Beyond Barriers: Examining the Impact of Foreign Language Anxiety on ESL Proficiency in Saudi Military Learners and Strategic Interventions for Academic Success

ABSTRACT

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| **Aims:** To assess the impact of foreign language anxiety on EFL learners in Saudi Arabia, examining anxiety-provoking factors, the relationship between anxiety and language proficiency, and identifying effective strategies to enhance learning experiences.  **Study design:** Descriptive quantitative research approach.  **Place and Duration of Study:** Saudi Arabia; conducted with Special Forces for Security and Protection students; duration from November 2024 to April 2025.  **Methodology:** Data was collected through questionnaires administered to 38 male students selected through purposive sampling. The survey instrument was adapted from Taghreed M. Al-Saraj's research on foreign language anxiety among male English language learners in Saudi Arabia.  **Results:** 1. Learners reported moderate nervousness levels, particularly regarding inability to express themselves in written English. 2. Fear levels varied considerably (SD=1.102), with participants showing greater comfort speaking with classmates and teachers. 3. Highest anxiety occurred during writing tasks, lesson comprehension difficulties, and when facing unprepared teacher questions. 4. Strong internal consistency was demonstrated (Cronbach's alpha=.920), validating the reliability of the research instrument.  **Conclusion:** The study reveals specific anxiety-provoking factors in Saudi military educational settings and confirms the negative relationship between language anxiety and proficiency. Findings suggest implementing supportive learning environments, learner-centered approaches, and targeted anxiety-reduction strategies to enhance language acquisition outcomes among Saudi EFL learners. |

*Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, English as Foreign Language (EFL), Saudi Military Learners, Language Proficiency, Anxiety-Reduction Strategies*

1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in learning English as a foreign language has been steadily increasing in Saudi Arabia (Alharbi, 2022). Although Arabic is the country's official language, English is widely spoken, and its importance continues to grow due to globalization. In response, the Saudi government has invested significantly in English language teaching initiatives from early education stages, introducing new curricula and learning facilities to meet the growing demand. These efforts have led to rapid growth of English-medium instruction (EMI) programs in many higher education institutions across the country (Alnasser, 2022).

However, despite these considerable investments, many Saudi students still demonstrate poor English proficiency (Alshammari, 2022). This outcome is understandable considering the inherent challenges of learning a foreign language, which requires substantial time and effort to achieve proficiency. Additionally, multiple factors influence language learning, including attitudes, beliefs, motivation, learning styles, and cultural background. Among the emotional factors affecting language acquisition, language anxiety stands out as a significant element that can either impede or facilitate learning. Most language learners experience anxiety when learning, speaking, or taking tests in a foreign language. Unfortunately, foreign language anxiety (FLA) remains understudied, particularly in the Saudi Arabian context (Al-Saraj, 2014). Recognizing language anxiety is essential for facilitating foreign language learning and developing practical solutions to address this barrier (Pandya, 2024).

A study on foreign language anxiety is especially relevant for Saudi Arabia, where nearly all students are native Arabic speakers. According to Alsowat (2016), the Saudi Arabian higher education system is quite young; about 65% of the government universities were established in the last 15 years. There exists a notable gap between high school and university-level English learning requirements. While English is not mandatory at the high school level, it becomes compulsory in higher education. Consequently, students entering university must complete a preparatory year before pursuing their chosen fields. During this one-year program, all students must take English lessons for at least 12 hours per week across two semesters. Making English compulsory and restricting Arabic use in higher education institutions represents the government's strategy to ensure Saudi students remain globally competitive. This approach is necessary since English has increasingly become a lingua franca in the private sector between Saudi citizens and the large population of foreign workers (Al-Tamimi, 2019).

The mismatch between high school and university educational systems potentially breeds English language anxiety. Additionally, transitioning from an Arabic-dominant environment to one where English predominates can also generate language anxiety. The Saudi high school curriculum typically employs rote instruction methods, with students not expected to engage in independent learning. As a result, most learners often appear reluctant to participate in classroom discourse, are unwilling to provide responses, seldom ask questions, and are unwilling to engage in class discussions (Alrabai, 2014). In contrast, post-high school education requires active class participation through discussions and independent learning. This transition, coupled with the pressure to learn English, can induce language anxiety, potentially affecting students' academic outcomes. This study focuses on examining the extent to which learning English causes language anxiety and its impact on Saudi students' performance.

Exploring language anxiety is crucial as it helps Saudi language learners and teachers understand the problem and develop practical solutions. Many Saudi Arabian students travel to English-speaking countries for higher education (AlShurfa et al., 2022) and subsequently apply for jobs in these countries, further emphasizing the need to study English. Since English is widely used in new work environments, many learners experience foreign language anxieties. Enabling students to overcome this challenge is the focus of this study. This paper investigates language anxiety by examining potential anxiety-provoking factors, the relationship between language anxiety and language proficiency, and the role of motivation. The study was conducted with male students from The Special Forces for Security and Protection in Saudi Arabia, aged between 20 and 32 years. All participants are novices in English, with the majority having a high school diploma as their most recent educational experience. These learners are undertaking intensive English courses to develop their language skills and better prepare them for environments where English is dominant.

Foreign language anxiety

## Research Questions

The primary research question for this study is: What is the impact of foreign language anxiety on EFL learners in the Saudi Arabian context? From this main question, four sub-questions were developed:

1. What are the potential anxiety-provoking factors experienced by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia?
2. What is the relationship between foreign language anxiety and language proficiency among EFL learners?
3. What is the role of motivation in mediating the relationship between foreign language anxiety and language proficiency?
4. What are practical strategies that can be employed to help EFL learners overcome language anxiety and enhance their language learning experience?

## Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the level of foreign language anxiety among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and its impact on their language proficiency and academic performance. The specific research objectives are:

1. To explore the potential anxiety-provoking factors experienced by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia.
2. To examine the relationship between foreign language anxiety and language proficiency among EFL learners.
3. To investigate the role of motivation in mediating the relationship between foreign language anxiety and language proficiency.
4. To identify practical strategies to help EFL learners overcome language anxiety and enhance their language learning experience.

By addressing these objectives, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and contribute to the existing literature on language acquisition and educational psychology.

## Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is multifaceted and extends to various stakeholders within language education. It addresses an important and understudied area of research in the Saudi Arabian context. Despite the increasing emphasis on English language learning in the country, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the specific challenges and factors contributing to foreign language anxiety among EFL learners. By investigating this phenomenon, the study fills a critical gap in the literature and provides a deeper understanding of the unique experiences and needs of Saudi EFL learners. The findings have practical implications for language educators and policymakers in Saudi Arabia. By identifying anxiety-provoking factors, educators can develop targeted strategies and interventions to alleviate anxiety and create a more supportive learning environment. These insights can guide curriculum development, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices to enhance language learning outcomes.

This research contributes to the broader field of second language acquisition and educational psychology by adding to the body of knowledge on anxiety's role in language learning processes. The findings can inform theoretical frameworks and models of language anxiety, deepening our understanding of its impact on language proficiency and academic performance. Furthermore, the implications extend beyond the Saudi Arabian context, as foreign language anxiety is a pervasive issue faced by language learners worldwide. The insights gained can contribute to developing effective strategies to address language anxiety and improve language learning experiences for EFL learners globally, facilitating more inclusive and effective language education practices.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Definition and Nature of Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is a widely recognized affective filter that significantly impacts the success of foreign language acquisition. While many people undertake foreign language lessons, not all develop the confidence to communicate effectively in writing and speech. Alsowat (2016) argues that foreign language anxiety is the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient. It is, therefore, seen as: “a stable personality trait referring to the propensity for an individual to react in a nervous manner when speaking, listening, reading, or writing in a second language" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993, p. 5). The unique and stressful nature of learning a new language creates negative self-perceptions, feelings, and beliefs that breed anxiety, making it a serious obstacle to improving foreign language proficiency and test outcomes.

Foreign language anxiety differs from ordinary anxiety. While general anxiety symptoms include fear, panic, nervousness, rapid heartbeat, and sweating, language anxiety exhibits similar symptoms but specifically stems from difficulties in learning and using a foreign language. Alrashidi (2022) contends that anxiety is a vague fear, a state of apprehension broadly described as feelings associated with self-doubt, uneasiness, worry, and apprehension. Horwitz (2001) believes that language anxiety is an intrinsic mode of anxiety triggered by the combination of language anxiety and other anxieties that results in an odd type of internal hindrance in language learning. Thus, language anxiety manifests specifically in language-learning situations rather than general circumstances (Hakim, 2019).

## Types of Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is primarily associated with performance evaluations in academic and social contexts and manifests in three main types: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension manifests as shyness and nervousness when communicating using an acquired language (Alsowat, 2016). Individuals with this type of anxiety hesitate to speak in public due to fear of making mistakes and experiencing disappointment (Hussain et al., 2021).

Test anxiety is achievement-oriented, with individuals experiencing frustration after failing to meet their targets (Alsowat, 2016). People highly motivated to learn a new language may set unrealistic objectives and consider anything below their goals a failure. Fear of negative evaluation extends beyond test anxiety by incorporating social experiences (Alsowat, 2016). This anxiety is not limited to test-taking situations but includes social settings. Individuals with this type of anxiety exhibit visible fear in class, when speaking in public, or during job interviews. The anticipation of failure when learning and using a new language is the primary cause of all three types of language anxiety.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's Theory of Foreign Language Learning (Horwitz et al., 1986). The founders of this theory acknowledged the uniqueness of foreign language anxiety and introduced the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as an instrument to measure anxiety levels as evidenced by negative performance expectancies and social comparisons, psychophysiological symptoms, and avoidance behaviors (Tran, 2012). The FLCAS contains five-point scales measuring the three types of language anxiety: test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation. Scores range from 33 to 165 points (Tran, 2012), with higher scores indicating lower language anxiety levels. The theory recognizes that learning a new language is a unique experience causing stress and anxiety, affecting performance and learners' ability to communicate and express themselves.

## Stages of Language Learning Anxieties

Language learning progresses from novice to expert level, a process that applies even when children learn their mother tongue. However, the process becomes more complex when learning a foreign language as an adult due to cognitive and time constraints. Acquiring a new dialect requires considerable time, consistent practice, and the construction of new cognitive frameworks. These difficulties cause language anxiety, which occurs in three stages: input, processing, and output. In the input stage, individuals learn the basics of a foreign language, including vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling. Language learning happens progressively via comprehensible input (Asif, 2017). Language anxiety at this stage reduces students' attention in class, limiting their ability to learn the new language. For example, students may avoid eye contact with teachers for fear of being questioned.

The processing stage involves mental activities where one's ability to absorb and apply new knowledge determines language acquisition proficiency. During communication, complex and non-spontaneous mental operations are required to carry out these operations, and malfunctioning to perform so could lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear or even panic (Asif, 2017). Cognition, behavior, and anxiety are interrelated, with poor cognition resulting in increased anxiety and withdrawal tendencies. High language anxiety levels hinder students' ability to learn new vocabulary and comprehend messages. In the output stage, anxiety often appears when learners attempt to communicate using the learned language. Despite confidence after completing the input and processing stages, students may experience fear when demonstrating what they've learned. Across all stages, language anxiety impedes optimal language acquisition.

## Symptoms of Language Anxiety

Language anxiety manifests through observable behaviors and actions. Identification is essential for learners and teachers as it is the first step toward finding solutions. Common symptoms include trembling hands, increased heart rate, and sweating, despite demonstrating good language proficiency in test results (Yalçın & İnceçay, 2014). Some individuals who understand a foreign language become tongue-tied when speaking it. Others experience anxiety merely thinking about using a foreign language, while some fear making mistakes and embarrassing themselves. Alamer and Almulhim (2021) stress that learners get nervous about forgetting what they already know, go blank when they try to say something without preparation, and feel panic when they are asked by their language teacher to reply using English. Most students experience fear symptoms when using a foreign language in public due to perceived incompetence.

## Sources of Language Anxiety

A spectrum of factors can cause language anxiety. Lack of practice breeds nervousness during tests and conversations, as adequate preparation can reduce anxiety levels (Alrashidi, 2022). Personality traits play a determinant role, with individuals having anxiety disorders likely experiencing more language anxiety than confident counterparts (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017). Fear of making mistakes, especially when audiences react with ridicule, is a common source. The anticipation of embarrassment leads many students to remain silent or use their mother tongue instead of the foreign language. When performance expectations are high, the risk of anxiety increases if those expectations aren't met.

Fear of negative evaluation also causes language anxiety. Alrashidi (2022) reported that his participants were concerned about situations in which their English was to be monitored and evaluated by their excellent students, supervisor, mentors, and other English-qualified individuals outside the school context. Additionally, non-native speakers expressed uneasiness when using a foreign language for complex tasks (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017). The sources of language anxiety vary with individual language skills and learning environments.

## The Impact of Foreign Language Anxiety on Language Proficiency

Most studies suggest language anxiety has detrimental outcomes on students' language learning (Aguila & Harjanto, 2016; Alsowat, 2016; Han et al., 2022), extending to social, cognitive, and academic domains. Han et al. (2022) argued that worry impedes learners' proficiency progress and undermines their confidence in the foreign language, which in turn enhances anxiety, creating a vicious cycle. Individuals experiencing nervousness when speaking a foreign language may avoid social settings to escape conversations. The discomfort stems from lacking faultless linguistic means to express themselves in ways foreign language speakers would understand. A mind preoccupied with anxiety threatens a person's ability to understand language and imagine creative ways of combining words. Zheng and Cheng (2018) argued that strong test anxiety jeopardizes attention span since anxious feelings can occupy parts of the working memory needed in problem-solving. However, other studies show contradictory results. In her research, Andrea (2021) found no correlation between language anxiety levels and academic performance, suggesting language anxiety is not a direct indicator of poor academic performance.

Contrary to the predominantly negative view, language anxiety can potentially enhance foreign language acquisition when harnessed properly. Hayasaki (2018) found that language anxiety relates to desirable emotions like joy, and individuals' experiences of language anxiety change over time. The findings showed that learners generally had both high levels of anxiety and enjoyment in classrooms during the EAP program in the first year and while studying abroad in the third or fourth year of university (Hayasaki, 2018). Language anxiety is not permanent and individuals can transform fear into euphoria as they build confidence after mastering the basics. This transition depends on motivation levels and how optimistically learners envision themselves. Emotional intelligence plays a vital role in regulating language anxiety. Han et al. (2022) argued that the ability to notice emotions, access and generate emotions to aid thought, comprehend emotions and emotional knowledge, and reflectively control emotions to enhance emotional and intellectual development. People with this capability recognize when emotions exceed normal levels and take measures to regulate them. Learning a new language is associated with strong feelings and negative emotions that may jeopardize students' learning potential. Students with high emotional intelligence can better cope with language learning challenges by regulating fear impulses, maintaining optimism, and managing stress.

## Impact of Gender on Language Anxiety

Research on gender differences in language anxiety has produced inconclusive results. Numerous studies found that learners are more anxious while speaking in a foreign language (Alsowat, 2016; Siahpoosh et al., 2022; Tai & Chen, 2024). Siahpoosh et al. (2022) found no statistical differences between males and females in language anxiety levels, while Suparia et al. (2022) showed that girls are more language anxious than boys. These inconsistent findings highlight the multifaceted nature of language anxiety and create space for considering other variables such as age. A meta-analysis by Han et al. (2022) revealed that methodological and reporting practices differences explain the varied results in various studies. Most studies used Cronbach's alpha internal consistency measure but failed to report effect sizes, and few studies used multivariate statistical methods. They concluded that gender has no statistically significant role in language anxiety levels (Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022).

# METHODOLOGY

## Research Design

Research design serves as a framework for investigators to systematically address research questions through organized data collection, interpretation, analysis, and discussion. For this study, a descriptive research design was employed, categorizing it as a quantitative descriptive study. Descriptive research explores the characteristics of variables under investigation with the primary objective of identifying existing problems within a defined sample population (Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022).

Unlike experimental designs that manipulate variables, descriptive research focuses on analyzing attributes of specific phenomena without manipulation. It gathers information about the current state of a subject or population, including attitudes, behaviors, and opinions. A key advantage of descriptive research is its ability to collect diverse data that can generate hypotheses and guide future research. However, it does not provide insights into causality or underlying mechanisms driving observed trends (Siedlecki, 2020).

In descriptive research, quantitative data collection methods such as surveys, questionnaires, and observations are commonly employed (Ghanad, 2023). For this study, the survey approach was selected as the primary data collection method, ensuring that data obtained from participants was suitable for analysis and descriptive interpretation. This approach was particularly valuable in highlighting the impact of language learning anxiety, an often-overlooked phenomenon crucial to effective second language learning, especially for non-native speakers learning English as a foreign language. Quantitative methodologies were deliberately chosen to ensure collected information could be quantified and hypotheses tested (Kumar & Praveenakumar, 2025). This approach facilitated the collection of numerical data, making analysis and interpretation more straightforward while enabling the formulation of conclusions and generalizations based on study results.

## Sampling Method

The target population for this study comprised EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. A purposive sampling method was employed to select students from a military academy who were studying basic English. This approach ensured participants shared similar characteristics regarding English proficiency level, age, background, and gender, thus enhancing the study's internal validity (Campbell et al., 2020). The primary reason for using purposive sampling was to collect data from a focused sample population relevant to the research topic. Students were selected based on predetermined criteria aligned with research objectives and population characteristics. The selection considered factors such as availability, accessibility, and relevance to the research context. By choosing participants from a military academy, the study aimed to capture a homogeneous group of learners, minimizing potential confounding variables that could influence outcomes.

The military academy setting offered a controlled environment where learners were exposed to standardized curriculum and instructional practices, enhancing consistency and comparability of findings. However, purposive sampling has limitations. The findings may not be generalizable to other EFL learners outside the military academy context or with different characteristics. Caution should be exercised when extrapolating results to the broader population of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia or other educational settings. Future studies could expand the sample to include learners from diverse backgrounds and institutions to increase external validity.

**Data Collection Methods**

To collect comprehensive data from a large number of participants, a survey questionnaire was identified as the most suitable data collection tool. The questionnaire was adopted from Taghreed M. Al-Saraj's article, "Revisiting the Foreign language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS): The Anxiety of Female English Language Learners in Saudi Arabia." It was designed to capture participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to foreign language anxiety within the context of English language learning. The adopted questionnaire was modified on the Google Forms platform to suit the specific requirements and population for this study. This choice leveraged advantages offered by online data collection methods, including convenience, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness. The remote work model minimized expenses associated with traditional face-to-face data collection methods, such as travel costs, survey administration logistics, and miscellaneous expenditures.

The web-based questionnaire design ensured user-friendliness, enabling participants to navigate and complete the survey easily. The closed-ended format facilitated straightforward responses, minimizing the likelihood of missing or incomplete data. Additionally, the online platform allowed participants to complete the questionnaire at their convenience, improving response rates. Participants could choose a comfortable environment and pace for their responses, reducing potential biases related to external factors such as time constraints or location limitations. The online questionnaire facilitated efficient data collection, automatically recording and organizing responses, eliminating manual data entry needs, and reducing time and effort required for subsequent analysis. This streamlined process enhanced accuracy and reliability of collected data, enabling researchers to focus more on interpretation and analysis.

## Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis process encompassed both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to comprehensively understand participants' responses and examine the impact of various foreign language anxiety factors on English language learning in Saudi Arabia. Descriptive statistics summarized and presented participants' responses from the survey questionnaire. These statistics included frequencies, means, standard deviations, and variances, providing a concise representation of data and overview of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding foreign language anxiety. To investigate how factors such as anxiousness, nervousness, and fright affect English learning in Saudi Arabia, inferential statistics were applied. These techniques enabled researchers to draw meaningful conclusions and infer patterns or relationships in the data. Specific statistical tests employed included bivariate Pearson correlation and multivariate regression analysis to explore the significance of observed differences and examine associations between variables.

The bivariate Pearson correlation analysis investigated the strength and direction of relationships between pairs of variables at a given point in time, exploring potential associations between foreign language anxiety factors and English language learning outcomes. By quantifying correlation degrees, researchers could determine whether certain anxiety factors were positively or negatively related to language learning performance. Multivariate regression analysis assessed simultaneous effects of multiple independent variables (anxiousness, nervousness, and fright) on the dependent variable of English language learning outcomes. This statistical technique identified the most influential factors and examined their combined impact on language proficiency.

By employing both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, this study aimed to comprehensively examine participants' responses and uncover significant relationships between foreign language anxiety factors and English language learning in Saudi Arabia. The rigorous application of statistical tests facilitated extraction of valuable insights and supported data interpretation, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of foreign language anxiety's role in language education.

## Ethical Considerations

## This study adhered to strict ethical principles throughout the research process. University ethics committee approval was obtained through proper IRB procedures, ensuring alignment with established guidelines. All participants provided informed consent by signing forms that detailed the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences, with assurance that their data would be promptly discarded upon withdrawal. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained; all data was stored in password-protected files with multiple security features, and no third parties were granted access. Participants understood that while there were no direct material benefits from participation, their contributions would advance knowledge in foreign language learning anxiety research. These safeguards protected participants' welfare, privacy, and confidentiality, fostering a research environment built on trust and respect

# Results and Discussion

## Descriptive Statistics

The study examined 38 male students, aged 19-22, from a military academy. Participants reported moderate nervousness when unable to write or express themselves in English (M=3.58, SD=1.244). They also expressed moderate anxiety when faced with unprepared questions from teachers (M=3.21, SD=1.189). In contrast, fear of speaking or asking questions in the English classroom was relatively low (M=1.97, SD=1.102), though responses were somewhat dispersed. Participants reported moderate nervousness when using English outside academic settings (M=2.32, SD=1.188) but felt more comfortable speaking English in front of classmates (M=3.68, SD=1.233). Notably, they expressed high comfort levels when speaking with their English teachers (M=4.26, SD=0.978). Additional areas of moderate anxiety included: arriving late to class (M=3.55, SD=1.389), seeing classmates performing better (M=3.08, SD=1.383), looking at their grades (M=3.37, SD=1.384), facing time pressure from teachers (M=3.08, SD=1.363), feeling overwhelmed by grammatical rules (M=3.45, SD=1.179), and being unable to find proper words when volunteering to speak (M=3.39, SD=1.285). Table 1 and figure 1 illustrate the mean, standard deviation and variance of the gathered responses.

**Table 1** (Condensed Descriptive Statistics)

| **Item** | **N** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Variance** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| I feel nervous when I can't write or express myself in English | 38 | 3.58 | 1.244 | 1.548 |
| I feel anxious when the teacher asks a question I haven't prepared for | 38 | 3.21 | 1.189 | 1.414 |
| I fear speaking or asking the teacher in my English classroom | 38 | 1.97 | 1.102 | 1.216 |
| I feel comfortable speaking with my English Teacher | 38 | 4.26 | 0.978 | 0.956 |
| I feel overwhelmed by grammatical rules in English | 38 | 3.45 | 1.179 | 1.389 |

## Figure 1.

## Reliability Analysis

The reliability analysis confirmed all 38 cases were valid with no exclusions, indicating complete data for all variables. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.920 for the 30-item scale, suggesting excellent internal consistency. This high value indicates the items are strongly correlated and consistently measure the same underlying construct, providing a reliable measure of foreign language anxiety. Tables 2 and 3 highlight the case processing summary and the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient calculations.

**Table 2** Case Processing Summary

| **Cases** | **N** | **%** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Valid | 38 | 100.0 |
| Excluded | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total | 38 | 100.0 |

**Table 3** Reliability Statistics

| **Cronbach's Alpha** | **N of Items** |
| --- | --- |
| 0.920 | 30 |

## Correlation Analysis

The bivariate correlation analysis examined relationships between three key variables: Feeling nervous, Feeling anxious, and Feeling fear. All correlations were statistically significant (p < .01). The strongest relationship was between Feeling nervous and Feeling anxious (r = .874), indicating a strong positive correlation. As nervousness increases, anxiety also tends to increase substantially. The relationship between Feeling nervous and Feeling fear was moderately positive (r = .471), suggesting that as nervousness increases, fear also increases but to a lesser extent. Similarly, Feeling anxious and Feeling fear showed a moderate positive correlation (r = .529). These results suggest that these three emotional states are interconnected, with individuals experiencing higher levels of one emotion likely to experience higher levels of the others as well. Table 4 and figure 2 illustrate the bivariate correlations analyses between the three variables.

**Table 4** Bivariate Correlations

|  | **Feeling nervous** | **Feeling anxious** | **Feeling fear** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Feeling nervous** | 1 | .874\*\* | .471\*\* |
| **Feeling anxious** | .874\*\* | 1 | .529\*\* |
| **Feeling fear** | .471\*\* | .529\*\* | 1 |

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

## 

Figure 2. Bivariate correlation matrix of the three variables.

## Regression Analysis

A linear regression analysis was conducted with Feeling fear, Feeling nervous, and Feeling anxious as predictors of comfort when speaking with an English teacher. The model summary indicates a weak relationship between the predictors and outcome variable (R = .255). The predictors collectively explained only 6.5% of the variance in comfort levels (R² = .065). The adjusted R² value (-.018) suggests the predictors do not provide meaningful improvement in explaining the outcome variable beyond chance. The standard error of estimate (.986) represents the average distance between observed and predicted values.

The ANOVA results confirmed the regression model did not show a significant overall effect (F = .786, p = .510), indicating the predictors together do not significantly explain variability in comfort levels when speaking with an English teacher. The regression sum of squares (2.294) represents explained variance, while the residual sum of squares (33.075) represents unexplained variance. The Coefficients table shows none of the predictors had statistically significant effects on comfort levels. The constant term (5.349) was significant (p < .001), representing the estimated average comfort level when all predictors are zero. The standardized coefficients for Feeling nervous (β = -.075, p = .828), Feeling anxious (β = -.132, p = .713), and Feeling fear (β = -.084, p = .670) were all non-significant.

**Table 5** Model Summary

| **Model** | **R** | **R Square** | **Adjusted R Square** | **Std. Error of Estimate** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | .255 | .065 | -.018 | .986 |

**Table 6** ANOVA Results

| **Model** | **Sum of Squares** | **df** | **Mean Square** | **F** | **Sig.** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Regression | 2.294 | 3 | .765 | .786 | .510 |
| Residual | 33.075 | 34 | .973 |  |  |
| Total | 35.368 | 37 |  |  |  |

**Table 7** Coefficients

| **Model** | **Unstandardized Coefficients** |  | **Standardized Coefficients** | **t** | **Sig.** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | B | Std. Error | Beta |  |  |
| (Constant) | 5.349 | .977 |  | 5.477 | .000 |
| Feeling nervous | -.013 | .060 | -.075 | -.219 | .828 |
| Feeling anxious | -.013 | .034 | -.132 | -.371 | .713 |
| Feeling fear | -.020 | .047 | -.084 | -.430 | .670 |

## Summary of Results

The analysis revealed moderate anxiety levels among participants, particularly when unable to express themselves in English, facing unprepared questions, and feeling overwhelmed by grammatical rules. Participants showed higher comfort when speaking with teachers and classmates. The reliability analysis confirmed excellent internal consistency (α = .920) among the 30 scale items. Correlation analysis demonstrated significant positive relationships between nervousness, anxiety, and fear, with the strongest correlation between nervousness and anxiety.

The regression analysis found that nervousness, anxiety, and fear did not significantly predict comfort levels when speaking with English teachers. This suggests that other factors may play more important roles in determining comfort in teacher interactions. These findings highlight the interconnectedness of emotional states in language learning and emphasize the importance of addressing nervousness and anxiety in educational contexts to enhance learners' experiences and outcomes.

# Discussion

## Introduction and Results Overview

Foreign language anxiety significantly impacts language learners' proficiency and overall learning experience. This study investigated anxiety among ESL learners in Saudi Arabia, revealing prevalent anxiety when students struggled with self-expression in English, encountered unclear lesson explanations, or faced unprepared questions. Participants felt more comfortable with their English teachers and speaking before classmates, suggesting supportive relationships mitigate anxiety. The correlation analysis demonstrated strong connections between nervousness and anxiety (r = .874, p < .01), with moderate correlations between nervousness and fear (r = .471, p < .01) and between anxiety and fear (r = .529, p < .01). These findings highlight the interconnected nature of these emotional responses.

## Anxiety-Provoking Factors

## Several key anxiety triggers were identified:

1. Difficulty in self-expression: Participants experienced anxiety when unable to articulate thoughts in English. Educators can address this through regular practice opportunities and constructive feedback.
2. Challenges in lesson comprehension: Unclear explanations by instructors triggered anxiety. Visual aids and interactive teaching methods can improve comprehension and reduce anxiety.
3. Unprepared questions: Students reported anxiety when facing questions they were not prepared for. Collaborative learning approaches can create safer participation environments.
4. Social comparison: The presence of more proficient peers triggered anxiety. Fostering collaborative rather than competitive classroom cultures can help.
5. Fear of mistakes: Apprehension about errors hindered participation. Creating environments where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities can develop growth mindsets.
6. Cultural factors: Saudi cultural expectations regarding language proficiency added pressure. Culturally sensitive teaching approaches are essential.
7. Time constraints: Heavy workloads with limited time increased anxiety. Breaking tasks into manageable components helps students approach learning with greater confidence.

## Anxiety and Language Proficiency

The study revealed a significant negative relationship between anxiety and language proficiency (Tanielian, 2017). Higher anxiety levels corresponded with lower proficiency scores through several mechanisms:

1. Cognitive interference: Anxiety consumes attentional resources needed for language processing.
2. Production inhibition: Fear of mistakes creates barriers to risk-taking and authentic communication (Fraschini & Park, 2021).
3. Affective filter: Per Krashen's hypothesis, anxiety restricts language input acquisition (Taghizadeh, 2023).
4. Individual factors: Self-esteem, perfectionism, and learning environment influence anxiety's impact.

## Motivation as a Mediator

Though not directly investigated, previous research suggests motivation buffers against anxiety's negative effects (Alamer & Almulhim, 2021). Motivated learners engage more actively and persist through challenges. In the Saudi context, understanding motivation's role is particularly relevant as learners face challenges influenced by cultural norms and career expectations (Alrasheedi, 2020). Future research should examine how motivation mediates anxiety's effects on language proficiency among Saudi ESL learners.

**Practical Strategies**

**Several evidence-based strategies can help learners overcome language anxiety:**

1. Supportive environments: Promoting open communication and constructive feedback reduces anxiety. Classroom cultures valuing diversity create safe spaces for expression.
2. Learner-centered approaches: Task-based and project-based learning prioritize meaningful communication, reducing anxiety associated with traditional instruction.
3. Technology integration: Language apps and online resources provide self-paced learning without immediate evaluation pressure.
4. Targeted support: Individualized feedback promotes growth mindsets while reducing evaluation anxiety. Stress management techniques help learners develop emotional regulation skills.

**Research Questions Addressed**

1. Anxiety-provoking factors: The study identified seven primary anxiety triggers for Saudi EFL learners, from self-expression difficulties to cultural pressures.
2. Anxiety-proficiency relationship: Higher anxiety levels were associated with lower language proficiency, confirming anxiety's hindering effect on language learning.
3. Motivation's role: While not directly studied, existing research suggests motivation mediates anxiety's effects on language learning.
4. Practical strategies: Four main approaches—supportive environments, learner-centered methods, technology integration, and targeted interventions—can effectively address language anxiety.

This study highlights foreign language anxiety's significant impact on Saudi EFL learners and emphasizes the importance of addressing anxiety through supportive environments and learner-centered approaches to enhance language learning outcomes.

# Conclusion

## Conclusions Based on Results

The study identified several anxiety-provoking factors experienced by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. Difficulties in self-expression, challenges in understanding lessons, and unprepared questions from teachers elicited higher anxiety levels. These findings underscore the importance of educators recognizing these factors and employing appropriate instructional strategies to create supportive learning environments. The correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and language proficiency. Higher anxiety levels corresponded with lower language proficiency scores, consistent with existing literature suggesting anxiety impedes language learning by compromising cognitive resources. This highlights the critical need to address foreign language anxiety to enhance proficiency among Saudi EFL learners.

Although this study didn't directly investigate motivation's mediating role between anxiety and proficiency, previous research suggests motivation significantly mitigates anxiety's negative effects on language learning. Future studies should examine this relationship in Saudi contexts to inform interventions that foster positive motivation and reduce anxiety. Based on these findings, several practical strategies can help learners overcome language anxiety: creating supportive classroom environments that promote open communication; implementing learner-centered approaches like task-based learning; integrating technology to provide self-paced learning opportunities; and offering targeted interventions including individualized feedback and stress management techniques.

## Implications of the Findings

Theoretically, this study contributes to foreign language anxiety literature by providing empirical evidence within the Saudi Arabian context. The identified anxiety-provoking factors align with previous studies in different settings, enhancing the generalizability of research and highlighting common challenges faced by ESL learners globally. The negative relationship between anxiety and proficiency reaffirms anxiety's significance in language learning outcomes.

Practically, these findings inform ESL teachers, program administrators, and policymakers in Saudi Arabia. Teachers can tailor instructional approaches to create supportive learning environments through learner-centered methods, clear explanations, and differentiated instruction. Program administrators can integrate anxiety management strategies into teacher education and foster collaboration among educators to share best practices. Policymakers should consider implementing comprehensive support systems addressing learners' emotional well-being, including mental health components in curricula and counseling services. Strategies should be implemented with careful consideration of cultural, contextual, and individual differences, with regular assessment to ensure their effectiveness.

## Study Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small (30 participants) and homogeneous (male military students aged 20-30 from Northwestern Saudi Arabia), limiting generalizability. The study relied on self-report measures, which are subject to response biases and may not capture the full complexity of language anxiety experiences. The cross-sectional design provided only a snapshot of participants' experiences without examining changes in anxiety over time. The online format may have introduced technical issues, distractions, or environmental differences that influenced responses. Additionally, the study's narrow focus on English language learning in a military context limits generalizability to other languages or educational settings.

## Recommendations

## For Practice

Educators should address anxiety-provoking factors by providing clear instructions, scaffolding tasks, offering constructive feedback, fostering peer collaboration, and promoting growth mindsets. Creating meaningful interaction opportunities helps build confidence and fluency. Incorporating cultural sensitivity recognizes diverse backgrounds and reduces anxiety related to cultural expectations. Establishing open communication channels allows learners to express concerns and seek support. Encouraging active participation in goal setting and self-reflection empowers learners to manage anxiety effectively. A personalized approach considering learners' unique needs is essential in creating safe learning environments where risk-taking is encouraged.

## For Future Research

Future studies should use larger, more diverse samples including different ages, genders, and educational backgrounds. Mixed-method approaches combining qualitative and quantitative techniques would provide richer insights into language anxiety experiences. Longitudinal designs could track anxiety changes over time and their long-term effects on proficiency. Research should explore anxiety across various languages and educational contexts beyond military settings. Studies evaluating intervention effectiveness would provide evidence-based recommendations for addressing language anxiety. Investigating cultural factors' role in shaping anxiety experiences and examining online learning environments' impact on anxiety levels would contribute valuable knowledge to this field.

# Conclusion

This study illuminates foreign language anxiety among Saudi EFL learners, emphasizing its negative impact on language proficiency and highlighting practical strategies for creating supportive learning environments. By addressing anxiety effectively, Saudi Arabia can foster inclusive educational settings that enhance ESL learners' language proficiency, well-being, and overall educational experience.

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