraduate and Masters' degrees from the University of Miami, Florida. Prior to beginning her doctoral research, Dr Al-Saraj was an English language lecturer at Dar Al-Hekma College in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Having seen firsthand the debilitating effects of FLA in the classroom, Dr Al-Saraj is very motivated to raise teachers' awareness about FLA in the Middle East. Dr Al-Saraj has presented on the topic of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in the Arab World at international conferences around the world, including at Waseda University in Tokyo, Saudi Ministry of Education in Jeddah, TESOL Arabia in Dubai, TESOL International in the United States, University of Texas at Austin, and the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) in the United Kingdom.

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