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Gender Differences in English Language Anxiety among Moroccan University Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on gender differences in English Language anxiety among Moroccan students. A structured questionnaire was employed for data collection by adopting a cross-sectional research design. The respondents comprised 240 university students; the questionnaire included respondents' demographic data and the English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS). The study aimed to answer three research questions: (1) Does gender significantly influence English language anxiety among Moroccan students? (2) What variables cause male and female students' English language anxiety? (3) How does English language anxiety affect male and female students' academic achievement and well-being? The study affirms that the level of English anxiety significantly differs by gender, and the female students had higher English anxiety. Some significantly identified factors include fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. The study thus advocates for tailored intervention to address gender-specific language anxiety and promote the student's academic achievement and well-being.

INTRODUCTION

English has become a significant tool of communication in the world today due to globalization. This critical skill paves the way for various educational and job opportunities. In the Moroccan context, the importance of English is rising gradually, and it is regarded as one of the essential skills for education and career progression. However, most students have relatively high anxiety levels associated with learning and using English. This anxiety can impact their academic performance as well as their psychological well-being, acting as a hindrance to their success. The purpose of this research is first to explore gender differences in English language anxiety among Moroccan students; second, to identify the possible causes behind this kind of anxiety; and third, to investigate the effect that anxiety has on students' academic achievement and well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Language Anxiety

Foreign Language Anxiety is a specific form of anxiety, which students experience when they are learning and practicing a Foreign Language. Horwitz *et al.* (1986) refer to this anxiety as a pattern of unusual feelings, thoughts, and attitudes related to classroom language learning. This kind of anxiety can significantly limit the learning and use of English by the students who have such a kind of anxiety. Students who have English language anxiety tend to be anxious before they make a mistake or when others evaluate them in any way, which means they cannot engage optimally in activities in the class. In speaking tasks, they may freeze, refrain from raising their hands to answer questions, or even sometimes miss classes entirely on language. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) state

that lack of adequate involvement in learning a foreign language precipitated by language anxiety results in poor achievements and low self-efficiency in the second language.

Besides, this anxiety not only transfers to their class performance but also to their attitude toward learning English. Students might perceive themselves as less competent learners of languages; this may diminish their motivation to learn and practice. This can lead to a cycle where anxiety results in poor performance and causes more anxiety in turn. Students must develop confidence and language abilities to get out of this cycle successfully. Altogether, English language anxiety is a much more serious condition than a slight fear of having to speak in front of others. It can manifest itself in nearly every learner's capacity to learn a new language whether it is oral or written language comprehension and production. Teachers and educators must be aware of this anxiety and try as much as possible to create a friendly and motivating environment that can help diminish fear and apprehension. Hence, it is possible to facilitate effective language learning among students by reducing language anxiety.

Gender Differences in Language Learning

Studies have indicated that there are significant differences between males and females in language learning, more specifically, levels of learners' anxiety. It was reported that female students generally claim to experience higher levels of language anxiety than male students. According to Aida (1994), this difference could result from cultural values and norms regarding gender that put the male and the female in different standards. For instance, females may experience a higher drive to excel academically

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and may carve negative evaluations more profoundly. These societal expectations put more pressure on female students, and as a result, they develop higher levels of anxiety towards learning and using English.

Young (1991) points out that such pressures increase the level of anxiety among female students, thus making them more sensitive to the stress that accompanies the process of learning a new language. Thus, it impacts students' classroom involvement, readiness to experiment with language, and confidence in their language competence. Female students are more prone to experience fear of failure and other people's judgments that negatively affect their language learning. Understanding these gender differences is significant, particularly to educators and language teachers, because it underlines the importance of fostering learning environments that can help ease the anxiety that affects female learners. Realizing these gender-based differences, it becomes possible to assist all students in feeling more self-reliant and competent in their language learning pursuits.

Factors Contributing to Language Anxiety

The factors identified as causal to language anxiety are fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation occurs when learners worry about being negatively evaluated based on their language performance. This fear can be especially experienced in class, where students are forced to speak or perform in front of other students and teachers. Communication apprehension is defined as fear or anxiety associated with any communication with other persons, thereby making many students avoid speaking in class and/or using English.

There is also test anxiety, which is another significant element that contributes to language anxiety. It pertains to avoiding language tests due to the belief that one will perform poorly, leading to a negative cycle that affects overall language learning. Young (1991) suggests that strategies need to be adopted in these classes to reduce anxieties. Teachers may significantly impact decreasing anxiety by creating a positive learning environment. Further, Oxford (1999) notes that previous negative experiences in learning languages may contribute to current anxiety. If students have had embarrassing or failed experiences regarding language-related experiences, these memories may affect their present attitude and increase anxiety.

Impact on Academic Performance

These high levels of language anxiety can hinder students' academic achievement. Horwitz *et al.* (1986) reported that anxious students tended to avoid participating in class activities, thus limiting their chances of using their language abilities and further development. This leads to learning gaps and slower progress in language proficiency. In addition, anxiety could distract students from focusing on their assignments and exams, causing them to get poorer grades and academic results.

As stated by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), feeling anxious about one's language skills can create a cycle: the more anxious a student feels, the less they participate, and the less they participate, their language skills do not develop, and hence, the more anxious they feel. This cycle is not easy to break unless reinforced with inputs that help one to reduce anxiety and gain self-confidence. Language anxiety influences not only the learning outcomes but also the interpersonal and emotional state of the learners, as well as their attitude toward learning languages.

To sum up, English language anxiety is a complex problem that could impact students significantly on their learning and use of English. Female students usually report higher anxiety because of societal and gender role expectations. Fear of a negative evaluation, communication apprehension, test anxiety, and others are some factors causing language anxiety. These could lead to poor academic performance, avoidance behaviors, and poor results. Therefore, supportive classroom practice and managing past negative experiences can reduce language anxiety and enhance students' practical and successful language learning experiences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

A cross-sectional research design was employed to identify gender differences regarding English language anxiety among Moroccan learners. This method can simultaneously gather data from many students from diverse backgrounds. By adopting such a design, we can know how anxious English-language learners are at the current level in various stages of education. Therefore, the findings were useful for directly comparing males and females to determine their anxiety levels.

Furthermore, we were able to incorporate such demographic variables as age, education, and gender because of the cross-sectional design of the study. It is crucial to take a holistic view regarding the complications of language anxiety and its effects on students from various backgrounds. We ensured such representation by collecting data from different universities in Morocco, as our objective was to ensure that the sample was representative of the target population, hence enhancing generalizability. This comprehensive approach contributes to explaining English language anxiety patterns by which we seek to understand the factors responsible for these gender differences.

Population and Sample

The study included 240 participants from 3 universities in Morocco, they were from a non-English department. To achieve this, an equal number of male and female participants were drawn, thus 120 males and 120 females. Stratified random sampling was adopted, whereby findings may be generalized to the total population of students rather than on the sample alone. As a result, we could promote representation from various age and educational categories in the university, from 1st year to

3rd year. In this way, it would be possible to collect all-around data regarding the English language anxiety of all students regardless of their age and education level.

Data Collection

Data collection was performed using a structured questionnaire designed to gather demographic data and information about English language anxiety. The questionnaire had two main parts. First, there was a part for demographic data, where we inquired about age, gender, and educational attainment. This basic information was necessary for our analysis to study how these demographic aspects may affect the students' anxiety in the English language. The second part consisted of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by (Horwitz *et al.*, 9999). FLCAS is a globally accepted, reliable, valid measurement scale for foreign language anxiety. The questionnaire consisted of statements concerning feelings and experiences about language learning; the respondents had to indicate how strongly they agreed with each statement. This part of the questionnaire allowed us to quantify the anxiety of English language learners. Therefore, the comparison of anxiety related to different genders was easily done. This was a comprehensive way of ensuring we got specific details relevant to our study.

Data Analysis

After collecting data, we conducted several quantitative tests to determine the trends and differences in English language anxiety between male and female students. First, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the basic features of the data. Thus, we calculated the mean and standard deviation of the ELCAS scores for the male and female groups. Descriptive statistics provided a general representation of the level of anxiety in our sample and also pointed out the prevailing trend.

After that, we applied ANOVA to test the anxiety level between the groups, particularly among students at different educational levels: 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year. This analysis tool will give us insight into whether significant differences in anxiety are found in our variables. We also ran the correlations to analyze the relationship occurring between those variables: between age and anxiety level and between educational level and anxiety, for example. Comparisons of the mean anxiety scores of male and female students were done using t-tests to ascertain whether such differences in anxiety levels between the genders are significant. Finally, regression analysis was used to identify significant predictors of English language anxiety. Through this, it was possible to ascertain which of the factors, such as age, gender, and educational level, significantly contribute to anxiety levels. These statistical methods provided a great understanding of gender differences in English language anxiety among Moroccan students, coupled with the identification of critical variables contributing to such differences. We could now quickly draw well-supported conclusions and

recommendations from the comprehensive approach we have undertaken regarding our findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Impact of Academic Progression on Students' English Anxiety Levels

The significant p-value further strengthens the argument that students' anxiety levels vary depending on the year of study. This result suggests that learners' perceptions of anxiety are related to academic advancement, and the extent of anxiety is different for each level of study. The observed differences may stem from several factors, including rising academic requirements, expectations, or shifts in students' exposure to the language/academic environment as they progress through the academic year. It is, therefore, essential to comprehend these differences to tailor practical approaches and mechanisms to cater to the needs of students at different periods of their learning years.

The Influence of Age and Education on English Language Anxiety: A Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was used to measure the relationship between various demographic characteristics—mainly age and education level—and the English language anxiety levels as determined through the ELCAS. This analysis aimed to ascertain the connection of these demographic factors to students' anxiety levels and identify patterns or trends.

Using correlation analysis, there is a small but statistically significant negative correlation between age and anxiety levels ($r = -0.12, p = 0.01$). This shows that as students' age increases, the anxiety level slightly declines. Nonetheless, the correlation is small, but what can be observed is that there is a trend that older students are less anxious about learning English than younger students. This could be attributed to higher maturity levels and experience, which may enable older students to cope well with their anxiety. Besides, the analysis revealed that there was a moderate negative and significant relationship between education level and anxiety, with a coefficient of ($r = -0.22, p < 0.01$). This indicates that, in most cases, students who are at a more advanced academic level tend to report lower levels of anxiety. Another explanation could be that as students move through their educational levels, they may become more confident and proficient in the English language, thus resulting in low anxiety. The moderate level of this relationship suggests that the difference is more pronounced, where the advanced students with higher exposure to learning and practicing English tend to have comparatively lower levels of anxiety compared to lower levels of education.

Overall, these correlation results show that age and educational level affect English language anxiety, but in somewhat varied manners. Older students and students at more advanced academic levels exhibit comparatively lower anxiety, implying that experience and maturity

help to reduce language anxiety. Knowledge of these relationships can help comprehend how multiple factors play a role in language anxiety and thereby help in designing ways for students to deal with anxiety effectively.

Gender Differences in English Language Anxiety: Results from Independent Sample T-Tests

Independent sample t-tests were conducted to explore the differences in English language anxiety between male and female students. The t-tests aimed to determine if there was a significant difference in the means of the English Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (ELCAS) scores between the two genders. The analysis revealed a highly significant difference, with a $t(238) = -7.45$, $p < .001$. This finding, derived from the total number of participants minus the number of groups being compared, underscores the importance of our research. It suggests that the observed difference in anxiety levels is not a random occurrence but a significant gender-based disparity.

The mean difference in ELCAS scores between male and female students was -7.4. This negative mean difference indicates that female students report significantly higher levels of anxiety compared to male students. The strong negative t-value and the very low p-value confirm that this difference is statistically significant and practically meaningful. These findings point out the differences in anxiety levels by gender, implying that female students have more anxiety in the English language than male students. It is essential to be aware of these differences to design strategies that could help to prevent and treat anxiety in female students more efficiently.

Predictors of English Language Anxiety: A Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression was used to analyze the collected data to determine significant predictors of English language anxiety. The analysis included three predictors: age, gender, and educational level. This regression method enables the researcher to determine these variables' overall effect on the anxiety level. The results revealed that the regression model was significant, with $R^2 = .19$, $F(3, 236) = 38.83$, $p < .001$. This means that the total of the predictors account for 19% of the variance in the anxiety level, which shows that these variables are significant in explaining English language anxiety.

In the regression analysis, the coefficients of the predictors were estimated using unstandardized coefficients (B), standardized coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values. For age, the unstandardized coefficient was $B = -0.34$ with a standard error of 0.11, yielding a standardized coefficient of $\beta = -0.11$, $t(236) = -3.09$, $p = .002$. This indicates that older students tend to have lower anxiety levels. For gender, where female students were coded as 1 and male students as 0, the unstandardized coefficient was $B = 7.37$ with a standard error of 0.95, a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.29$, and $t(236) = 7.75$, $p < .001$. This indicates that being female is associated with

higher anxiety levels. Lastly, the educational level had an unstandardized coefficient of $B = -1.15$ with a standard error of 0.26, a standardized coefficient of $\beta = -0.19$, and $t(236) = -4.42$, $p < .001$, showing that students at higher educational levels experience lower anxiety.

To make the data more precise, the analysis showed that gender has the most substantial impact on anxiety levels, with females reporting significantly higher anxiety than males. Age and educational level also play important roles, with older students and those in higher years of study experiencing lower anxiety. Specifically, for each additional year of age, anxiety decreases slightly, while each higher educational level also contributes to reduced anxiety. As students age or advance in their studies, their English anxiety decreases. Gender differences are more pronounced, with female students generally having higher levels of anxiety compared to male students. Understanding these factors helps to identify which groups may need additional support in managing their English language anxiety.

Discussion

Differences of Gender in English Anxiety

According to the research, gender differences in English anxiety are notable. Female students had significantly higher levels than male students. This finding has been confirmed through various studies, including Aida's (1994), which also showed that female students are most likely to experience more language anxiety. Therefore, these disparities can be attributed to several factors, such as societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Young (1991) pointed out that girls may face more pressure from the need for academic excellence and fear negative evaluation more. This pressure from society could increase girls' anxiety levels when learning a foreign language like English.

In addition, females have been socialized to believe their communicative competence is more important than males', which might make them anxious if they do not meet this expectation. This additional pressure is usually witnessed where language learning can be viewed as a continuous performance assessment of the ability to communicate effectively. Therefore, female students with high levels of English anxiety tend to adopt these societal demands into their performance.

The cultural context is worth mentioning because it will contribute immensely to a better understanding the findings in question. For example, Moroccan culture is one of those cultures where boys and girls are brought up differently depending on their gender roles and expectations about them. Consequently, such girls are likely to be overcautious regarding making any mistakes at school, leading to higher levels of fear of failure and negative evaluation compared to other children subjected to different upbringing styles within the same background. Therefore, they may experience a lot of anxiety every time they try new lessons in unknown languages as compared to boys who may be aggressive

simply because they undergo harder training on how they should take risks without regard to their mistakes; thus, the level of anxiety was low among males.

Contributing Factors

These fears include Communication Apprehension or Fear of Negative Evaluation, specifically among female students affected most. Anxieties regarding negative evaluation are the fear and apprehensions one has when one believes that others will judge them negatively. This fear is even more evident in cases of language learning because students are often required to do presentations in class. While doing so, their fellow students and teachers observe and correct their mistakes immediately. Such females may feel much greater pressure on themselves to avoid making mistakes during the performance period, thus resulting in an even higher level of fear. Such females may expect much greater pressure to ensure they do not make any mistakes during the performance period, leading to higher fear.

Another factor is communication apprehension, which means fear or anxiety linked to communication. This can be difficult in English language because students do not know how to express themselves appropriately and concisely. Female students reported higher levels of communication apprehension than their male counterparts, which means that they have less confidence in their ability to speak good English and more anxiety when it comes to engaging in group discussions or speaking in front of classmates.

These findings should be taken into consideration for interventions that are targeted at dealing with English anxiety. For instance, establishing a supportive environment in the classroom can reduce some of these anxieties. Teachers and educators should make efforts to ensure that there is the proper construction of a learning environment in which students are free to make mistakes during their participation without feeling that they will be criticized for their actions. It could also include using instructional methods that propagate ideas of a growth mindset, which means that instead of framing mistakes as failures, other approaches must be used when faced with them. Furthermore, consistent positive evaluations and emphasizing the student's improvement may empower the student and lower their stress level.

Impact on Academic Performance and Wellbeing

Both academic performance and general wellbeing are affected negatively by English anxiety. According to the research paper conducted among female college students, one out of three respondents claimed that stress-related disorders hindered their performance at school due to anxiousness. This means that not only females but all other students should be assisted to overcome English anxiety for better academic results as well as mental health preservation.

Anxiety can impede cognitive processes like attention, memory, and problem-solving, which are prerequisites to

language learning. Poor concentration in class, forgetting words, and misapplying the language in real-life situations become common among students who become anxious (Rose *et al.*, 2009). The female students' statements validate that it can result in poorer academic performance and low grades. Language anxiety is often accompanied by constant stress and worries that may have an enormous effect on mental health, leading to depression, low self-esteem, and burnout.

Tailored interventions such as stress management workshops, counseling services, and language support programs could benefit female students in overcoming their anxiety and performing better academically. Stress management workshops may teach the students coping strategies like mindfulness and deep breathing exercises. For those who cannot deal with their fears alone, there is a need for counseling services that will enable them to share what they are going through with a professional counselor's help. Besides, language support programs such as tutoring and conversation clubs may offer chances outside the classroom for more practice and to develop confidence that may lower anxiety.

Moreover, schools and institutions of higher learning can adopt, support, and implement policies and measures that will foster supportive and inclusive learning environments. This entails training teachers on how to properly handle language anxiety among students, promoting teamwork and mutual support among learners, and at the same time, ensuring second/foreign language learners get to practice their language in a context where mistakes and poor performances are considered proof of learning. These institutions have a responsibility towards the female population of students to foster individual achievements and, at the same time, ensure that they can maintain good health status all the time.

CONCLUSION

This research indicated significant gender differences in English language anxiety levels among Moroccan university students. More female students indicated that their anxiety was higher, and the overall impact of this was more apparent in their academic performance and wellbeing in comparison to the male students. The findings suggest that there may be a need for gender-specific strategies to address language anxiety and improve students' performance and quality of life. This indicates that providing appropriate language support programs and fostering students, teachers, and classmates' understanding and acceptance of students' language differences due to English language anxiety will assist students in reaching their full potential.

Thus, it is crucial to know what causes such differences between genders and to develop particular measures to minimize their effects. More practical steps include providing workshops and counseling for students to help them manage anxiety levels, which many are facing. In the long term, it concerns expanding an inclusive learning environment, improving teachers' ability to address

language anxiety, and promoting a culture of appreciating effort rather than perfection in class. Peer support programs can also be very useful in increasing confidence and reducing anxiety levels. Constantly monitoring and evaluating these interventions will confirm that they are functional and long-lasting. In this way, institutions can assist students in managing their language anxiety and thus improve their learning and well-being.

Limitations

The study depended on the respondents' self-reports, prone to social desirability and recall bias. Future studies could include objective tests for students' English language proficiency and anxiety levels. Further, the cross-sectional design captures the level of English anxiety only at a given moment. Perhaps longitudinal studies could provide more detailed data about the development of English anxiety over time and the consequent impacts on academic achievement and wellbeing. Last, the study was conducted in Morocco; therefore, the result may not apply to students in other countries or educational settings.

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