

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY: THE CASE OF AMERICAN STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS IN MOROCCO

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been identified as one of the major obstacles to acquisition and fluent production of foreign languages (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furham, 2008; Williams & Andrade, 2008). A lot of research has been conducted on the topic of FLA (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) and students who study abroad (e.g., Davidson, 2010; Kinginger, 2008), but there have been very few studies that focus on the relationship between studying abroad and affective factors such as language learning anxiety (e.g., Allen & Herron, 2003; Lee, 2018; Thompson & Lee, 2014). This study analyses the profiles of study abroad learners of Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) in Morocco. A total of 146 American students answered the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al, 1986) and completed a background questionnaire to collect information regarding their amount of experience abroad. Findings showed that participants experienced an average level of FLA. The main factors underlying FLA were Arabic class performance anxiety and negative feelings towards Arabic. Suggestions about the best strategies to reduce anxiety are offered.

Keyword: Arabic, American Students, Anxiety, Study Abroad

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been many studies that examined the benefits of study abroad (SA) in terms of linguistic gains including the different skills, namely listening (e.g., Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; Meara, 1994; Dyson, 1988; Ginsberg, Robin & Wheeling, 1992; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Kinginger 2008; Davidson, 2010), speaking (e.g., Wood, 2007; Trenchs-Parera & Newman, 2009; Serrano,

Tragant, & Llanes, 2012; Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Di Silvio, Donovan & Malone, 2014), reading (Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1995; Briggs, 2016; Dewey, 2004; Fraser, 2002; Lapkin, Hart & Swain, 1995; Kinginger, 2008), and writing (e.g., Adams, 2006; Freed, So, & Lazar, 2003; Pe´rez-Vidal & Barquin, 2014). However, few scholars have examined the impact of study abroad on affective factors such as anxiety (Lee, 2108) in spite of an early call by Allen and Herron (2003) for the need to conduct research exploring the relationship of experience abroad and foreign language anxiety (FLA). Study abroad is a sojourn in a host country where students are enrolled in an institution taking language and content courses mostly in the target language (Isabelli-García, Bown, Plews, & Dewey, 2018). The current study is an attempt to fill the gap in the literature about data-driven evidence on the affective outcomes of study abroad through the anxiety profiles of American learners of Arabic as a foreign language (AFL).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety

Gardener and MacIntyre (1993) defined FLA as “the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a foreign language with which the individual is not fully proficient” (p.5). Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FLA experienced in the foreign language classroom as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) aver that FLA should be distinguished from other types of anxiety such as general anxiety and state anxiety. It is unique to the foreign language context.

Previous studies that examined underlying causes of FLA have yielded different results in terms of the number of factors, varying from two (e.g., Park 2014; Yang 2012) to six findings, (Phongsa et al., 2017) because each study was conducted in a different educational and linguistic setting. One of the most commonly identified factor was classroom performance anxiety (Thompson & Lee, 2012; Thompson, 2015; Phongsa et al., 2017; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016). This factor includes items that reveal learners' anxiety is triggered by fear of negative evaluation, either by the instructor or classmates, and fear to participate in class especially when not prepared. The second factor that was identified by more than one study was lack of confidence to communicate with native speakers with the target language (Thompson & Lee, 2012; Thompson, 2015; Phongsa et al., 2017; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016). Other factors identified in previous studies include negative attitudes towards the language (Phongsa et al., 2017). This fear largely resulted from worrying about the consequences of failing the language course. A new factor labeled 'fear of ambiguity' has recently emerged in a few studies involving EFL students (Thompson & Lee, 2012; Thompson, 2015; Phongsa et al., 2017; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016). This factor is triggered by learners' inability to understand, for example, what the teacher is correcting.

2.2. Previous research on FLA and SA

The relationship between FLA and SA has not received enough attention from scholars in the field of second language learning. This is probably because it is difficult to control for the huge number of independent variables inherent to the SA experience (Isabelli-García, Bown, Plews, & Dewey, 2018).

One of the first studies that investigated FLA and SA was conducted by Allen and Herron (2003) whose study aimed at measuring the effect of a six-week French program on students' integrative motivation and language anxiety. A sample of 25 French undergraduates answered the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery and FLCAS. The findings indicated that while there was no significant change in integrative motivation, the participants' levels of FLA decreased.

In another study involving French as a foreign language, 93 learners of European and Asian origin, Dewaele, Comanaru and Faraco (2015) examined the effect of a

two to four week course on learners' FLA and Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Their results showed that learners reported a decrease in their levels of FLA and an increase in WTC. No link was found between the length of sojourn and FLA.

An experiment that aimed at examining the short-, long-term and longitudinal effects of SA on 70 advanced EFL learners at a university in Spain was conducted by Trenchs-Parera and Juan-Garau (2014). The participants were bilingual speakers of Catalan and Spanish who spent a three-month sojourn in an English-speaking country (mostly in the UK). Results showed that learners' anxiety levels towards speaking English decreased. There was correlation between the learners' lower anxiety levels and their linguistic self-confidence. The authors concluded that high perceived linguistic competence helped participants communicate with native speakers with less anxiety.

In a more recent study, Lee (2018) investigated the impact of SA experience on FLA, international posture, and L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC). The participants were 69 EFL female learners enrolled in English courses at a private college in South Korea. The overwhelming majority of the participants (about 87%) had a short SA experience with less than a month in four different SA programs. Data showed that the learners' levels of FLA decreased and fostered their international posture and L2 WTC. The author attributed the positive impact of SA, despite its short duration, to the fact that learners had regular interaction with target language speakers from the beginning of the sojourn. A quick adjustment to the target language environment has positively impacted learners' gains from the SA experience.

3. THE CURRENT STUDY

This study seeks to investigate the effect of study abroad experience and Arabic self-rated proficiency on foreign language classroom anxiety among American students who completed an intensive Arabic language program in Morocco. Particularly, this study measures levels of the FL reading anxiety experienced by both male and female students. It also examines the underlying factors of FLA among a group of American AFL students. The following research questions are addressed:

RQ1. What are the levels of foreign language anxiety among AFL learners?

RQ2. Do male and female students experience similar anxiety levels?

RQ3. What are the underlying factors of FLA experienced by AFL learners?

4. METHODS

4.1. Participants

Participants were 146 American college-level students (95 females; 49 males) who were placed in three private institutions for 4-week, 8-week, and 12-week Arabic intensive programs in Morocco. The majority of students (about 92%) were between 18 and 24 years old. About 3% of participants had at least one SA experience in another Arab speaking country prior to their sojourn in Morocco. Most students were majoring in political science, economics and international relations. Some students had double majors with Arabic as one of the majors. They came from universities all over the United States, and their levels of Arabic ranged from Novice to Advanced. No minimum level of Arabic was required for students to qualify for these SA programs. Students took language along with content classes such as literature, Arab media, and North African politics among a wide variety of courses offered in all three institutions.

4.2. Instruments

Background questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to elicit participants' information about age, gender, major, and their previous study abroad experience and their sojourn in Morocco. It included self-ratings of proficiency in Arabic including the four skills namely: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Participants' Arabic Self-perceived Proficiency Levels are reported in Table 1.

Foreign Language Anxiety scale. An adapted version of the FLCAS was used to measure anxiety levels among participants. The phrase foreign language was replaced with Arabic language because students in the current study were learning AFL. FLCAS is a self-reported measure of learners' anxiety in the foreign language classroom designed by Horwitz et al. (1986).

Table 1. Arabic Self-Perceived Proficiency Levels.

Skill	Mean	SD
Listening (max = 10)	3.72	2.14
Speaking (max = 10)	3.71	2.10
Reading (max = 10)	3.92	2.18
Writing (max = 10)	4.07	2.37
Total (max = 40)	15.42	

It consists of 33 statements. Each item on the scale is rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The mean scores in the FLCAS range from 33 to 165, with lower scores indicating lower anxiety while higher scores indicate higher anxiety. Twenty-four of the items are positively worded; nine are negatively worded. In the present investigation, the FLCAS had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability index of .83.

4.3. Procedure

Data were collected by means of an online questionnaire. Participants who volunteered to answer the survey were briefed about the purpose of the study. They were assured of the confidentiality of all the background information they shared. Completion of the questionnaire was anonymous. Data was collected over the course of three semesters since the number of students of each SA program was rather small.

4.4. Data analysis

In order to analyze the collected data, descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' responses. An independent t-test was conducted to examine any statistically significant difference between the FLCAS scores of male and female participants. Furthermore, in order to detect the underlying factors of FLA among AFL learners, Varimax rotated exploratory analysis was performed.

5. RESULTS

RQ1. What is the level of FLA among study abroad students of Arabic?

To measure the level of FLA among the participants of this study, means and deviations for participants'

responses to each FLACS item were calculated (see Table 1). The mean language anxiety score for the seventy-three participants was 92.14 (SD = 14.17). As displayed in Table 2, the range of scores in the present study was 59-130. Following Arnaiz and Guillén's (2012) scale, participants had three levels of anxiety. The overwhelming majority of students (96.15%) experienced low to average levels of FLA. About 15% had low levels of anxiety and about 81% experienced medium levels of FLA. Less than 4% of students suffered from high levels of anxiety (see Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the participants' responses to the FLCAS

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my Arabic class.	3.13	1.158
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in Arabic class.*	3.14	1.218
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in Arabic class.	2.28	1.167
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in Arabic.	2.60	1.130
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more Arabic classes.*	4.14	.994
6. During Arabic class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the Arabic course.	2.87	1.152
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at Arabic than I am.	3.41	1.224
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my Arabic class.	2.94	1.025
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in Arabic class.	2.88	1.180
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my Arabic class.	3.16	1.353
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over Arabic classes.*	2.89	1.096
12. In Arabic class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	3.00	1.174
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my Arabic class.	2.45	1.070
14. I would not be nervous speaking Arabic with native speakers.*	2.81	1.194
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.12	1.099
16. Even if I am well prepared for Arabic class, I feel anxious about it.	2.68	1.126
17. I often feel like not going to my Arabic class.	2.20	1.142
18. I feel confident when I speak in Arabic class.*	3.17	.964
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.32	1.015
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in Arabic.	2.26	1.127
21. The more I study for an Arabic test, the more confused I get.	1.87	.745
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for Arabic class.*	2.39	.908
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.	3.07	1.167
24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking Arabic in front of other students.	2.88	1.177
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	2.71	1.180
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my Arabic class than in my other classes.	2.79	1.180
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my Arabic class.	2.69	1.054
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.*	3.37	.895
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the Arabic teacher says.	2.61	1.033
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak Arabic.	3.06	1.128
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.	2.12	1.007
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of Arabic.*	2.97	1.050
33. I get nervous when the Arabic teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.	2.87	1.046

*Items are reverse-coded

Table 3. Anxiety levels for participants

Scores	Level of FLA	Frequency	Percentage
33-79	Low	22	15
80-117	Moderate	119	81.15
118-134	High	4	3.75

RQ2: Do male and female participants experience similar anxiety levels?

The descriptive statistics associated with male and female participants' FLCAS scores are reported in Table 3. The male group (N = 49) was associated with a smaller mean (M = 90.22). The female group (N = 95) was associated with the higher mean (M = 93.02). In order to examine differences between the male and female groups on the FLCAS scores, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The assumptions of homogeneity of variance were tested and satisfied via Levene's F test, $F(146) = .094, p = .76$. The independent samples t-test was not associated with a statistically significant effect, $t(275) = .17, p = .266$. These results suggest that both male and female participants experienced similar levels of FLA.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of FLCAS scores for males and females

	N	Mean	SD
Male	49	90.22	14.80
Female	95	93.02	13.95
Total	146	91.62	14.38

RQ3: What are the underlying factors of FLA experienced by study abroad students of Arabic?

A Varimax rotated exploratory analysis was performed to examine the underlying factors of FL reading anxiety. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(378) = 12392.00, p < 0.001$). Therefore, the use of this factor analytic model on this set of data was appropriate. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy showed that the strength of the relationships among variables was high (KMO = .92), thus the data were

suited for factor analysis. Only items loaded onto a factor with a value of 0.4 or higher were included. Therefore, Items 11, 14, 19, 21, 22, and 30 were eliminated from the analysis. Initially, five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were generated. Based on the scree test, parallel analysis, and the interpretability of the factor solution, only two factors were retained, as shown in Table 4. The pattern matrix generated Factor 1 which was identified as 'English class performance anxiety'. It was a robust factor made up of 23 items (Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, and 33), with a high eigenvalue of 11.72, and it accounted for 41.86% of the variance in the data. Factor 2, with six items (Items 5, 6, 15, and 17) with eigenvalue 1.77 had a probability of 6.31%. The cumulative explanation was 48.17%. Factor 2 highlights students' negative feelings towards Arabic.

Table 5. FLACS factor analysis with Varimax rotation (N = 220).

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
FLACS1	.526	
FLACS2	-.527	
FLACS3	.720	
FLACS4	.625	
FLACS7	.686	
FLACS8	-.411	
FLACS9	.740	
FLACS10	.548	
FLACS12	.599	
FLACS13	.692	
FLACS16	.694	
FLACS18	-.729	
FLACS20	.627	
FLACS23	.778	
FLACS24	.697	
FLACS25	.508	
FLACS26	.630	
FLACS27	.713	
FLACS28	-.571	
FLACS29	.493	
FLACS31	.590	
FLACS32	-.431	
FLACS33	.706	
FLACS5		-.633

FLACS6		.721
FLACS15		.585
FLACS17		.820
Eigenvalue	11.72	1.77
% Variance	48.17	6.33

6.DISCUSSION

The first research question examined the anxiety levels experienced by AFL male and female students. Participants reported an average level of anxiety overall. In fact, their level of FLA was similar to the level reported in previous research that involved foreign language learners such as EFL (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012; Liu, 2006; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004), Japanese (Aida, 1994), and Spanish (Marcos-Llinás & Juan-Garau, 2009). One of the plausible explanations for the similarity of anxiety levels experienced by participants of the current study with previous studies mentioned above, in spite of the differences in the target languages and educational context, is that FLACS elicited mainly anxiety related to speaking. Aida (1994) asserts that speaking situations trigger FLA more than any other situations for foreign language learners. Thompson and Lee (2012) provide another possible explanation. They argue that communicating in the target language is such a real challenge that a few weeks in the target country is not enough to substantially reduce the amount of anxiety. This suggests that students who spend longer periods of time in a target country may have lower levels of anxiety.

The second research question provides empirical evidence that gender may not be a factor impacting FLA especially among western students. This outcome is aligned with the findings reported by previous studies. This outcome corroborates other findings in the literature (e.g., Aida, 1994; Bensalem, 2017; Dewaele et al., 2008; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). A few scholars attribute the absence of gender effect on FLA to socio-educational and political factors (Dörnyei, 2005; Young, 1991). In a recent study involving EFL students from Tunisia, Bensalem (2017) argued that females experienced similar levels of anxiety to their male peers because of the empowerment granted by the Tunisian government. In fact, Tunisian women holding positions in diverse sectors including engineering and judiciary (Ben Salem, 2010) increased their self-confidence, which

placed them on par with Western women. In contrast, in societies where women are supposed to adopt a submissive role to males, female students tend to experience higher levels of anxiety than their male peers (Park & French, 2013).

In order to examine the underlying factors behind FLA, an exploratory factor analysis was carried out. The analysis produced two dimensions: English class performance anxiety and negative feelings towards Arabic. The first factor was similar to the factor identified in previous studies (Phongsa, Mohamed Ismail, & Low, 2017; Thompson and Khawaja, 2016; Thompson and Lee, 2012). The current study identified 23 items for this factor, which is larger than any number of items for the same factor reported in previous studies. For example, Thompson and Lee (2012) identified 13, while Thompson and Khawaja (2016) identified 15 items and Phongsa et al. (2017) identified only 11 items. The current study confirms the prominence of English class performance anxiety as one of the major factors affecting FLA as measured by FLACS.

The second factor revealed in this study was negative feelings towards Arabic. It is similar to the factor identified by Thompson and Khawaja (2015). The items that composed this factor include Item 5: It wouldn't bother me at all to take more Arabic classes (reversed item); Item 6: During my Arabic class I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the Arabic course; Item 15: I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting; and Item 17: I often feel like not going to my Arabic class. One of the plausible reasons for the participants' negative attitudes towards the target language is that Arabic is perceived to be one of the most difficult languages to learn. According to The Foreign Service Institute's School of Language Studies, Arabic features among the category IV languages that are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers. It takes about 88 weeks (2200 hours) for students to reach level 3 in reading and speaking ("U.S. Department of State," 2019). Arabic is a distant language from English. Arabic and English don't share the same alphabet or word order. Therefore, it is quite expected for students to get frustrated, especially for those who are still at the lower levels.

7. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examined the relationship of SA and FLA through the profiles of American students learning AFL in Morocco. The findings showed that participants exhibited average levels of FLA. Male and female learners exhibited similar levels of FLA. The study revealed two factors underlying FLA: class performance anxiety and negative feelings towards Arabic. These results lend evidence to the argument that FL learners are not immune to FLA even when given ample opportunities to practice the target language in an authentic context. In fact, this study provides another evidence that communicating in the target language with native speakers can trigger anxiety as reported in previous research.

The study has limitations that need to be addressed. First, this study relied on a small sample size, so the findings should be taken with caution. Second, the participants' linguistic background was not accounted for in this study. Some of the participants could be heritage learners of Arabic. Other participants could be multilinguals, especially Hispanic students. Previous studies have shown that multilinguals tend to experience lower levels of anxiety than their monolingual peers (Cenoz, 2013; Dewaele, 2007, 2010; Dewaele et al., 2008; Santos, Cenoz, & Gorter, 2015; Thompson & Lee, 2012; Thompson & Khawaja, 2015). Therefore, some of the participants' anxiety could have been influenced by factors other than SA experience. Third, not all participants had the exact length of SA sojourn. Even though the difference was a couple of weeks, this gap in time could have impacted the results. Future research should investigate the changes of FLA over the course of SA sojourn as suggested by Lee (2018) who argued that there is a lack of research in this area. It would be more interesting to examine potential changes in anxiety levels among students within the context of a long SA sojourn with a duration of no less than two semesters. Such a study could shed more light on the construct of FLA among FL learners involved in SA.

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