

Foreign language anxiety among first-year Saudi university students

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This study surveys 156 Saudi male and 131 Saudi female students in their first year at King Faisal University in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Demographic data is collected along with quantitative data using a self-reporting Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) with a 5-point Likert scale. English performance data is collected via course grades. Comparisons are made between genders, majors, course levels and academic terms using ANOVA and descriptive statistics. Correlations and regression assess relationships between FLCA and English performance. Results show moderate levels of FLCA and moderate, negative correlations with performance. Further qualitative data is collected in the form of feedback from foreign English instructors and university administration. Qualitative data is compared to prior research and results from the quantitative study in order to ensure reliability. The discussion and conclusion leads to recommendations for teachers and administrators with the intent of reducing FLCA and increasing educational opportunity.

Keywords: foreign language classroom anxiety; EFL, ESL, ELT; Saudi Arabia; Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

English language training (ELT) has become commonplace in public and private schools around the world. The British Council (2013) estimates that one in four people around the world use English. By the year 2020, two billion people are expected to be using and learning English. English is one of the most important carriers of information, the most widely used language on the internet, and the language of international trade (Pan, 2011; Zazulak, 2015). The *Harvard Business Review* reports that countries with better English skills have better economies (McCormick, 2013). Thus, English language acquisition is not merely for self-improvement but also an economic necessity in our increasingly interconnected world.

No longer content with relying on oil revenues, Saudi Arabia has developed ambitious plans to expand and diversify its economy (McDowall, 2016). Education is the main focus of the strategy that is expected to, among other things, reduce unemployment, increase women's employment, develop retail and technology sectors, and, ultimately, move the country into the top 15 in the world (Al-Riyadh, 2016). Schools and universities are among the most important institutions that will give effect to the new vision. Not surprisingly, ELT has been considered fundamental to expanding students' access knowledge in sciences and technology. Most public and private universities in Saudi Arabia now use English as the language of instruction for medical, engineering, and scientific courses. Two or more Saudi universities use English as the only language of instruction (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). As such, English has become an essential skill for

students who desire to earn degrees in technical fields and, in many cases, access to employment in these fields is restricted by language ability.

Although the Saudi government has invested heavily in English language education, student performance in the subject has failed to meet expectations, resulting in reduced education and career opportunities for Saudis who cannot survive in English-based university courses. Hence, Saudis are caught in a complicated predicament. Successful implementation of the new economic plan is largely contingent upon performance in English at a standard that enables students to obtain degrees in sciences, engineering, and medicine. Despite the crucial importance of English skills, Saudi Arabia has lingered among the least competitive nations in the world in terms of English. In fact, government investment in ELT since 2011 has only led to decreasing proficiency on the English First (EF) index (EF, 2015). In 2015, Saudi Arabia ranked third to last among 70 nations surveyed, ahead of only Cambodia and Libya.

As of 2016, the Saudi government has invested about US\$22 billion in university students each year. Students at public universities pay no tuition fees and receive a monthly stipend. The government also provides scholarships for about half of private university students in the country (Hamdan, 2016). In order to improve return on investment, studies are needed to find and analyse the reasons why students have failed to meet objectives. One area that has garnered consistent attention over decades is foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA).

PRIOR RESEARCH

FLCA is different from other types of anxiety and specifically arises from aspects of the foreign language classroom (i.e. participating, speaking, writing, grade performance, etc.). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined FLCA as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the (foreign) language learning process.” In their seminal work on FLCA, Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the most commonly used instrument for assessing FLCA: the FLCA scale (FLCAS), which is a 33-point survey with a 5-point Likert scale that learners use to self-report their feeling toward communication, test and evaluation anxiety.

Numerous authors have confirmed links between FLCA and English language performance, although associations vary between samples. Negative relationships between FLCA and language performance are the most commonly reported kind (Aida, 1994; Saito & Samimy, 1996; Salehi & Marefat, 2014; Spielman & Radnofsky, 2001). However, there are also cases where anxiety and performance are positively related (e.g. Jones, Swain, & Hardy, 1993). Alpert and Haber (1960) described “facilitative anxiety” as a drive to improve performance and “debilitative anxiety” as a hindrance to performance. How and why anxiety arises, and its potential impacts on learning have also been found to vary by culture (Horwitz, 2016).

Saudis are clearly unique in the scope of the global student population due to factors such as tuition-free higher education, English language instruction for science courses, and exposure to foreign teachers who do not speak Arabic, in addition to things that make every culture different: religion, history, climate and environment, etc. Notwithstanding the distinctiveness of Saudi students, researchers have confirmed that Saudis are no

exception when it comes to experiencing debilitating anxiety (Alasmari, 2015; Alrabai, 2014; Alsowat, 2016; Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015). Studies have shown Arab students usually experience moderate levels of FLCA and that anxiety shares a moderate, negative correlation with language performance.

While FLCA research has been expanding in Saudi Arabia in recent years, there is little, if any, research about how persistent FLCA is over time. How first year university students respond to the demands of English language preparatory year programs (PYP) is also largely unknown. Still, knowledge of the dynamics of student attitudes and emotions, and their interplay with language performance may be key to developing effective strategies to improving proficiency. The present research was developed bearing in mind the potential value of a study that tracks FLCA over multiple academic terms in the first year of university and assesses the relationship between FLCA and English performance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aims of this research are to:

- 1) Investigate how FLCA changes among Saudi students in their first year of study at a Saudi public university;
- 2) Examine statistically significant variance in mean FLCA levels between males and females, between medical and non-medical students, and between students in upper and lower levels,
Note: Students are separated into two levels following an entrance examination. Students in the “upper level” begin their studies in English 2 courses whereas students in the “lower level” begin in English 1.
- 3) Quantify and analyze statistically significant relationships between FLCA and English language performance.

Research questions

- 1) How strong is average FLCA among students in the sample?
- 2) Does mean FLCA change significantly between academic terms?
- 3) Are there any significant differences between males and females?
- 4) Do medical students experience higher or lower levels of FLCA as compared to non-medical students?
- 5) Do students in higher levels of study experience higher or lower levels of FLCA as compared to students in lower levels?
Note: During each academic term, there are two “levels” of courses (i.e. English 1 and English 2 in the first term; English 2 and 3 in the second term, etc.)
- 6) Are there any significant correlations between FLCA and English performance? If yes, to what extent does FLCA predict or affect performance?
- 7) Can instructors and administrators confirm findings of a FLCAS survey?
- 8) What are common concerns and thoughts about student performance and FLCA among faculty and administration?

Limitations

Surveys were administered by a group of foreign English instructors at the King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Convenience, logistics, budget and other factors limited the sample population to incoming freshmen enrolled in a preparatory year English program at one campus in Saudi Arabia. Although the sample size was sufficiently large to generalize results, the unique context makes it impossible to determine exactly how reliable the results are for application at scale.

Quantitative data was collected in the form of self-reporting surveys. Reliance on self-reporting could potentially affect honesty and reliability. Socially desirable responding (SDR) is a well-known phenomenon that can impact the validity of survey data (Ong & Weiss, 2000; van de Mortel, 2008). Researchers could not eliminate the potential for SDR; instead, the research was designed to mitigate SDR as an interfering variable in analyses and conclusions. For example, researchers took two survey samples: one was entirely anonymous, and the other required some identifying information in order to associate classroom performance with survey responses. Survey results were also compared to qualitative instructor and administrator feedback to avoid making erroneous conclusions.

Ethics statement

Researchers ensured the study adhered to ethical standards of the institution and relevant privacy and education laws of Saudi Arabia. Relevant university administrators were aware of the study. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Researchers informed participants that participation was confidential and that their responses would not affect any grade or performance measure. All identifying information was removed prior to representation of data.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory study was conducted to assess foreign language classroom anxiety levels among first year university students in a preparatory year program. Two surveys were distributed in two academic quarters in order to provide information FLCAS dynamism among students in the program. Parametric and nonparametric statistics were calculated. Additional qualitative data was collected from teachers, which helped clarify reasons for FLCAS prevalence and changes between surveys.

Context

The study was conducted at the King Faisal University Preparatory Year Deanship English Program (KFUPYDEP), located in Hofuf, Saudi Arabia. KFUPYDEP has more than 70 foreign instructors who teach more than 1,000 students. The program was accredited by the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation in 2016. As part of continuing efforts to improve service quality, several foreign instructors volunteered to administer surveys and collect performance data. The head researcher (author) is also a classroom instructor at KFUPYD.

The KFUPYDEP is the entrance point for students pursuing scientific, engineering and technical degrees at the university. One year of intensive English language training at the KFUPYDEP is required for students who enter KFU to study business, computer science, engineering, dentistry, applied medicine, pharmacy and medicine. English is the language of instruction for those major programs. Depending on entrance exam results, students must complete three or four English courses in the KFUPDYEP, each of which is one academic quarter in duration. The program uses a curriculum based on Pearson-Longman's Northstar textbook series, which has four colour-coded books. Each colour represents a different level: orange is beginner, blue is intermediate, green is upper intermediate, and purple is advanced. Students whose entrance exam scores are higher may bypass the beginner course in the Fall quarter.

Each course level is structured into an eight-week academic quarter – one week per unit in the textbooks. Students attend class for four hours on Sunday through Wednesday, learning unit-centred vocabulary and grammar. Each week, students take two quizzes and submit a writing assignment. On Thursdays, students sit for written exams and give a speaking presentation. Course grades are calculated using a weighted average of course components: 5 percent for attendance, class participation, quizzes and writing assignments; 30 percent for weekly exams; 10 percent for a midterm exam; and 40 percent for the final exam as per university policy on final exams. Every student must achieve a 70 percent overall score in order to pass the course, which corresponds to a 3.0 in the grade point average (GPA) out of a possible 5.0 points. Students must maintain a minimum overall GPA of 3.0 in order to stay enrolled at KFU, so a failing PYD grade in the Fall quarter usually results in dismissal from the university on academic grounds.

Sample

The sample included 287 respondents from the KFUPYDEP. There were 185 participants in the Fall quarter and 102 participants in the Spring quarter of the 2015-16 academic year. In both academic quarters, the student body was split into two modules – upper and lower – based on entrance examination scores. Medical students were separated from students in other majors in both terms. Males and females were in separate sections as per university policy. A cluster-area sampling technique was utilized in order to include students from various groupings within the whole population.

Instruments

Foreign language classroom anxiety was assessed using the FLCAS instrument from Horwitz et al. (1986), which is the instrument most commonly used to measure FLCAS. English was the language of the survey. The questionnaire contained a 5-point Likert scale which participants use to report their level of agreement or disagreement with 33 statements. English language performance was measured by overall course scores (as a percentage) using the grading structure explained above.

Analysis

Survey data was translated into SPSS for statistical analysis and data representation. Descriptive statistics were tabulated using charts and graphs. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated to discover any significant differences in FLCA between quarters, modules, genders, and majors. Pearson correlations and linear regression

analysis were calculated to quantify relationships between FLCA and English language performance.

RESULTS

Cronbach's alpha was calculated to determine reliability ($\alpha = .944$). The instrument was found to be very reliable.

Descriptive statistics

The data were approximately normally distributed as shown by the bar graph and histogram (Figure 1), and further assessed by Q-Q plots. Across all data points, the mean FLCA was moderate at 2.82. The standard deviation of 0.72 showed that about half of the students reported anxiety on the higher end of the scale and slightly more reported anxiety on the lower end of the scale.

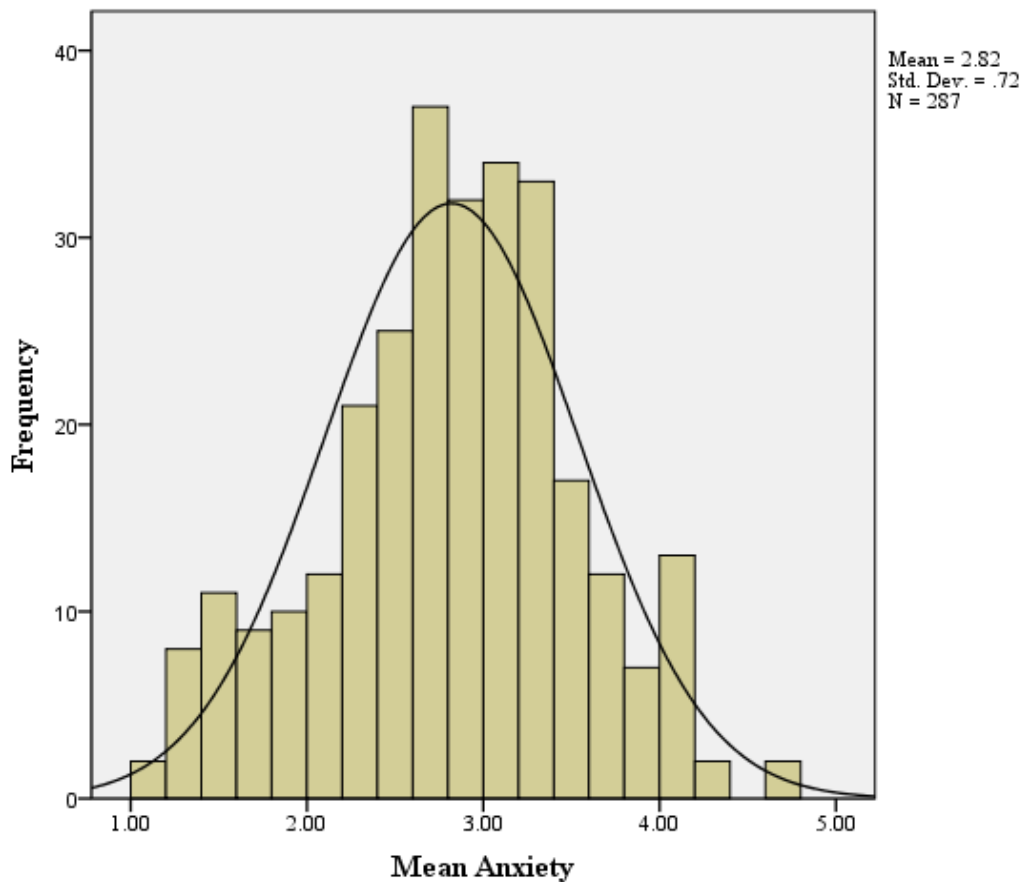


Figure 1. FLCA Distribution

Mean and median anxiety levels fell between the first and second surveys, as did minimum and maximum levels of anxiety. In both the Fall and Spring quarters, all of the data fell within three standard deviations of the mean. Table 1 contains descriptive statistics by academic term.

Table 1: Distribution statistics by term

Term	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Median
Fall	3.1184	185	.59435	1.42	4.67	3.1515
Spring	2.2764	102	.60085	1.00	3.52	2.3636
Total	2.8192	287	.71954	1.00	4.67	2.8438

Males and females reported nearly identical levels of anxiety. Data from males had a broader range but slightly lower median and mean when compared to female data. Table 2 contains descriptive statistics separated by gender.

Table 2: Distribution statistics by gender

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Median
Male	2.7503	156	.70987	1.09	4.67	2.7576
Female	2.9012	131	.72507	1.00	4.18	2.8788
Total	2.8192	287	.71954	1.00	4.67	2.8438

Students in the upper module reported slightly lower levels of anxiety than students in the lower module. However, data for the lower module was more tightly grouped around the mean. Table 3 shows distribution data by module.

Table 3: Distribution statistics by module

Module	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Median
Lower	3.0848	120	.67093	1.36	4.36	3.1818
Upper	2.6283	167	.69403	1.00	4.67	2.6667
Total	2.8192	287	.71954	1.00	4.67	2.8438

Medical students reported slightly higher levels of anxiety than non-medical students, though the data for medical students was more tightly grouped around the mean. Table 4 compares distribution statistics between medical and non-medical students.

Table 4: Distribution statistics by major

Major	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Median
Medical	2.8874	110	.63731	1.09	4.67	2.8788
Non-Medical	2.7768	177	.76488	1.00	4.64	2.7879
Total	2.8192	287	.71954	1.00	4.67	2.8438

Analysis of variance

Mean anxiety levels were compared between participants in Fall and Spring quarters, male and female sections, upper and lower modules, and medical and non-medical groups. There was homogeneity of variances among FLCAS scores in each group, as assessed by a Levene's test ($p > .05$). The only statistically significant difference that was found using a one-way ANOVA test was between students in the Fall and Spring quarters ($F(130, 156) = 2.048, p = .000$). Students in the Fall quarter ($M = 3.12, SD = 0.59$) reported significantly higher FLCAS when compared to students in the Spring quarter ($M = 2.28, SD = 0.60$). There were no statistically significant differences found between male and female students, upper and lower modules, or medical and non-medical students. Table 5 contains ANOVA data.

Table 5. ANOVA

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Term	Between Groups	41.457	130	.319	2.048	.000
	Within Groups	24.292	156	.156		
	Total	65.749	286			
Gender	Between Groups	32.475	130	.250	1.006	.483
	Within Groups	38.731	156	.248		
	Total	71.206	286			
Module	Between Groups	35.103	130	.270	1.213	.124
	Within Groups	34.723	156	.223		
	Total	69.826	286			
Major	Between Groups	30.186	130	.232	.962	.589
	Within Groups	37.654	156	.241		
	Total	67.840	286			

Pearson correlations

Course scores were available for participants in the Spring quarter only. A moderate, negative correlation was found between mean anxiety and English language performance that was statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($r = -.430$, $n = 48$, $p = .002$). Table 6 contains the correlation data.

Table 6. Pearson correlations

		Mean anxiety	Course total
Mean Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	-.430**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	287	48
Course Total	Pearson Correlation	-.430**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	48	48

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Regression

Linear regression analysis was used to test how much FLCA influenced course scores among participants. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 46) = 10.437$, $p = .002$). Participants' predicted total course score was equal to 93.385 minus 4.517 times FLCAS score. This means that the maximum English score a participant could have expected was about 89 out of 100, or a high B. Students with letter grades in the B range generally had FLCA levels on the lower end of the scale whereas participants whose FLCA levels were on the higher half of the scale generally had overall course grades in the C range. FLCA accounted for approximately 18 percent of the variability in student course grades.

DISCUSSION

Results were consistent with prior research that showed moderate levels of FLCA, no significant differences between genders, and moderate, negative correlations between

FLCA and English performance. The significance of the present research is found in the decreased anxiety levels between the first and third terms. It follows other studies (e.g. Alasmari, 2015; Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015) that contextual factors probably played a significant part in students' higher levels of FLCA during their first months at university. Alsamaani (2012) found Saudi students have positive and realistic beliefs about language learning and, while feedback from instructors in the KFUPYDEP did not wholly contradict those findings, KFU faculty did relate that their students' attitudes and beliefs improved significantly between terms. Qualitative data affirmed a positive relationship between the length of time spent in the PYD and overall quality of student behaviour and performance. This supports Alshumaimeri's (2013) findings that completion of a PYP is likely to increase a student's motivation toward English language learning.

Despite the correlations coming from data for the second survey only, the results are still significant considering that enrolment in the KFUPYDEP decreased from 1,650 students in the Fall quarter to 1,251 students in the Spring quarter, where the decrease was due almost entirely to dismissal on academic grounds after students failed to achieve 70 percent or higher in their English course. The negative correlation between grade performance and FLCA is obvious given the higher average FLCA in the Fall quarter against a higher failure rate. Although no causative relationship can be assumed, the data clearly shows that lower anxiety levels coincide with better grades.

Qualitative feedback from instructors indicates higher FLCA in the Fall quarter. Instructors felt students who exhibited more anxiety in class tended to miss more class hours and were more reluctant to participate in class. According to instructors, anxiety was manifested as unwillingness to join discussions, answer questions and use English as a medium of communication in class. Acute writing anxiety was very prevalent according to instructors who reported high incidence of plagiarism and improper use of electronic translation software. Teacher and administrator feedback indicated that students who exhibited higher anxiety toward the English language classroom environment also complained more frequently about course responsibilities to Arabic-speaking staff.

Generally, students frequently misunderstood the concept of a deadline or the rigidity of a university academic program. While the students with higher course scores tended to learn that assignments, grades and deadlines are static and non-negotiable, the students whose grades were on the low end of the scale had more persistent difficulty in comprehending the idea that they could not bargain for grades or extensions. Saudi students are, by many accounts, used to negotiating in areas that people from English-speaking countries are not, such as grades (Pennington & Hoekje, 2010, p. 128; Springsteen, 2014). According to KFUPYDEP administrative staff, it is not uncommon for students to have high school transcripts showing 100 percent as course marks in dozens of subjects; this does not necessarily indicate mastery of these subjects but rather that the student successfully negotiated a grade by some means, bribery included. Students and administrators both confirmed that lower schools often misrepresent grades and that, following 12 years of that system, it is a shock to enter an accredited English program with Western standards. Thus, higher FLCA probably reflects an inability or unwillingness on the students' part to change their world view, namely adapting to a more accurate and reliable system of grades.

Teaching methods

Considering that there were no significant differences in FLCA between any groups within the sample, only between terms, it is not unlikely that FLCA played a significant part in the termination of many students' enrolment in university in the first term of university, which thereby limited their access to education. Taking into account instructors' and administrators' feedback, students who failed in the Fall quarter probably came into university unprepared, and their lack of preparedness may have been due to having had unrealistic grading policies throughout their years in primary and secondary education. Much, if not most of the student population experienced a form of culture shock when they entered the KFUPYDEP. Those who were not able to cope with the increased responsibility and rigidity compared to their high school years typically demonstrated higher FLCA, and many of them failed. Faculty and administrator feedback suggested that that secondary education in Saudi Arabia might have failed to adequately prepare students for English courses at university.

Studies have shown that Saudi teachers have been reluctant to adapt a style consistent with contemporary methods. Ali & Ammar (2004) found that Saudi teachers tend to cling to traditional teacher-centred classrooms rather than adopting more student-centred approaches. Hasan & Gupta (2013) found "authoritarian" models were dominant in Saudi education. Grami (2012) found the Saudi educational environment is typically structured and teacher-centred rather than communicative and learner-oriented. Gulnaz, Alfaqih, and Masshour (2015) discussed the harmful implications of the "stereotypical traditional role" that is frequently embraced by Saudi teachers. KFUPYDEP instructors commented that students frequently appeared confused in the student-centred classroom, as if they had never experienced this approach before.

Remarkably, the tendency to embrace old-fashioned methods is not only persistent among older teachers. Ali & Ammar found pre-service teachers at multiple universities in Saudi Arabia held "naïve epistemological beliefs," that they tended to "rely more on lower order cognitive strategies such as memorization and rehearsal than higher order ones such as elaboration and critical thinking," and that English teachers themselves often experienced anxiety related to learning and teaching English. Aljafen (2013) reported that English classes in Saudi high schools most often use the grammar-translation approach, which is not as effective as the communicative approach.

One of the main reasons Saudi universities developed PYPs is to help students adjust to the rigors of university life. After 12 years in ostensibly poorly managed lower schools, where teachers are most likely to practice outmoded pedagogy, students need some time to unlearn bad habits and learn new ones. PYP faculties are usually comprised of expatriate teachers who may hold expectations of undergraduate students that Saudi students do not meet (Habbash & Idapalapati, 2016). These unrealistic expectations could prompt instructors to utilize less effective teaching methods in the face of adversity. Any failures by PYP faculty members to adapt strategies consistent with the Saudi students' needs may reduce the effectiveness of the PYP, and thereby harm the students' educational opportunities.

In response to the distinct characteristics of Saudi English language learners, Chua & Al-Shammary (2015) recommended teachers utilize a student-centred approach and take every opportunity available to make the content of lessons interesting and relevant to

students. Alrabai (2015) found FLCA reduction strategies were effective in Saudi classrooms. These strategies included measures to reduce communication apprehension, reduce fear of negative evaluation, reduce fear of testing, address misconceptions that provoke anxiety, establish realistic learning objectives, and increase student self-confidence. Furthermore, while negotiation on par with Saudi high schools is obviously not feasible, Habbash & Idapalapati (2016) suggest compromising with students during the initial days of instruction. Taking a progressive approach toward attendance, tardiness and assignment deadlines for a temporary period so that students can adjust may improve the relationship between teacher and student, which could help improve student performance. Some PYPs, such as the KFUPYDEP, feature structured, inflexible curriculum and syllabi that do not allow individual instructors to apply a more personalized approach, but there are generally options available for teachers to demonstrate modest amounts of patience and understanding. If English instructors, whether foreign or Saudi, bear in mind that the ultimate objective of their work is to enhance students' abilities and opportunities, they should be able to navigate the complex array of demands and obstacles between the present position and future success.

CONCLUSION

Results from this study were consistent with other FLCAS research in Saudi Arabia. Students in the KFUPYDEP reported moderate levels of FLCA and anxiety had a moderate, negative association with English performance. There were no statistically significant differences in mean FLCA between men and women, between medical and non-medical students, and between levels. The second part of the study, taken in the Spring quarter, showed significantly lower FLCA compared to the Fall quarter. One possible reason for this reduction in mean FLCA was that roughly one-fourth of students failed out of the program between the two surveys. The other possible explanation was that time spent in the PYP improved student discipline, motivation, and study skills. The second scenario was supported by prior research and qualitative feedback from KFUPYDEP English instructors.

One of the most significant findings of the qualitative research pertained to the lack of preparedness among students entering university. PYPs across Saudi Arabia exist to give students a year to adjust for broader university studies where English is the language of instruction, but in the case of KFUPYDEP students, a large number were unprepared to enter the PYP. Prior research and qualitative feedback from KFUPYDEP personnel indicates that high schools may be particularly at fault for not providing students with quality education. Administrators' main concerns included perceived unscrupulous grade inflation and lack of rigidity on matters of attendance and deadlines, which are commonplace in Saudi secondary schools, where it is not uncommon for a student to receive 98 percent and above in every class, regardless of relatively low proficiency. Administrators reported bribery was one possible cause of unreliable high school data, but research also suggested that the culture of negotiation and saving face may be more problematic. Outdated teaching methods and lack of accountability in high schools could have been directly related to the KFUPYDEP failure rate. Lack of uniform objectives and methods between universities and lower schools was a potential factor in hundreds of students losing their chance to study science or medicine at King Faisal University in the 2015-16 academic year. However, more comprehensive data is needed to make a solid conclusion regarding the role that Saudi secondary school policies and pedagogy play in university success.

Unfortunately, curriculum demands of the university do not provide KFUPYDEP instructors opportunity to play catch-up with students whose skills are significantly below average, so there are only a few measures the faculty could take to retain students whose performance does not meet standards. One such possible way to help students stay in school would be to discontinue the practice of terminating students' enrolment after only one academic term. Students whose GPA drops below 3.0 after the first term could be placed on academic probation for one term and allowed to repeat a KFUPYDEP level. Academic probation is standard practice in American universities, which understand that some students simply are not prepared for the higher standards of university in their first term, but their naiveté should not cost them their chance to earn a degree of their choice.

KFUPYDEP teachers also recommend more Arabic-speaking support staff, such as a counselling department and English tutors, in order to help students whose English skills are simply not sufficient to discuss certain issues with their foreign instructors. Arab support staff could help reinforce core academic values in the Western-standards context, such as attendance, promptness, timely submission of assignments, academic honesty, and limiting contests to grades. According to teachers, failure to perform in the KFUPYDEP was as much a product of culture shock or failure to adjust to a rigid academic standard as it was related purely to ability. If students could discuss their fears, concerns, and complaints in detail and at length in Arabic, and receive explanations and positive feedback from other fluent Arabic speakers, students' anxiety and resistance to higher English standards could be reduced.

Beyond administrative policy changes, teachers remain the key to reducing anxiety, gaining compliance, and providing students with ample opportunities to acquire higher education. Universities need highly qualified instructors who have knowledge and experience with contemporary methods. Demand for foreign teachers outpaces supply around the world, so it is unrealistic that every instructor, whether at university or a lower school, will hold qualifications necessary to obtain the same position at an American or British institution, but experience and certification are certainly crucial. Teachers need to know that the profession has moved past rote memorization, quarrelling, and the teacher-centred classroom. Students need to be engaged with authentic English content. Lessons need to be relevant and interesting. Moreover, teachers need to create a safe social and psychological environment that minimizes harmful anxiety. Various techniques and approaches are available for teachers to utilize, but without exposure to literature, teachers could revert to outdated practices. Thus, it is important that school administrators provide professional development sessions followed by peer and mentor observations so both teachers and students can benefit from the wealth of knowledge available.

FLCA potentially hinders and limits learning. Therefore, it is an antagonist of the functional classroom. Significant efforts should be taken to reduce and constrain FLCA so students can achieve at their maximum potential. Teachers and administrators should discuss psychological and social factors that affect classroom and exam performance, and develop strategies supportive of constant and continual improvement. Higher education plays a pivotal role in micro and macroeconomic development. Without college-educated citizens, a nation cannot compete and prosper. Hence, in order to accomplish the goals and objectives set by the Saudi government, educational institutions should undertake to enhance the quality of their classrooms, minimizing detrimental fears and maximizing opportunity to grow, learn, and develop.

Future research

In view of the findings of the present study, the head researcher plans to continue assessing the impacts of FLCA on English performance among KFUPYD students. In future studies, the research is likely to include direct interviews with students, whose qualitative feedback can supplement instructor and administrator opinions on personal educational histories, root causes of FLCA, potential strategies and tactics in response to anxiety in the classroom and relating to foreign language learning. Although significant barriers exist that make it difficult to incorporate other universities into a study of larger samples across a broader geographic range (i.e. communication, budget, institutional values, research qualifications of partners, etc.), such a comprehensive study would be beneficial to undertake. Presently, faculty and administration at KFUPYD have no means by which they could initiate or engage such a study, despite its obvious merits. In order to complete such an expansive piece of research, the Saudi Ministry of Education would need to be directly involved. In the process of improving Saudi English programs and universities in general, nationwide studies including secondary and tertiary educational institutions should be implemented by Saudi authorities. In the meantime, independent researchers should continue to examine factors related to performance and FLCA in order to improve understanding of Saudi students' unique backgrounds and needs.

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