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Abstract

Foreign language learning anxiety (FLLA) is one of the most vastly studied variables in the field of foreign language learning (Horwitz, 2001). It is widely conceived as an obvious factor, in foreign language learning, which explained why some learners are more successful at learning and acquiring a foreign language than others though the settings and circumstances of learning are alike.

The aim of this paper is to address the issue of foreign language learning anxiety that Tunisian students of English suffered from when they learn ‘behind the screen’ during the Covid-19 pandemic, by surveying 50 students enrolled in the Tunisian public universities and institutes.

The foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), the most widely used scale for assessing general foreign language anxiety, is used in this research to inspect the anxiety level the learners face.

Results of the survey reveal a significant relationship between foreign language anxiety and the academic level, whereas no significant relationship between gender and foreign language learning anxiety is marked. Investigating online learning in relation with foreign language learning anxiety can provide guidance and recommendations for teachers, course designers, pedagogues how to deal with learners behind the screen.

Key words: Covid-19 Pandemic, foreign language learning anxiety, Foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS), Online learning, Tunisia students of English language.

Introduction

By the end of 2019, Covid-19 appeared as a fierce deadly virus in China, it has spread so fast all over the world. (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020). The World
Health Organization (WHO) declared that Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus (WHO, 2020). When the virus reached its peak and the hospitals have been replete, curfews have been imposed and full lockdowns have been necessary to slow down the mixed infection, and mitigate the impact of this plague, international trade has ceased, airports have closed. In the education realm, the United Nation Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) realized that the Corona virus pandemic has impacted the education system in the world (UNESCO, 2020), roughly, 90% of the world’s countries have shut their schools and their universities. A massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions, and the shift from face-to face to online learning is the hallmark feature of education in pandemic time especially in developed country where internet speeds are very swift in comparison with the rest of the world.

In Tunisia, the Northern African country, internet access is reasonably priced relative to other countries in the region, and available for people, especially in major cities (Magouri, 2018). Three companies, Tunisie Telecom, Ooredoo and Orange compete to offer internet services with a low price. This developed and expanded telecommunication infrastructure in Tunisia allows Tunisian decision makers to call for the distance education project to face the pandemic and save the academic year 2019/2020.

**Research Objectives**

This study seeks to:

(1). Measure the level of online language learning anxiety that Tunisian students of English faced.

(2). To examine the variance in the students’ levels of foreign language learning anxiety according to their level of study and their gender.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following research questions.

RQ 1. What is the anxiety level that Tunisian students of English face when they learn online?

RQ 2. Is there any significant relationship between the academic level, gender and online language learning anxiety?

**Research hypothesis**

The research questions, cited above, entail the hypothesis of this study that:

level of anxiety and the level of anxiety varied from one gender to another, and from one academic level to another.
LITRATURE SURVEY

Online learning: Definition and types

Online learning, distance education and distributed learning … et represent a web of new concepts in the education realm. They appeared in the glossary of education terms when the telecommunication evolution reached its highest peak. These concepts are, all, well defined as a new form of education where teachers and learners are separated in time and space (Keegan, 2002).

In his pioneering article On the Nature of Distance Education, Keegan (1980) mentions six key aspects of distance education: (a) physical separation of teacher and learner, (b) learning occurs in the context of an educational institution, (c) technical media are used, (d) teacher and learner communicate, (e) face to face meetings are possible, (f) and an industrial model of providing education is used.

On this basis, Belanger and Jordan (1999) classified distance education into categories: (i) Asynchronous refers to instruction that occurs anytime or anywhere and (ii) synchronous refers to real-time interaction between the instructor and learner. In all, the foremost feature of distance education is the fact that it can happen away from an academic institution and can lead to a degree or credential (Gunawardena, McIsaac & Jonassen, 2008). In the Tunisian context, distance education has been launched since 2002 with the foundation of Virtual University.

By its own definition, the Virtual University is a multidisciplinary university; its major task is to provide students with opportunities for professionalizing courses tailored to the needs of the scientific and socio-economic environment as well as to the needs of the Tunisian and international labor market. While distance education is used in a very limited context since Tunisian Virtual University provides its services for particular people (administrative staff, experts…) who are unable to attend courses in universities, during corona pandemic, online learning has been a common buzzword that has been mulled over by all Tunisians, and particularly politicians who called for distance education.

Foreign language learning anxiety: Definition and sources

Anxiety is an umbrella term recurrently used in the field of psychology, it refers to a psychological state, and it is well known as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the nervous system” (Spielberg p.13, 1983).

Horwitz et al. (1986) differentiated between the two types of anxiety: (i) SPECIFIC ANXIETY, as the adjective specific denotes, this type of anxiety is limited just to a specific situation, such as speaking in a foreign language, passing an exam (ii) GENERALIZED ANXIETY is not limited to a specific situation, it is used to describe those who are generally anxious for no good reason.
On the light of other researches (Scovel, 1978; Spielberger, 1983; MacIntyre – Gardner, 1991), Horwitz (2001) reconsidered his previous classification, and spelt out three categories of anxiety: **Trait Anxiety** is defined as a relatively stable personality trait; **State Anxiety** is a temporary response to a particular stimulus (Spielberger, 1983). **Situation Specific Anxiety** is caused by a specific type of situation or event (MacIntyre – Gardner, 1991). In the realm of foreign language learning, anxiety refers to the negative feelings and emotional reactions of the learners towards foreign language learning (Horwitz, 2001), therefore; foreign language anxiety can be put under the rubric of state anxiety as well as academic anxiety (Wilson, 2006: 44). In the same context, schoolers mentioned four sources of language anxiety: For Jackson (2002), situational variables such as course level, course activities, instructor behavior, and course organization are major sources of foreign language learning anxiety, while for Dewaele (2002) learner variables including beliefs, gender, age, personality, and learning styles, are sources that trigger and sharpen foreign language learning anxiety.

In his turn, Young (1991: 426) picked out six sources of foreign language learning anxiety: (1) personal and interpersonal anxieties; (2) learner beliefs about language learning; (3) instructor beliefs about language teaching; (4) instructor-learner interactions; (5) classroom procedures; and (6) language testing”. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) revealed three sources of foreign language anxiety: **Communication apprehension**, **test anxiety**, and **fear of negative evaluation**. Communication apprehension is defined as the learner’s level of anxiety or fear connected with either real or expected communication with other people (McCroskey, 1978).

**Test anxiety** is defined as the tendency to view the results of poor performance in an evaluative situation (Sarason,1984). In this situation, learners develop a **negative image** about tests and have illogical perceptions in evaluative situation.

Along with the study of the sources and types of foreign language learning anxiety, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) sought to study the level of language anxiety, they designed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) which is the most widely used scale to measure students’ foreign language anxiety. It includes 33 items, classified as shown in the figure below:
Research Method

**Subjects**

The target population in this study is Tunisian students of English enrolled at Tunisian public universities and institutes. Fifty subjects aged between 19 and 35.

**Design**

The design of the research is quantitative. Both descriptive and inferential analyses were adopted. An online questionnaire was used as a measuring instrument. The participants were asked, first, about their demographic profile, and second they were invited to answer the items of the questionnaire about their feelings and emotions when they learnt online during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Instrument**

The instrument is presented in two parts. Part one is devoted for general information (gender, age, place, level, online learning experience, learning distance type preference). The second part aims to answer the research questions, and prove the hypothesis; it consists of an Online Language Learning Anxiety questionnaire developed in accordance with Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). The questionnaire consists of 33 statements reflecting the respondents’ feeling towards online foreign language learning, and based on 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The score range is from 1 to 5 (strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neither agree nor disagree = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1). The questionnaire was shared in special Facebook groups devoted for English learning in Tunisia, such groups are administered by Tunisia students of English, who encourage their colleagues from different affiliations to exchange courses, post information, share activities. The questionnaire remained online for one three weeks during January 2022.
Findings and Discussion

Demographic profile

Table 1 below sums up the distribution of sample of the study. Respondents were invited to answer six questions to provide the background information (gender, age, place, level, online learning experience, Learning distance type preference).

Table 1
Demographic Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Age &amp; level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20-22: licence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23-25: M.A students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25-30: PhD students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N %</td>
<td>N %</td>
<td>N %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 70</td>
<td>15 30</td>
<td>30 60 20 40 8 16 15 30 27 54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Past online learning experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online learning model</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asynchronous</td>
<td>N %</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronous</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the questionnaire is administrated in many active groups, only 50 students responded, the direct implications of this findings is that students are not interested in online learning. The profile of respondents was illustrated as follows:

The gender: The first question in the background information is about the gender. Females constitute 70% of the total responds. This finding coincides the general statistics in Tunisians public universities stating that women outnumber men students at universities. The minister of higher education stated that two out of three are girls University World News.

Place: respondents were asked to mention the place where they live. The majority are from the north 60%. This finding is expected because internet access is more available in north than in the south (Magouri, 2018).

Age and academic level: the average age is between 25 and 35. The majority of them are doctorate students. This finding is expected because license students, as well as M.A students are obliged to attend the face to face classes, while doctorate students, as beginning researchers, are ‘autodidactic’, they learn by themselves (conduct researches … attend freely scientific events …).
Online learning experiences: participants at advanced level specially doctorate students, about 54%, stated that they have learnt online before.

Learning distance type preference: most participants, particularly, license students, respond positively to ASYNCHRONOUS model; However, a minority of participants, mainly doctorate students, prefer SYNCHRONOUS over ASYNCHRONOUS delivery.

Level of Anxiety Among Participants

Table 2
General level of anxiety among learners:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Fq</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Fq</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>level</th>
<th>Fq</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33-69</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>33-69</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>45.71</td>
<td>33-69</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-89</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>70-89</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22.85</td>
<td>70-89</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-132</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>90-132</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31.42</td>
<td>90-132</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptive analysis:

Arnaiz and Guillén (2012), differentiated between three levels of anxiety: Low, Moderate, High. The table above showed that 46% of participants have a low level of anxiety, more than 20% experienced a moderate level, and 32% suffered from a high level of anxiety.

Inferential analysis:

Following Arnaiz and Guillén’s classification, the findings exhibited in the table above reveal no significant difference in the extent of anxiety between the respondents across gender. 46% of males experienced a low level of anxiety, approximately the same percentage 45.71% is marked for females.

This finding aligns with the results of a research conducted in the same context of the present study (Bensalem, 2017: 241), and another study conducted in the Spanish setting (Arnaiz & Guillén’s, 2012). These researches, though conducted in two different settings, deduced that gender is not a significant predictor of foreign language learning anxiety among participants (Bensalem, 2017: 241). Indeed, the findings of this study, as well as the results of previous researches, reject the hypothesis of the present study, and demolish the orthodoxy of males being more self-confident and experiencing less anxiety compared to females (Hussain, Shahid & Zaman, 2011; Lian & Budin, 2014). More fundamentally, this finding confirms Doneyei’s assumption that foreign language learning anxiety is related to socio-educational and political factors (Dörnyei, 2005), and may be explained by the fact that in the Tunisian context; socially
politically and economically, woman enjoys a prestigious status thanks to many legislations mainly the Tunisian Code of Personal Status enacted in 1956, that highlighted the equality and full humanity of women and men. Ever since, Tunisian woman enjoyed many prosperities and privileges in comparison with Arabic woman (Kelly & Breslin, 2010), which have a positive impact on her mood and personality, she feels more self-confident and comfortable to learn and acquire a foreign language, and gets qualified. Accordingly, Tunisian woman is specialized at teaching foreign languages at secondary schools and universities, also, she invades other sectors (tourism, foreign affairs, diplomatic ...) which demanded an proficient level in foreign language.

Table 3
Anxiety score ranges according to the academic level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Fq</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Fq</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33-69</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>33-69</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.66</td>
<td>33-69</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-89</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>70-89</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44.44</td>
<td>70-89</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-132</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>90-132</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>90-132</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Descriptive analysis:**
The overwhelming majority of doctorate students, about 60% experienced low level of foreign language learning anxiety, a majority of license-learners, more than 60%, suffered from a high level of anxiety, while master students, approximately 45%, have a moderate level of anxiety.

**Inferential analysis:**
The findings, as shown in the table above, assert the research hypothesis, there is a significant correlation between students’ language learning anxiety and their academic achievement. Doctorate students who have experienced a low level of anxiety, acknowledged they have experience online learning before, they have been accustomed to learn online. They used internet to attend and participate in national and international scientific events, whereas a minority of the participants enrolled in license, most of them acknowledged that they have never studied online.

Two reasons behind this finding: first, foreign language learning anxiety is significantly affected by the academic achievement (Horwitz, 2001; Price, 1991). Second, generally, online learning ties together three overlapping threads-computers and its accessories, internet and Computer-mediated communication (CMC).
Indeed, doctorate students have been accustomed with the use of the above-stated tools even before the Covid-19 pandemic. They use computer to store a large amount of information whereas license students and M.A students as well, use the traditional tools (notepad, pen ...), in taking notes in classroom. Also, doctorate students exploited internet to exchange information (Naughton, 2016, p.7) about their field of expertise, looking for references, collecting research data etc. Furthermore, computer-mediated communication is key in online learning, it permits distance education courses to become increasingly interactive and to foster learning environments which surpass most classroom settings for supporting student participation and interaction (Czerkawski & Lyman, 2016). Doctorate students are more competent in computer-mediated communication as they used to participate in online scientific events (symposium, conferences), these opportunities allow them to acquire a considerable level of digital proficiency, which is, positively, related to psychological well-being (Deng & Yang, 2021), and attenuates the level of online learning anxiety.

Conclusion

This research was an attempt to better understand foreign language learning anxiety in distance education by examining the levels of anxiety among Tunisian students of English. The analysis of quantitative responses from a survey instrument revealed three major findings. Firstly, regarding learning distance type preference, most participants respond positively to asynchronous, this is the optimal way for them to learn.

Secondly, the academic level affects positively the level of anxiety. Doctorate students are less anxious than M.A students who, in turn, have experienced a lower level of anxiety in comparison with license students. This result aligned with other studies conducted in different contexts. Thirdly, in relation to gender, there is no significant difference between male and female regarding the level of anxiety. This finding rejects the hypothesis of the present study that the gender of the learner may affect the level of anxiety, also it demolishes the general axiom stating that males are more self-confident and experiencing less anxiety compared to females. In fact, this finding is expected thanks to the socio-educational and political factors in Tunisian context where woman enjoys a prestigious status thanks to many legislations mainly the Tunisian Code of Personal Status enacted in 1956.
References


