
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating the Relationship between Self-Esteem and Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety among Moroccan Undergraduate EFL Learners: a pilot study

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| ABSTRACT

The current pilot study aimed at identifying whether Moroccan undergraduate EFL students' levels of self-esteem (SE) correlated significantly with their Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), focusing particularly on their speaking in the EFL classroom context. The study followed a quantitative approach using Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to collect data from 150 second and third-year students who have completed at least two years of university English instruction. Fear of negative evaluation seemed to be a major source of (FLA) for our selected sample, followed by communication apprehension and test anxiety respectively. The two variables correlated negatively ($r = -0.74$, $p < .001$) with (SE) explaining 54% of the variance in anxiety. Besides, according to the independent t-tests, there was no indication of any significant differences between genders. This strong negative correlation and predictive association observed in the present study confirms Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis which posits that self-perception directly affects learners' levels of anxiety. The study concludes with educational implications aiming at enhancing students' self-perception and reducing speaking anxiety in the Moroccan EFL context.

| KEYWORDS

Foreign Language Anxiety, Self Esteem, Moroccan EFL learners, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Speaking Anxiety, Affective Filter Hypothesis, Higher Education

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

English occupies a crucial position in today's interconnected world, which makes it essential for researchers to explore issues related to this language especially those that hinder effective communication among its learners. One of these factors that significantly hinders foreign language acquisition and learners' willingness to communicate is Foreign Language Anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Oxford, 1999; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). In fact, a bulk of research in the literature affirms a consistent negative correlation between language anxiety and language performance, particularly in oral contexts (MacIntyre et al., 1998), which proves that language anxiety constitutes a significant factor influencing language acquisition and proficiency. Although FLA has been abundantly studied as a factor affecting language performance, self-esteem, being an equally significant affective variable, did not receive the same degree of attention despite its pivotal role in determining the learning experiences particularly in the EFL context (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 2010). The concept of self-esteem, which is defined as an individual's general evaluation of their self-worth (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Brown, 2000), is crucial in influencing language learners' confidence and willingness to participate in communicative assignments. According to Dörnyei (2005), learners with high levels of self-esteem are more likely to show traits for successful language learning, such as risk taking, persistence and resilience. Yet, low levels of self-esteem might intensify anxiety resulting in withdrawal from language related tasks which in turn leads to avoidance of such situations and therefore slower or weaker academic attainment (Horwitz et al.,

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1986; MacIntyre, 1995). Given this dynamic relation between SE and anxiety, it is essential to examine it in the context of Moroccan universities, the main focus of the present study.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Introduction

Attention to emotional variables in language learning began decades ago with the emergence of approaches such as suggestopedia, silent way, community language learning and total physical response. These methods have all agreed that language learners are influenced not only by cognitive factors but also by affective elements such as attitudes, motivation, anxiety, and self-esteem, all of which determine the students' engagement in the foreign language classroom (Arnold, 1999; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). In fact, due to its obvious influence on learners' speaking performance, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has been the center of interest for several researchers (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). However, self-esteem has not received the same degree of attention although evidence shows its crucial role in fostering motivation and oral confidence in educational settings (Brown, 2000; Baumeister et al., 2003; Dörnyei, 2005). Additionally, scholarly research, mainly (Woodrow, 2006; Dörnyei, 2005) has shown that more anxiety and less self-esteem may restrict students' willingness to effectively participate in oral tasks. Given their impact on learners' natural classroom speaking performance, it becomes essential to examine how (SE) and (FLA) interact within the EFL context. Thus, the present literature review brings together previous research on these constructs, with a particular focus on their effects on Moroccan learners' speaking performance. Moreover, it highlights the need for further investigation of these psychological elements in the Moroccan setting, particularly among EFL undergraduate students.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

According to Krashen's (1982) affective filter, psychological factors such as motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence can strongly hinder learners from efficiently processing and producing the new input, which in turn weakens performance in the target language (Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Horwitz, 2001; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). As Krashen's model accounts for the influence of emotion on language learning outcomes, it also serves as a relevant theoretical framework for this study which examines the relationship between SE and FLA among Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners. By stressing learners' psychological needs, language teachers can create a supportive and inspiring learning environment that facilitates language learning outcomes. Further, Krashen's theory has also been a source of inspiration for a wide range of studies in second language learning, providing more insights on the interplay between emotional and cognitive processes in determining language learning success. Despite criticism claiming the abstract nature of this theory (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014) that cannot be measured empirically, its role in highlighting affect and its link to language learning outcomes remains significant. Thus, Krashen's framework offers a lens through which the dynamics between SE and FLA in the Moroccan undergraduate EFL context can be explored.

2.3. Self-Esteem: Definitions and Previous Research

The concept of the "self" is a crucial psychological concept that influences perception and behavior in one's environment. It is often defined as a dynamic system of attitudes, beliefs and judgements that individuals have about themselves (Baumeister, 1999; Rosenberg, 1979). This construct involves a set of psychological elements such as identity, self-concept and self-esteem that impact language related performance. Furthermore, in contrast to cognitive variables, self-esteem is generally classified as an affective variable that is often studied alongside similar concepts such as attitude, motivation, empathy and anxiety (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). The concept of self-esteem on the other hand, has been defined from different perspectives that highlighted its multidimensional nature. Rosenberg (1965), defined it as "a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self" (p. 15). Similarly, Lawrence (1981) underscored the evaluative aspect of SE, meaning that individuals tend to assess their self-worth either positively or negatively which in turn shapes their responses in the educational context. Further, Robson (1989) defined SE as "The sense of contentment and self-acceptance that results from a person's appraisal of his own worth, significance, attractiveness, competence, and ability to satisfy his aspirations" (p. 514). Blascovich and Tomaka (1991) also perceived it as "a global evaluation of one's worth as a person" (p.115).

In the educational context, particularly within Foreign Language Classrooms (FLC), SE is considered a crucial psychological factor that influences learners' willingness to engage in language learning. In this respect, researchers such as Brown (2000), Dörnyei (2005), and Tóth (2019) found a positive correlation between increased SE and willingness to communicate, suggesting that students who are confident in their abilities are more prone to participate in communication tasks and tend to persevere despite the language challenges, which contributes positively to their language learning experience. Besides, Dörnyei (2001) highlighted self-esteem and motivation as two related traits that directly contribute to language proficiency. In the same vein, Woodrow's (2006) study found that low self-esteem often leads to speaking anxiety, which in turn weakens learners' performance in language-related activities.

Overall, SE has been widely examined in the domain of psychology (Cast & Burke, 2002), yet it is less empirically present in second language acquisition research (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 11). Despite its salience, SE has not received enough attention in applied linguistic research compared to other affective variables such as anxiety and motivation (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). More specifically, in the Moroccan EFL context where English is gaining ground academically and professionally, empirical research on the impact of SE on learners' oral performance remains extremely limited.

2.4. Foreign Language Anxiety: Previous Research

Anxiety, in its general psychological sense, is defined as an uneasy feeling of worry or nervousness that occurs when anticipating a potential future threat (Spielberger, 1983; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The higher it gets the more likely it is to increase attention and heartbeats and therefore disturb clear thinking and performance. In the foreign language learning context, Horwitz et al. (1986) define anxiety as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). Further, MacIntyre (1995) views FLA as a situation specific form of stress that occurs when learners are required to use a language in which they lack sufficient competence. Similarly, Young (1991) defines it as "the psychological tension, apprehension, and worry experienced by non-native speakers when learning or using a foreign language" (p. 14). In fact, research on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) started to gain prominence in the late 20th century aiming to understand how anxiety, as an affective factor, can possibly hinder language performance. In this regard, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) empirical study introduced foreign language anxiety as a distinct type of situation-specific anxiety by developing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which has been one of the most standardized tools to measure language-related anxiety in academic settings. IN THE SAME VEIN, Young (1991) also examined the factors that interfered in learners' language anxiety such as classroom environment, teacher-student interaction, and learners' beliefs about language learning, which confirms the multidimensionality of the FLA construct.

The negative correlation between anxiety and language performance was also corroborated by Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley (1999) in their large-scale study in U.S. university settings, where they found that extremely anxious learners seemed to study more yet perform worse than their peers. As a result, such learners skip classes and delay their assignments (Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002). Likewise, in their empirical research Teimouri, Goetze, and Plonsky (2019) found a moderate to negative correlation between FLA and language performance particularly in speaking tasks. Despite its abundance globally, the literature on (FLA) in the Arab world, especially in Morocco, remains scarce. Akhjam (2016) conducted a study on the relationship between FLA and academic achievement in the Moroccan classroom setting and concluded that Moroccan university students experienced high levels of anxiety while there was no consistent correlation with their final grades. A couple of years later, Bouddage and Elfatih (2018) investigated foreign language speaking anxiety among secondary school students and came to the realization that students experienced high communication apprehension as well as anxiety. Another significant study conducted by (Sibouhi, Nouri, & Ghaicha, 2025) concluded that anxiety strongly impacts Moroccan university students' overall academic performance, emphasizing the importance of incorporating affective strategies into the Moroccan EFL classroom. However, the three studies were limited in scope in that they did not examine the role of self-related variables like self-esteem which may also strongly influence students' anxiety levels. In response to this gap, the present endeavor aims at offering a deeper understanding of FLA and its relationship with SE among Moroccan EFL undergraduate learners and also looks at how these elements interact to impact students' oral performance.

2.4.1. Types of Anxiety in Language Learning

As far as Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is concerned, anxiety is considered as a major affective factor that can influence language learning either positively or negatively. In this regard, Scovel (1978) distinguished between **facilitative anxiety**, which motivates learners to face language learning challenges, and **debilitating anxiety**, which leads them to avoid the learning situation. This distinction suggests that anxiety is not always harmful and that it can either help or limit language learning depending on its intensity and how learners perceive it. Another differentiation has been proposed by Ellis (1994) which proposed three types of anxiety: First, **Trait anxiety**, which is described as "a permanent predisposition to be anxious" (Scovel, 1978, as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 479), meaning that some individuals generally respond with anxiety in different situations. Second, **state anxiety**, which refers to a temporary emotional response to a particular situation, such as when a student is surprisingly asked to answer a question or perform orally in front of peers despite his self confidence in normal life (Ellis, 1994; Spielberger, 1966). Third, **situational anxiety** which occurs only in specific contexts such as public speaking, oral interviews or language exams. This understanding of the various sources of anxiety open room for researchers and teachers to look for strategies to deal with it.

2.4.2. Components of Foreign Language Anxiety

For a more comprehensive understanding of foreign language anxiety (FLA), Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) introduced a widely recognized model highlighting this construct's main components.

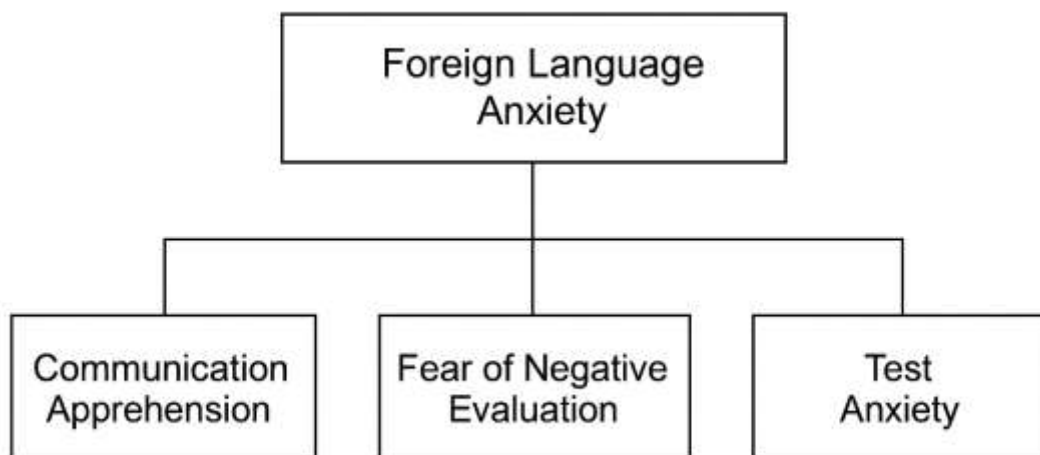


Figure 1. Components of Foreign Language Anxiety adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986)

In their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety framework (FLCA), Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three main sources of foreign language anxiety. The first being **communication apprehension**, which occurs when learners struggle to express themselves openly and without any complex. The second is **fear of negative evaluation**, where learners are concerned about being judged by others and expect negative feedback which often leads to avoidance behaviors. The third is **test anxiety**, which involves nervousness about academic tests. Either combined or individually, these anxiety components may well impede the learners' effective communication by causing delay in the language learning journey or even leading them to give it up altogether. (Horwitz et. Al., 1986; Young, 1991)

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

This paper attempts to examine the relationship between self-esteem and foreign language anxiety among Moroccan undergraduate EFL students majoring English in the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences (FLSH Med V), a public Moroccan university in Rabat: In this context, the study aims to examine the differences between self-esteem and foreign language anxiety levels, and to explore whether male and female students differ significantly in their foreign language anxiety levels.

The research questions are organized as follows:

1. To what extent do Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners experience Foreign Language Anxiety during oral performance in class?
2. What are the main sources of FLA among Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners?
3. Is there a significant correlation between SE and FLA among Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners?
4. To what extent does SE predict the level of FLA in Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners?
5. Does gender influence the level of FLA in Moroccan EFL classes?

3.2. Research Design and Data Collection

To examine the relationship between self-esteem and foreign language anxiety among Moroccan EFL undergraduate learners, this study employs a quantitative approach using a descriptive correlational design. This latter was adopted to enable the collection of numeric data that can demonstrate patterns and statistical correlations between variables in a natural classroom context, without the need for direct involvement. The study also looks at whether gender affects students' anxiety levels when learning a foreign language. Besides, subjects of this study are 150 undergraduate students majoring in English at Med 5 university, Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Rabat. All respondents were second and third-year students who had received at least one year of university-level English education. The choice of this university level stems from the assumption that these learners had developed a certain level of EFL proficiency, yet they might still experience foreign language anxiety particularly in speaking tasks. Additionally, gender parity technique was employed to select the sample, which consisted 75 males and 75 females—chosen homogeneously to avoid gender bias and ensure that the findings are representative of both genders.

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES), originally developed and validated by Rosenberg (1965), was employed as the primary measurement of the self-esteem variable. The scale consists of 10 items, with five worded positively and five worded negatively.

In fact, the original version of RSES used a four-point Guttman scale. However, the current study deployed it using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "I highly agree" to "I highly disagree" so as to improve response clarity and statistical accuracy (DeVellis, 2016; Joshi et al., 2015). The RSES manifested good reliability and validity (Scheier et al., 1994) and was proven to be deployable and more useful in various cross-cultural contexts in both the original form, revised and subsequent translated versions (Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Tinakon & Nahathai, 2012). As for the (FLA) measurement, the study used Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in order to measure the participants' levels of foreign language anxiety in the Moroccan English classroom setting. It was mainly adopted due to its common use in various languages and contexts, as well as its demonstrated validity and reliability (Alshahrany, 2016: 69). This scale is composed of 33 statements evaluating the three previously stated dimensions of anxiety, namely: "communication apprehension," "fear of negative evaluation," and "test anxiety". In the present study, the scale was administered using a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5). Finally, the students' responses were recorded anonymously and converted into numerical data for statistical analysis. The data were tabulated and processed with SPSS. The analysis was conducted quantitatively using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics to spot correlations between SE and FLA.

4. Results and discussion

The findings of this study are presented in response to our five research questions. The ultimate dataset consisted of 150 complete responses (75 males and 75 females) while incomplete questionnaires were eliminated for analysis accuracy. Descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized to scrutinize the relationship between SE and FLA, taking into account gender-based differences as well as the dimensions of anxiety.

1. To what extent do Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners experience Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) during oral performance in class?

As displayed in Table 1, descriptive statistics demonstrate that most Moroccan undergraduate students experience high anxiety during oral classroom activities. The FLCAS yielded a mean score of 99.80 (SD=13.37) with scores ranging from 66 to 137.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Foreign Language Anxiety (N= 150)

Statistic	Value
Mean	99.80
SD	13.37
Minimum	66
Maximum	137

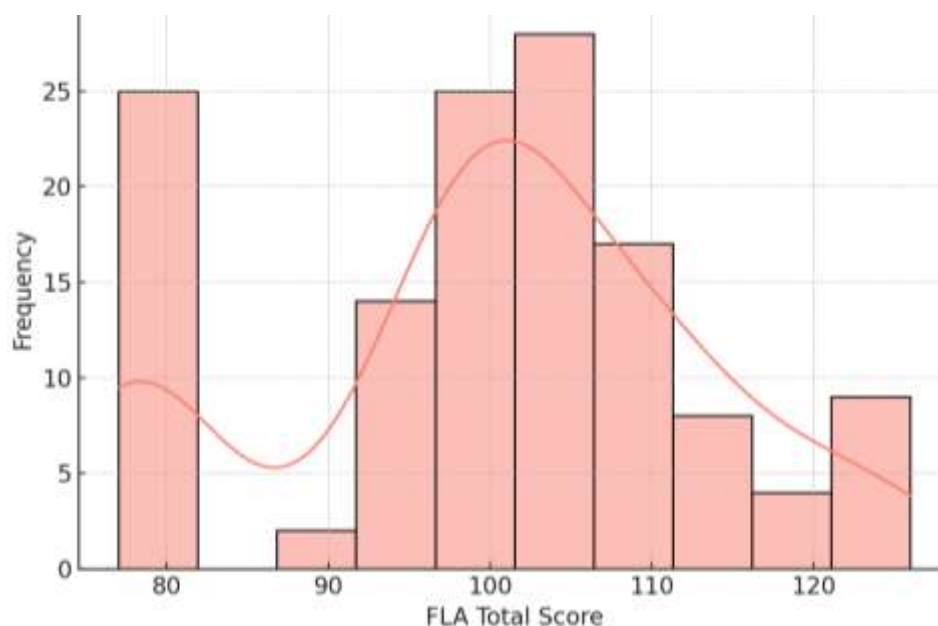


Figure 2: Distribution of Foreign Language Anxiety Scores

Figure 2 demonstrates the distribution of FLA scores among the participants, the majority of which seemed to experience moderate to high anxiety. These results strongly match the related literature reported by Horwitz et al. (1986) and Liu (2006) who jointly affirmed that foreign language learners' oral tasks directly provoked their anxiety. Thus, the current data clearly shows that FLA, particularly in oral performance situations, is a common phenomenon in the Moroccan EFL context.

2. What are the main FLA sources among Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners?

In order to identify the main sources of anxiety, Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986) divided the FLCAS into three main components: *fear of negative evaluation*, *communication apprehension*, and *test anxiety*. These sources were measured by grouping relevant questionnaire items that correspond to each anxiety source.

Table 2: Mean scores for FLA sources

Source of Anxiety	Mean (out of 5)	Percentage
<i>Fear of Negative Evaluation</i>	3.21	64.2 %
<i>Communication Apprehension</i>	2.79	55.8%
<i>Test Anxiety</i>	2.43	48.6%

As depicted in table 2, the primary source of anxiety among Moroccan EFL learners was "fear of negative evaluation". Kitano (2001) and Subaşı (2010) found that learners' fear of being evaluated or judged negatively impacted their confidence in speaking assignments. Communication anxiety, which is generally associated to learners' spontaneous speaking or fear of making mistakes, was also commonly experienced. While test anxiety, which was experienced relatively less intensely, remains a significant factor influencing oral performance.

3. Is there a significant correlation between SE and FLA among Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners?

Table 3: Correlation between Self-Esteem and Foreign Language Anxiety

variables	r	p-value	interpretation
SE & FLA scores	-0.74	<.001	Strong negative correlation

The correlation test, demonstrated in table 3 showed a negative correlation between self-esteem (SE score) and foreign language anxiety (FLA score) which suggests that learners with high levels of self-esteem tend to experience less English-speaking anxiety. This result clearly supports the bulk of literature on the impact of affective variables on language learning such as Krashen's infamous (1982) affective filter hypothesis which posits that high self-confidence and low anxiety allow learners to better process and learn the language, and MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), and Dörnyei (2005) who highlighted the importance of affective variables in effective language learning.

4. To what extent does SE predict the level of FLA in Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners?

Table 4: Linear regression: SE predicting FLA

Predictor	β Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Intercept	161.49	5.48	29.47	<.001
Self-Esteem score	-1.78	0.14	-12.45	<.001
R^2	0.54			

To better explore this research question, simple linear regression analysis was conducted as shown in table 4. SE significantly predicted FLA levels among Moroccan EFL undergraduate learners. 54% of the students' FLA scores were predicted by their SE levels with an R^2 of .54, meaning that more than half of their anxiety levels can be explained by how they feel about themselves. According to the negative beta coefficient ($\beta = -1.78$), every one-point increase in students' self-esteem, their anxiety score decreases by almost two points. This statistically significant relationship ($p < .001$) confirms that SE not only correlates with FLA but also strongly predicts it. This finding goes hand in hand with Dewaele's (2013) study, where it was found that emotional traits can strongly influence learners' responses to the speaking challenges in foreign language situations.

5. Does gender influence the level of FLA in Moroccan EFL classes?

Table 5: Gender Differences in SE and FLA in Moroccan EFL classes

Variable	Gender	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
FLA score	Male	98.35	13.03	-1.19	.237
FLA score	Female	101.11	13.40	-	-
SE score	Male	38.68	5.56	1.25	.213
SE score	Female	37.48	5.36	-	-

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine if Moroccan male and female EFL students differ significantly in their levels of anxiety and self-esteem. In fact, the tests did not manifest any statistically significant difference in male and female SE or FLA scores. This joins the conclusions of Elkhafaifi (2005) and Akhajam (2016), who observed that gender did not have a

significant influence on foreign language anxiety levels, which in turn shows that the learner's experiences in the language classroom are directly associated to their individual psychological traits and not necessarily influenced by gender.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The current study attempted to explore the relationship between self-esteem and foreign language anxiety among Moroccan undergraduate EFL learners. For this aim, five main research questions were put forward and were answered quantitatively. Generally, moderate to high levels of anxiety were experienced among our participants, which reflects the psychological challenges Moroccan EFL learners confront in the university setting. Fear of negative evaluation acted as the main source of anxiety among these learners, followed by communication apprehension and test anxiety respectively, which confirms that for them "the other's" opinion is more debilitating than making errors in the foreign language. Additionally, from a statistical point of view, the data showed a significantly strong correlation between SE and FLA ($r = -0.74$), with SE emerging a strong predictor of FLA ($R^2 = 0.54$). That is to say, students who feel better about themselves were also highly confident in English speaking situations. Besides, the gender factor did not seem to show any variation in either SE or FLA among the learners which implies that Moroccan students' EFL performances are defined by their individual differences rather than by gender.

Pedagogically speaking, Moroccan university professors are recommended to create a safe and low-stress environment for language learning, where all students can express themselves freely in the target language irrespective of their proficiency levels. This can happen by assisting and reassuring students with speaking anxiety. Positive feedback can also be effective especially during class presentations and group interactions. Moreover, despite being perceived as a major hindrance in academic and language success, anxiety should be addressed effectively and tolerated as a natural reaction, which can lead to improvement and active participation rather than fear or avoidance. By accepting this spontaneous emotional response, language instructors can encourage a healthier and more emotionally intelligent learning environment. With this being said, as the present study was conducted as pilot investigation, it comes with its limitations as it adopted the questionnaire as a single instrument and targeted students from only one Moroccan institution. Hence, future studies are invited to use further instruments such as interviews and focus groups for a more comprehensive understanding of Moroccan students' psychology in the EFL context.

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