

# Language Anxiety: A Case Study of the Perceptions and Experiences of Students of English as a Foreign Language in a Higher Education Institution in the United Arab Emirates

Rola Ahmed Lababidi

Correspondence: Rola Ahmed Lababidi. E-mail: rlababidi1@yahoo.com

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## Abstract

This case study explores and investigates the perceptions and experiences of foreign language anxiety (FLA) among students of English as a Foreign Language in a Higher Education Institution in the United Arab Emirates. The first phase explored the scope and severity of language anxiety among all Foundation level male students at a college in the UAE. In the second phase of the study, focus group (FG) interviews with students were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the possible sources of anxiety about language learning and its manifestations, as well as consideration of the strategies that may be used to alleviate its negative effects. The findings indicate that some of the student participants in this case study experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety in the second language classrooms. The findings from the FG indicate that foreign language anxiety could be attributed to a number of variables. The results highlight a number of implications and recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** foreign language anxiety, higher education

## 1. Introduction: Why Research Language Anxiety? Nature of the Problem

The extensive use of English language globally has placed second language learners (L2) on a challenging tract of acquiring effective communicational skills. Surmounting this challenge is depicted as a guaranteed 'rite of passage' within higher education and subsequent success in the job market. Anxiety that is associated with learning a second language is referred to as language anxiety (LA). LA is a psychological construct particular to language learning and can be characterized as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). For educators, the challenges are manifested in the ability of educators to promote a stress-free learning environment that engenders in learners an interest in learning a second language. From a theoretical point of view, this is not a simple task to embrace. Educators and students step into classrooms with a loaded baggage of expectations, beliefs, and prospects about a particular teaching and learning environment. The interplay of these expectations may foster a unique learning context that shapes the nature of the classroom environment. In instances, whereby, the climate in the classroom is rigid and judgmental in outlook, this presents a context that shakes and sometimes shatters the learner's self-concept. As Horwitz et al. (1986) clearly note, "Any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" (p. 128).

Learning English as a second language incorporates many challenges to both learners and educators alike. For learners, these challenges are inherent in many a priori factors that are embedded in the learner's unique psychosocial and educational framework. This framework takes into account the learner's affective and cognitive predisposition in learning a second language. Feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and apprehension are usually manifested by L2 learners in learning to speak a second language. These feelings are considered to connote a negative and detrimental consequence on communication in the target language. Foreign language anxiety or more precisely, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is considered a situation-specific anxiety experienced in the context of the foreign language classroom (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, 1991b, 1994). The nature of the classroom environment may trigger the emergence of language anxiety among L2 students. For the purpose of clarity, the term 'classroom environment' is used here to include a wide range of educational dimensions that takes into account the physical setting, the socio-psychological environment, and a variety of instructional routines related to teachers' characteristics and behaviours. Some classroom environments create a

feeling of insecurity among students. Often, classroom related scenarios such as teacher factors and the behaviours of peers are deemed to be at the root of such feelings of anxiety. For educators the challenges are embedded in their receptive ability to identify and help students surmount their anxieties especially when it effects their academic achievements (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) and communication skills (Hashemi, 2011).

### *1.1 Significance of the Problem*

Investigating the concept of LA is of profound significance due to the adverse negative effects it can have on second language students learning experience and outcome. LA can have a detrimental effect on learners' achievement (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). It also has an adverse outcome on social interactions (MacIntyre, 1995). From a cognitive perspective, it interferes in the three stages of learning; input, process and output (Tobias, 1986). Due to its deliberating consequences, Krashen (1982) emphasizes the importance of creating a low stress-learning situation in improving learner's language competence.

Consequently, investigating the roots of LA will help in gaining a deeper understanding of this complex phenomenon and will in turn assist second language teachers in creating a stress- free classroom environment.

Most of the studies on FLA emerges from Western countries (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) and from a number of other countries in the world. Very few studies have been undertaken in the Arab world, notable exception include for example Al-Saraj 2011[KSA]; Hashemi, 2011[KSA]; Alrabai, 2014, 2015[KSA].

Horwitz (2001) review of research studies asserts that there are cultural variations through which FLA is experienced among learners and as such, generalizations from other studies should be carefully considered. Therefore, in order to fill this gap, this study aimed to explore foreign language anxiety as experienced by Emirati male Foundation level students.

In addition, the findings and recommendations from this mixed method study might add a significant contribution to the literature. Compared to studies conducted in other L2 contexts in the Arab world (for e.g. Alrabai, 2014, 2015; Rassaei, 2015) which were for the most part quantitative in nature, this study is unique in using a multi-method approach in investigating LA in the UAE.

### *1.2 Relevant Literature*

Research has examined many personal and or situational variables that are related to second language anxiety. Students with high level of anxiety share a number of characteristics. A study, conducted by Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley (1999) with university language students, revealed that they share at least one of these characteristics: they are usually older, high achievers, had never visited a foreign country, had not taken high school language courses, had low expectations of their overall average for their current language course, had a negative perception of their scholastic competence, or had a negative perception of their self-worth.

Dewaele, Petrides and Furnham (2008) found that, in addition to personal characteristics; social circumstances also play a role in generating language anxiety. They conducted a large-scale study of multilingual adults from different countries and established that individuals who were younger when they started learning a second or third language had lower levels of FLA. Social circumstances include the availability of supportive conversational partners and L2 role models may play a role in helping language learners avoid or overcome FLA. Al-Saraj (2013) conducted case study research in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to examine female students' perception of FLA. She concluded that there a number of teacher-related variables may be responsible for the emergence of anxiety among EFL students.

Evidence from a number of research studies indicated that variables associated with FLA may fall into two main categories: micro-level (learner's variables/ trait-specific anxieties) and macro-level (situational variables/ situation specific anxieties). Learner's variables include ability, age, attitude, beliefs, culture, gender, learning styles and personality variables among others (Campbell, 1999; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Gardner, Day, & MacIntyre, 1992; Gregersen & Horwitz 2002; Oxford, 1999). Situational variables incorporate for instance; course activities, course level, course organization, instructor's attitude, behaviour, and social interaction among learners (Jackson, 2002; Oxford 1999; Spielman & Radonfsky, 2001; Young, 1991).

## **2. Research Questions**

The significance of this research rests on a paradigm, which attests the existence of substantial variation through which FLA is experienced not only across cultural groups Horwitz (2001) but also across regions within a specific country (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). The scarcity of research on FLA in the UAE and the existence of cultural variations among learners from different cultures add to the unique originality of this study and warn

that generalizations from various studies on LA to the UAE context should be considered with absolute cautiousness. In addition to the aforementioned factors, the importance placed on learning English compounded with the transformational forms of the educational system adds a distinctive dimension to the study of LA in the UAE.

Therefore, in order to fill the gap in the literature, and to expand the field current understanding of LA in the Arab world, this mixed method research design study is set forth. It also affirms the importance of Alrabia (2014) and (Hussien, 2013) call for using multi-methods for the purpose of exploring and investigating possible factors associated with language anxieties and the coping strategies used by students to alleviate its existence. This case study with its core intent to investigate language anxiety among Emirati learners; assumes that attitudes, beliefs and perception of students and teachers, embrace an implicit aspect of learning a language and that there are many factors that influence these perceptions and ultimately the anxiety level of L2 learners. It also assumes that language anxiety that many students experience in L2 classrooms cannot be defined in a linear manner (Skehan, 1989), but rather it may be viewed as a complex psychological construct, influenced by many interrelated factors.

The data is expected to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are L2 students' perceptions of the extent to which the L2 classroom environment contributes to L2 students' feelings of anxiety?

RQ2: How is this anxiety manifested amongst L2 learners?

RQ3: What strategies do L2 students believe would be effective in reducing levels of anxiety in the L2 classroom?

### **3. Method**

This case study comprised two phases. In Phase 1 of the study Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was administered to all students in Foundation English with the intention to flag up classes that showed highest scores on anxiety. This resulted in the collection of quantitative data on the anxiety state of students across classes. In Phase 2 of the study FLCAS was used with the classes that exhibited the highest levels of anxiety in Phase 1, along with Focus Groups interviews.

#### *3.1 Piloting Phase*

To provide a firm foundation for the case study and to establish its feasibility, a pilot study was conducted to test the reliability and validity of the proposed tools for data collection. The preliminary phase of the pilot study was conducted in English. However, undertaking this step revealed the need to translate the instruments and the interviews into Arabic. The FLCAS was therefore translated, piloted and revised before distribution. In order to ensure the content validity of the scale, a professional translator and I translated the scales, a method that is referred to as multiple translators. The aim of this method is to make certain that the translated scales serve its purpose and is effectively suitable in terms of language and content. The translated scale was tested for response validity by using thinking aloud protocol with a professional translator, and two students who have an excellent command of the English language. The students were asked to read out each item, highlight any questions they found confusing, and to make general comments on the scales. The translated scale was given to 22 students registered in levels one and two of the foundation program. The internal consistency for FLCAS in the piloting phase of the 22 students who participated in the piloting phase yielded 0.87.

The focus group interviews questions were piloted and scrutinized by a colleague who holds a Doctorate degree in Education. The questions were tested with five students in the Foundation Program. By piloting the interview questions, I was following Wragg's (1984) recommendation of the importance of piloting the interview question with a group of respondents that are similar in make up to the group that would be interviewed, and that a qualified person should scrutinize these questions. Results from the pilot study provided useful feedback for designing the case study. The changes included rephrasing some of the translated questions. These items were highlighted, altered and double-checked for any connotative meanings. Consequently, the piloting stage set the ground for conducting both phases of the current study in Arabic.

#### *3.2 Participant*

Students of the present study are male Emirati students who have previously attended governmental institutions, where for the most part traditional methods of instruction were strongly reinforced. They are registered in the Foundation program at a Federal college in the UAE. The classrooms are adequately designed and equipped for teaching and learning to take place. The curriculum is taught to second language learners within a

student-centred learning environment that encourages respect for students, their culture, and traditions. The teacher utilizes various educational technological driven resources to ensure that effective and innovative instruction methodologies are employed. Students taught in these classrooms are also provided with individual pedagogical assistance whenever it is needed.

### 3.3 Sampling Procedures and Data Analysis

#### Phase 1

The main aim of Phase 1 was to highlight the classes that displayed the highest level of anxiety as shown by the use of FLCAS. In order to achieve this purpose, the FLCAS was given to all Foundation level male students. A sample of 278 students in 18 classes representing the total number of classes of both level one and two in the Foundation program completed the 33-items FLCAS. Of the participants, 119 (43%) were level One students, and 159 (57%) were level Two students. This study showed that the mean of anxiety scores measured by the FLCAS for the entire group of 278 subjects in phase one was 86.4958 and the range was 62-139, indicating moderate levels of anxiety among the surveyed students.

#### Phase 2

Classes that exhibited the highest level of anxiety as measured by the FLCAS in phase one were purposely chosen to participate in the second phase of the study. The rationale was to investigate the complexity of this phenomenon through the voices of students who scored considerably high on the FLCAS. Table 1 presents the academic levels of the participants that participated in Phase 2 of the case study.

Table 1. Phase 2-number of students in level one and level two

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Level 1	25	44.6	44.6	44.6
	Level 2	31	55.4	55.4	100.0
	Total	56	100.0	100.0	

The distribution of participants based on item rating is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of participants across (four classes) based on item rating and la total score

Item Rating	LA Total Scores	N (Percentage)
1-2(non-anxious)	33-66	11 (19.6%)
2-3(lightly anxious)	67-99	18 (32%)
3-4 ( moderately anxious)	100-132	23(41%)
4-5 (very anxious)	133-165	4 (7.4%)

The data shows, 32% of the students fell into the slightly anxious group and 48% of them are moderately anxious or very anxious.

Focus group interviews were conducted with students who had participated in the quantitative aspect of Phase 2 of the research design. Four FG were conducted; each group comprised 13 /12 /14/ 11 participants respectively.

The table below indicates the number and code of participants in each class who participated in the focus interviews.

Table 3. Focus group, participants and codes

Classes	Participants' Codes
Class1(Level 1)	S1A, S1B,S1C, S1D, S1E, S1F, S1G, S1H, S1J, S1K, S1L, S1M, SIN
Class 2(Level 1)	S2A, S2B,S2C, S2D, S2E, S2F, S2G, S2H, S2J, S2K, S2L, S2M
Class 3(Level 2)	S3A, S3B,S3C, S3D, S3E, S3F, S3G, S3H, S3J, S3K, S3L, S3M, S3N, S3O
Class 4(Level 2)	S4A, S4B,S4C, S4D, S4E, S4F, S4G, S4H, S4J, S4K, S4L

#### 4. Results

Descriptive analysis and thematic analysis were used to analyze the derived data from the FLCAS and the FG interviews respectively.

##### 4.1 Results of Quantitative Analysis

The derived results from the FLCAS succeeded in giving a preliminary understanding of the nature of students' language anxiety. The finding from the FLCAS showed some of the variables that are indicative of relatively high level of language anxiety among Foundation level male Emirati students. These variables are highlighted in Table 4.

Table 4. Variables that are indicative of relatively high level of language anxiety among foundation level male emirati students

Items indicative of anxiety	%	Mean
16-Anxiety about the language class even if I am well prepared for them.	60	2.6964
21- The more I study for a test the more confused I become.	55	2.6964
10- worrying about the consequences of failing foreign language class	54	2.6250
8-Lack of ease during tests in language classes.	52	3.1964
20- Feel the pounding of the heart when being called on in language class	41	3.3036
18- Lack of confidence when speaking English in class.	40	2.6786
17- Feel like not going to language class.	39	3.3571
26- Feel more tense and nervous in language class than in any other classes	35	3.3036

Five key findings merged from the FLCAS. The first of these findings is related to the students' general attitude and feelings towards the language class. Despite their considerable anxiety and feeling of apprehension, a moderately high percentage (79%) of the students would not mind at all taking additional L2 classes. This may indicate that students are motivated to learn a language.

A second finding has to do with the students' academic performance in the classroom. A considerable percentage of the students are excessively worried about their performance and the consequences of failing their L2 classes.

The third finding that emerged from the data defines language anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety experienced in the second language classroom and which is associated with uneasiness and physiological symptoms.

An additional finding emerged after further scrutiny of the students' responses on the FLCAS highlighted a number of fears and worries related to language anxiety. The greatest fears as indicated by the majority of the students and which may be considered as potential sources of language anxiety are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Summary of students' apprehension and concerns

Apprehensions and Concerns	%
27- I get anxious and confused when I am speaking in my language class. (speaking)	67
4- It frightens me when I do not understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language. (comprehension problems)	59
10- I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.(consequences of failing)	54
19- I worry the language teacher will correct every mistake I make. ( error correction)	52
30- I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak a foreign language. (rules to be learnt)	50
31- I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language. (peers' scorn)	34

Additional key findings from FLCAS are associated with the effects of language anxiety on second language learners. These effects take into account the following: (1) self-confidence, (2) academic and cognitive effects and (3) behavioural and psychological effects. Almost 65% of the students feel that the other students are better than them in L2. The hampering effect of language anxiety on students' cognitive ability emerged through the students' responses: 44 % think about other things in the class. Forty-eight percent claim that they tend to forget things they know, while 55% of the students indicated that the more they study the more confused they become. The third and essential effect of language anxiety is related to the physiological and behavioural reactions of the students. Physical reactions are evident: almost 50% experience heart pounding and trembling. Behavioural effects are displayed by more than half of the students who claim that preparation is not enough while 39% feel like not going to class.

#### 4.2 Qualitative Analysis

The purpose of the present section is to provide an in depth analysis of language anxiety through the use of a more focused lens that takes into account the students accounts of language anxiety under the spectrum of the classroom environment. Thematic analysis of the FG interviews succeeded in extracting a number of categories and subcategories that shed a light on the students' perception of the phenomenon under study. These categories include the following: (1) causes of language anxiety, takes into account the nature of language learning; (2) effect; relates to the impact of language anxiety on the students' academic, social and cognitive abilities; (3) manifestations of language anxiety and (4) the coping strategies that some of the students resort to in anxiety ridden situations in the classroom and the strategies that are deemed as helpful in alleviating this anxiety.

##### 4.2.1 Sources of Language Anxiety

The roots of language anxiety as extracted from the FG findings are grouped under the following main themes: (1) teacher characteristics; (2) pedagogical practices; (3) fear of making errors; (4) test taking and (5) previous experience of learning an additional Language. These themes emerged from the analysis process.

##### *Teacher-related Factors*

The findings from the students' FG indicated that certain teacher- related factors might play a role in the emergence of feeling and uneasiness towards the English Language class. These factors include teachers' attitude, fast speech rate and accent, native versus non-native teachers and attention bias.

About two –third of the participants indicated that if the teacher is very serious or is in a bad mood this may have a negative toll on their psychological well-being and which ultimately leads to feelings of discomfort and agitation on their part. One of the participants indicated that if the teacher is very authoritarian in the classroom *"this will generally increase my apprehension level and would bring back not-so- happy memories of my previous bad experience at school."*

The fast speech rate of some of the teachers was attributed as a hurdle in understanding what is discussed in the classroom. Participant S1K indicated that lack of comprehension might be attributed to the fast speech rate that some teachers use in the classroom. He emphasized:

*"When teachers speak in a very fast manner, I find it very difficult to comprehend what she is saying, but with a slower pace I can get a general idea of what she is trying to tell us."*

I asked whether the teacher's accent is also related to this issue. Most of participants indicated that the teachers' accent and speed of their talk has an effect on their comprehension level. In this regard, M3S recalls:

*“I had once a college teacher who spoke in a thick incomprehensible accent ... I was not able to comprehend a word she was saying, attending class was a waste of time.... I eventually changed classes because of this teacher’s accent”.*

The preference/ non-preference for native vs. non-native English language speakers were brought up by about one-third of the participants. In this regard, the participants provided various explanations for their preferred choice of a particular teacher. Examples of their comments are cited below:

*“ I strongly prefer native English language teachers because they have more experience teaching students... my teacher taught in many countries and he is very knowledgeable....in addition his accent is amazing, I want to be able to speak like him one day” ( S2B non- anxious student).*

*“I feel more at ease with a non-native teacher ...simply because he/she can clarify any ambiguities through translating or re-explaining in Arabic... This is especially helpful for vocabulary and grammar concepts.” (S1A anxious student)*

I find the discrepancy between anxious and non- anxious students’ preference of a particular teacher an interesting finding in this study. Non-anxious students might feel that a non-native speaker of the English language is better at clarifying any concept that they are finding a difficulty in understanding.

#### *Attention Bias*

Attention bias also emerged as a potential source of anxiety among the students indicated by eight of the interviewed students. One of the students emphasized the issue of teachers’ divided attention, which could be related to their feeling of nervousness. Teacher must show equal attention to all students and favouritism in the classroom must be strongly avoided.

Participant S3D (an anxious student) indicated that teachers’ attention which is usually directed towards the bright students in the classroom, increases anxiety among some students. This divided attention, he further emphasized makes some of the students feel apprehensive and affirms their somehow predisposed belief that they are unworthy of the teachers’ attention because they are not bright enough. I asked him to reveal more about this concern. Participant S3D responded:

*“Lack of attention from the teacher can lead to lack of attention in the language class from my part. Teachers seem to be more interested in students who stand out than they are in others who do not... you know those who always give the correct answers to the teacher’s questions. S3D further emphasizes: I do not like it when the teacher has a favourite student in the classroom... he is usually the person who always gets the highest marks and is always ready to answer the teacher’s questions... this makes...feels worthless because I am a student with lesser ability...”.*

This inclination by some of the teachers might indicate that they are at times prone to select high achievers as a safety measure over not choosing students with limited linguistic resources. Finding a justification for teachers’ behaviours might indicate that they are overly sensitive to students’ feelings and as such, they resort to this mechanism in an effort to diminish the feeling of embarrassments that might arise if the students fail to provide the correct answer. However, this behaviour may have a negative effect on some students’ self-esteem and may reaffirm preconceived beliefs of self-worthlessness and inadequacy in language proficiency, especially, when this biased attention is directed towards “bright” outspoken students in the classroom.

#### *Pedagogical and Instructional Practices*

Around forty percent of the interviewed students described the teaching style of their present teachers as innovative in nature. In this sense, teachers use various innovative strategies and interesting activities in the classroom, which are in most cases technologically focused.

*“We study through the use of many interactive activities from different sites... We also use Smart Boards to do these activities... English class is fun at times.”*

*“... Teacher uses various activities on Black Board Vista that makes the lesson very interesting ... and it helps me to stay focused in the classroom.”*

Despite the use of innovative teaching strategies in the L2 classrooms, a number of pedagogical practices were identified by the students as anxiety provoking at the college. These practices seem to affect the students understanding and participation in L2 context. These include the following; (1) pace and speed; (2) listening comprehension activities and (3) speaking the target language.

### *Pace and Speed*

The students' 'inability to understand and follow teachers' instructions in the classroom were depicted as prominent features of many L2 learners' experiences. The students' FG provided insights into students' concerns about understanding the target language. The interviewed students both anxious and non-anxious indicated that intensive or fast-paced lessons could increase their anxiety. Students are worried about being left behind because they are not able to catch up with the pace of the lesson, which ultimately leads to frustration due to their inability to fully comprehend the given lesson. The majority of the participants who were interviewed indicated that they face a tremendous amount of difficulties in understanding what is being said in the classroom.

Participant S4B (anxious student) described his problem as an extremely frustrating experience:

*"I cannot understand what is going in the classroom; I have to ask my classmates about what is being explained during class, or whether there is a project or test ...this can very frustrating because I do not trust my listening abilities."*

The majority of the participants\_ who were interviewed indicated that they face a tremendous amount of difficulties in understanding what is being said in the classroom, and many of these students indicated that this difficulty contribute to anxiety as indicated by 65 % of the students who completed the FLCAS.

### *Listening Activities*

Almost all of the interviewed students stated that listening to a text is a major source of anxiety. They have attributed this anxiety to lack of listening and comprehension strategies. In the words of one of the participants:

*"Listening to a text terrifies me. I keep on hearing the sound of drumming in my ears, lose track, panic and in many cases give a wrong response to the questions... I do not know how to get the main idea..."*

The students' performance in listening comprehension exams was cited as problematic and they always live in the fear of failing their exams. Participant S3O (non-anxious student) shared his experience during a listening comprehension test. He blamed his difficulties on the fast pace of the scripted audios and because of this he ended up submitting a blank sheet of paper.

Another student reported a further example of students' difficulty in this area:

*"Listening to an audio text during a listening exam is of great concern to me, even though the text is repeated twice, I end up leaving many of the questions unanswered..."*

In general, the majority of the students indicated that their listening skills improved over time, but the feeling of anxiety generated by listening tasks has not been resolved. The listening, and related comprehension difficulties, which these students face may be attributed to a number of possible causes. Chiefly teachers' accent, the speed at which they speak and students having limited vocabulary in relation to the content of the spoken language. The findings from my study are similar to those of Aida (1994) and McIntyre and Gardner (1999) who found that an inability to comprehend the teacher in the classroom poses a serious problem for many learners.

### *Speaking in Target Language*

All of the students indicated that speaking in class is the least likable activity but while they said, it is the most frightening experience at the beginning of the term this feeling diminishes to a certain extent over time. However, none of the students stated that they have yet overcome this problem. The students' FG also highlighted evidence of students' communication apprehension, which also echoes the findings derived from FLCAS, which highlighted evidence of students' communication apprehension

The majority of the students indicated that speaking in class is the activity they like least. Classroom discussion was also indicated as an activity that many students dread in the English language classroom. Participant S2A explained the problem for him:

*"In most cases I feel as though I am lagging behind and unable to keep up with the discussion."*

This may indicate that that the students' apprehension is subject to both the act of speaking and that of sustaining the flow of the conversation with others.

Fear of making presentations was also cited as a major concern for many participants. Participant S1D (anxious student) brought up this concern and the rest readily agreed that it is their worst fear. Participant S3O indicated giving presentations is very frightening. He stated:

*"I feel very worried if I have to prepare for a presentation... even though I usually read out the presentation from my papers ... my hearts beats very fast, my hands tremble and I seem to lose my hearing and attention abilities."*



Thus, it seems that the fear of presentations is a common feeling among anxious and non-anxious students.

Additional sources of anxiety cited by the majority of the participants were the fear of being called on and waiting for their turn in answering the teachers' questions. Many of the participants claimed that this feeling has not diminished with time and have described it as very 'dreadful'. Their response indicated general discomfort with this classroom related procedure. Participant S2M indicated that he always keeps quiet in the classroom and feels very nervous when the teacher asks students to participate or when he calls on students to answer questions. Examples of students' responses:

S3M (an anxious student) points out:

*"I am always quite in the classroom and feel at ease when the teacher is lecturing. However, I become very anxious when the teacher asks questions or call on me to answer the question, my mind goes completely blank and I only hear incomprehensible voices in my ears. I stutter, give any answer to save face, and feel ill at ease afterwards."*

S2A stated:

*"I feel very anxious when I have to speak in the class simply because I am not used to doing so and second, I always fear that the teacher will yell at me and this is very embarrassing...even though I know that my teacher will never do so"*.

Consequently, the students only speak or volunteer answers when they are sure that whatever they have to say is correct. The comments from participants S1B below further support the students' 'uneasiness with respect to speaking:

*"I hardly ever speak in the classroom, I do not even like to volunteer answers."*

Student S1D said:

*"I do not speak in the classroom, I am so worried that I will give a wrong answer and be considered as not as smart as the rest in the class."*

SM1 revealed:

*"I am inclined to stay silent even though I know the answer to the teacher's question"*.

The findings are consistent with many studies of language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Koch and Terrell, 1991; Price, 1988, 1991; Young 1990, 1991, 1992).

#### *Fear of Making Errors*

Fear of making errors was profound for 10 students who reported that they refrain from any proactive participation in lessons.

Even asking the teacher for clarification is avoided during class time as participant SG2 explained:

*"I want to ask my teacher the question... I rehearse the question many times in my mind but was never able to gather my courage to do so...thinking that the question is unimportant or that I might sound not so bright if I ask a question that sounds silly or obvious to many and as a result I do not ask questions."*

SM4 said that he feels very embarrassed and humiliated if the teacher corrects his mistakes in front of his peers in the classroom.

In the same line, student S1D said:

*"I do not speak in the classroom, I am so worried that I will give a wrong answer and be considered as not as smart as the rest in the class."*

Participant S2L also indicated:

*"I stay quite because I think I am the weakest in the classroom and all the other students are better than me... my classmates laugh at everything I try to say...it is so embarrassing... I know I must participate because it helps in practicing my speaking skills ...I do not unless I am called upon by my teacher, in this case I only say a word or two... and feel angry and embarrassed when the others laugh at my attempts, but I do not show my anger... I join my classmates in laughter..."*

The majority of the students (anxious and non-anxious) also indicated that their peers usually try to correct them by whispering out the right answer or writing down the correct answer on a piece of paper for the student to read.

Fear of negative evaluation seemed to be a major concern to many students. This fear was also picked up by items in FLCAS. Based on FLCAS results, 52% of the students fear that the teacher will correct each mistake

and 34% fear that their classmates will make fun of them. It is assumed that some of the anxious students of the present case study are hesitant to make mistakes and consider speaking with an excellent accent as important. These concerns would most likely inhibit their enthusiasm to communicate in the L2 classroom. In the same vein, these results may also provide an explanation as to some of the potential causes behind the students' inhibition and lack of participation. These results may provide an explanation as to some of the potential causes behind the students' inhibition and lack of participation as evident by the results from FLCAS, whereby 67% of the students express a fear of speaking and 39% of the students worry about making mistakes.

These findings may also be related to a cultural issue. As mentioned in the literature review the fear of ‘*losing face*’ is a pronounced cultural issue in Arabian societies, thus making errors may result in the fear of being looked upon as less capable than others.

#### *Test-Taking*

Almost half of the interviewees indicated that tests cause anxiety and yet testing is a regular occurrence in their L2 class. Nearly all of the participants indicated that test taking is very stressful. Participant S3M indicated that speaking tests are stressful. He stated:

*“Waiting for my turn can make me feel sometimes like running away from the class... thinking that I might not be able to utter a word when my turn eventually comes”.*

Participant S1B stated:

*“I feel very nervous when I have a speaking test; I feel overwhelmed and attempt to memorize the given dialogues, and sentences word by word... but during the test I find myself stuck because I cannot remember some of the words and phrases hence my sentence sound gibberish and make no sense”.*

The students' comments reveal that both speaking and taking oral tests are a source of apprehension in EFL classrooms.

The students' comments reveal that both speaking and taking oral tests are a source of apprehension in EFL classrooms. These findings echo the findings derived from FLCAS whereby 54% of the students worry about the consequences of failing.

Participant S4D echoes his peers' concerns. He explained why:

*“I study hard for the test...but during the test I forget the sentences and I even try to translate some of the words but the results were never good... I end up failing most of my speaking exams.”*

These findings are in line with the result of the FLCAS component of test anxiety, whereby 52% of the students exhibit a considerable amount of fear in test taking situations. Similarly, 55% of the students report that advance preparations for tests does not in any way alleviate this problem but on the contrary increases their confusion as measured by the FLCAS.

#### *Previous Experience of Learning an Additional Language*

The majority of the students stated that the present classroom environment in general is very welcoming and relaxing and that the teachers try their best to make the students feel at ease. Their current teachers are described as very friendly and helpful (n=34). In contrast, previous school experiences have been, for some, less positive. Many of the students attributed their anxiety to two main causes related to their previous schooling experiences in which traditional practices were upheld: (1) an educational system that does not put great emphasis on student participation (n=16) and (2) the harsh manner of error corrections (n=19). Their earlier experiences were portrayed with a rather negative tone. They believe that their rather dreadful previous experience at school might have played a role in their current feeling of uneasiness in the English language classroom. In this respect, the quantitative tool used in this study was unable to measure the impact of past learning experiences on the development of language anxiety among students. Conversely, the FG data provided strong evidence that prior learning experiences can shape students' attitudes towards learning an additional language. Therefore, it can be inferred that students' ‘anxiety and ‘erroneous’ beliefs might be a remnant of their past experience in traditional schools.

#### 4.2.2 Effects of Language Anxiety on Students' Performance

The students reported a number of perceived effects of language anxiety on their academic performance. All of the anxious students in the study believed that anxiety affected their academic achievement in English. One of the anxious participants said:

*“Anxiety leads to feeling of uneasiness and frustration in the classroom. This feeling acts as a wall which blocks*

*comprehension.*”

To give a further emphasis on the role of language anxiety on students' academic performance in the classroom; the finding from the FG showed that students are very apprehensive with respect to classroom participation. In this regard, students with high level of anxiety are more inclined to refrain from engaging in communicational activities in the classroom. An anxious participant stated:

*“Participation is greatly diminished when one is feeling anxious.”*

This idle status in the classroom may also have a negative effect on the students' academic progress in the program.

One of the anxious students' said that he dropped the course twice because of his unexplained fear of the language classroom. In this sense, anxiety can lead to attaining lower grades due to lack of participation, dropping the course and, in worst-case scenarios, failing the course altogether.

The finding supports Clément, Gardner, & Smythe's report (1977, 1980: cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999) that there is a negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and achievement e.g. the higher the anxiety, the lower the performance.

#### 4.2.3 Manifestation of Language Anxiety

Students were asked to describe how their language anxiety was manifested. The explanations that the students provided could be organized under two main categories: psycho-physiological and behavioural indicators.

Feelings of anxiety were described as being manifested in physical symptoms such as tremors, rapid heart palpitations, sweating and blushing. Many students worry that their teacher and peers would notice these physical symptoms, which served to increase their anxiety level further.

Examples of students' responses include:

S3M indicted:

*“My hands tremble; my knees become weak and even my voice shakes.”*

S1M (an anxious student) reported:

*“I can feel the beating of my hearts and buzzing sounds in my ears”.*

The reports on physical manifestations of anxiety amongst the interview participants corroborate the FLCAS data: 53% of the students said they tremble when they know that they are going to be called on to speak in their language class and 41% of the students feel their heart pounding.

Behavioural manifestations of language anxiety cited by the students include skipping classes, coming late to class, hiding behind classmates, avoiding eye contact, making jokes, laughing or displaying a 'not so serious' attitude in the classroom or engaging in off task activities in the classroom.

S4K (an anxious student) indicated:

*“I play on my laptop instead of completing an on-line listening task or I give the impression of completing an activity while my mind wanders to things unrelated to what is going on in class”.*

Besides engaging in off-task activities, many students reported that an additional manifestation of language anxiety is not participating or reluctance to participate in classroom discussions.

The FLCAS also provided evidence of behavioural manifestations of language anxiety by the tendency to skip classes - reported by 39% of the students.

Participant S3G (an anxious student) indicated:

*“I sit in the back row; hiding behind my classmate's back praying that my teacher will not notice me.”*

Incidentally, many students resort to the following behaviours: skipping classes, not studying or preparing for the class or succumbing to their anxious feelings, which are usually manifested in different ways.

#### 4.2.4. Students' Recommendations on Having a Less Stressful English Language Class

Most of the participants suggested a number of activities and strategies to make the English language classroom less stressful. There was a focus on the teacher-student relationship. The students interviewed felt that a teacher could reduce learners' anxiety by (a) being friendly (b) being supportive and tolerant (c) having a sense of humour and (d) speaking slowly. Pedagogical practices that would help to reduce levels of anxiety were cited as group work, and clear instructions about tasks.

Most of the participants (n=34) indicated that being informed beforehand about the lesson objectives would help to reduce their fear of the English language classroom. There were also calls for less use of tests and/or quizzes, and more use of on-line interactive activities.

However, Participant S1C indicated that none of these situation-specific ideas would help him overcome his nervousness in the classroom, because his fear is deeply embedded. Based on the student's account, it is evident that his apprehensions could be categorized as a trait anxiety in its outlook.

He further elaborates:

*"My teachers are patient and supportive; my friends are helpful, yet the fear is there ... I do not think I am smart enough to learn this language. Many students learn it faster than I.... I have been studying English for the past three years ... I am still confused when to use the verb 'to be' or verb 'to have'... You see, I am helpless."*

The respondents indicated a number of strategies that they sometimes use to avoid and/or cope with feelings of anxiety. These included being well prepared (n=11), positive thinking (n=1), avoidance behaviour (n=9), and seeking the help of their peers and teachers (n=16). Some of the participants indicated that coming prepared to class may help in reducing their apprehension, but preparation does not make the associated symptoms of anxiety disappear completely. Participant S3L indicated:

*"...When I come prepared for class I feel more confident motivated and more at ease in the classroom ... when my teacher asks me a question... I do get the jitters but they are usually less than when I come unprepared to class."*

The FLCAS also revealed that 60% of the students still feel anxious in spite preparing for the class. Sixty-five percent also indicate that they get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which they have not prepared in advance. Thus, it seems that preparation might slightly help in alleviating the feeling of apprehension but does not in any way eradicate its presence.

Participant S3E (anxious student) indicated that at times, he does not know what to prepare for class and he ends up studying hard for a lesson that the teacher does not teach the next day.

He further stated:

*"Why bother studying when we always have surprises in the class?"*

S3M disagreed with S3E, indicated that they always know what they are going to study, and blamed participant S3E for not paying sufficient attention in the classroom. Participant S3E was quick in defending himself and he stated:

*"I sometimes do not understand what the teacher is saying ...."*

In addition, the students indicated a number of coping strategies for dealing with problems related to understanding what is happening in the classroom. If they missed an important piece of information, they check with one of their classmates or ask their teachers after class in order to make sure that they have not missed anything important that might be included on the test or for an upcoming project or task.

Only one participant indicated that he adopts positive thinking and self-encouraging statements as a strategy to cope with his apprehension. Self-encouraging statements included "I can do it"; "I must pass my English class".

Many of the students across the classes also emphasized the significant role of their teachers and peers in reducing their anxious feelings in the classroom. Some of the students also reported sharing their feelings with their classmates, but rarely with their teachers.

## 5. Discussion

Using qualitative data alongside the quantitative data from FLCAS enabled a deeper and more nuanced understanding of language anxiety from the perspective of the English language learner. According to Ghaith, Shaaban, and Harkous (2007) research into the effectiveness of teaching and learning has highlighted the importance of classroom climate as a key determinant of learners' achievement and psychosocial adjustment. The participants' responses in this study are consistent with such finding. Most of the interviewed (anxious) students claimed that a stressful classroom atmosphere made them highly anxious. At the same time, there was some evidence that current apprehension may be partly a result of previous learning experiences and accumulated beliefs and attitudes about English language learning, in general.

The students' interview data provided strong evidence that prior learning experiences can shape students' attitudes towards learning an additional language. The majority of the students interviewed stated that, in general, their current language classroom environment is very welcoming and relaxing and that the teachers try their best

to make the students feel at ease. Previous school experiences had, for some, have been less positive. Two key issues were identified. First, the education system-prior to the reforms in the Emirates did not place great emphasis on student participation and therefore being required to interact with the teacher and with peers was an unfamiliar experience. Second, their teachers in the past might have responded in a harsh manner to their errors. This might have led to some students' reluctant participation in their current L2 classroom.

### 6. Limitations of the Present Study

A primary limitation of the research reported in this study is the size of the participants. This was one case study undertaken in one higher education institution in one country, the UAE. It is not therefore possible to make generalisations from my findings –Although, generalisation was not my aim. My aim was to develop a deeper, professional understanding of language anxiety in order to inform my own practice and hopefully to prompt others' to think about their own practice. In hindsight, this study might also help educators in understanding the occurrence of this phenomenon in HEI in the Gulf region where students share similar cultural and pedagogical backgrounds to the participants in this study.

### 7. Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, I set forward a number of recommendations for future research. Others interested in this field may wish to explore the extent to which my own findings are transferable to other contexts: either in HEIs within the UAE or in other countries. In addition, I undertook my study only with male students; it could be interesting to explore the extent to which female students exhibit language anxiety and whether the triggers are the same or different, just in case there is a gendered dimension. Other studies may also wish to explore further whether situation-specific anxiety exists in other subject areas and, if so, whether it is similar or different in terms of its causes, its manifestations, and effective strategies for preventing or reducing it.

### 8. Conclusions

This study has provided valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of male students in a context, a higher education institution in the UAE, which has not previously been a key focus for research into language anxiety and its findings, should be helpful to teachers and curriculum developers in the UAE.

Many previous studies of language anxiety have used quantitative measures to investigate the phenomenon. In employing a case study approach, which used a combination of quantitative measures and qualitative data collection tools, this research has been able to provide a richer understanding of language anxiety than would have otherwise been gained through quantitative means alone.

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