

دراسة قلق التحدث لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عبر الإنترنت:

دراسة خلال أزمة كورونا في سوريا

عمر شرجي¹، أ. د. علي سعود حسن²

طالب ماجستير، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة دمشق 1-

أستاذ دكتور، كلية التربية، جامعة دمشق. 2-

الملخص:

دفع تفشي فيروس كورونا جميع المؤسسات التعليمية تقريباً إلى الانتقال إلى التعلم عن بعد "عبر الإنترنت" في محاولة لمكافحة انتشار الفيروس، فكان لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية نصيبه في هذا الانتقال العالمي المفاجئ إلى التعلم عبر الإنترنت. لظالما ثبت أن التحدث بلغة أجنبية في صفوف التعليم التقليدية أنه عملية تثير القلق لدى متعلمي اللغة، لكن السؤال حول ما إذا كان الأمر نفسه ينطبق على تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية عبر الإنترنت لا يزال قيد الدراسة عالمياً. لذلك أجريت هذه الدراسة لاكتشاف مستويات القلق التي يعاني منها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية السوريين عند التحدث باللغة الأجنبية في دورات اللغة الإنجليزية عبر الإنترنت، كما واستقصت العوامل التي تساهم في زيادة هذا القلق ولهذا و استراتيجيات التكيف التي يستخدمها المتعلمون السوريون للتعامل مع هذا القلق. ولهذا شارك في هذه الدراسة 30 متعلماً ممن كانوا يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية في فصول عبر الإنترنت في المستويات المتوسطة وفوق المتوسطة. تم تصميم الدراسة بناء على مجموعة من الوسائل البحثية الكمية والنوعية، كما استخدمت أداتين لجمع البيانات: استبيان ومقابلات. كشفت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلاب السوريين بشكل عام يعانون من مستوى متوسط من قلق التحدث بلغة أجنبية في فصولهم عبر الإنترنت. أبلغ المشاركون عن 20 عاملاً مسبباً لقلقهم من التحدث بلغة أجنبية والتي تم تصنيفها إلى عوامل لغوية (5 عوامل) وتعليمية (4) وفردية (9) وبيئية (2). كشفت النتائج أيضاً عن 7 استراتيجيات يستخدمها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية في سوريا للتعامل مع قلق التحدث بلغة أجنبية والتي تم تحديدها في إطار المجموعات التالية: استراتيجيات التحضير والتفكير الإيجابي والاسترخاء والامتناع عن التحدث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم عن بعد- التعلم عبر الإنترنت- التعلم الإلكتروني- القلق من اللغة الأجنبية- القلق من التحدث بلغة أجنبية.

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Investigating Syrian Learners' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in Online EFL Classes: A Study in the COVID-19 Crisis

Omar Shurbaji¹, Prof. Ali Saud Hasan²

1-Master student, Department of English, Faculty of Arts and humanities, Damascus university.

2- Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts and humanities, Damascus university.

Abstract:

The COVID-19 outbreak has prompted almost all educational institutions to adopt "online" distance learning methods to combat the spread of the virus, and the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) has not lagged behind in this sudden global transition to online courses. Speaking a foreign language face-to-face has been shown repeatedly to be an anxiety-provoking task in learning, but the question of whether the same is true for online EFL instruction is still being globally researched. This study, therefore, investigated the extent to which Syrian EFL learners in online English courses experience foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), what factors contribute to this fear, and what coping strategies Syrian learners use to deal with it. To that end, 30 participants who were learning English in online classes at the intermediate and upper-intermediate levels were involved in this study. The study was designed on a combination of quantitative and qualitative means of research that employed two data collection tools: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed that Syrian students, generally, experience a moderate level of FLSA in online classes. Participants reported 20 factors as the reasons for their FLSA which were categorized into linguistic (5 factors), educational (4), individual (9), and environmental (2). Results also relayed 7 strategies Syrian EFL learners use to cope with their FLSA which were identified under the following strategy sets: preparation, positive thinking, resignation, and relaxation strategies.

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Key words: Distance learning – Online learning – E-learning – Foreign language anxiety – Foreign language speaking anxiety.

1. Introduction

The sudden outbreak of the recent infectious disease Covid-19 has affected all areas of life, including economic, social, and educational. Indeed, English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning domains were no exception. Due to the challenges caused by coronavirus, people have started to shift to working and learning remotely, which has become very popular overnight. With this drastic and exponential wave of online courses breaking every demographic frontier, a new era of learning and education has begun. In fact, a number of arguments is associated with the concept of online learning regarding its efficacy in different contextual and educational aspects. As hypothesized by Dhawan (2020), “accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning, and policy” are some of the arguments related to online pedagogy (p. 2). Just as with traditional face-to-face courses, the existence of online learning nowadays, according to Alawamleh, Al-Twait & Al-Saht (2020), is exactly as essential to share knowledge and information, interact, connect and communicate effectively (p. 1).

However, this is not always the case, as McConell (2006) notes that one of the problems students face in online learning is that they feel isolated while studying, dominated by others in discussions, and anxious to share their ideas publicly (p. 70-71). Despite the many merits of this new trend in education, Bach, Haynes & Lewis Smith (2007) maintained that online learning is a new fear for some people which creates a gap between the learning materials and human interaction, which may increase their anxiety in this regard (p. 89). The same researchers emphasized the importance of considering the negative impact anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem usually have on the learning process in general which may strongly take place in online learning as well (p. 180). This is consistent with Dhawan's (2020) view that many learners do not have the same skills or level of confidence, which can generate different feelings of confusion and anxiety (p. 11).

This prompted other researchers around the world to investigate the area of anxiety related to online foreign language learning: Almost all of these studies proved the existing correlation between anxiety level, foreign language learning, and online learning (Darmawansah, 2020; Alqarni, 2021; Wang & Zhang, 2021; Muliadi et al., 2022; Obaid et al., 2022). Remarkably, the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in online language learning is currently being intensively researched around the world to shed more light on the factors that might trigger this anxiety in online courses.

In the Syrian context, however, there seems to be an obvious lack of studies of this kind. This study, therefore, aims to participate in the global research in this area and fill the gap of such studies in the Syrian context by investigating the extent to which Syrian learners who are attending online English courses in different Syrian cities demonstrate anxiety about speaking foreign languages, the factors that contribute to their anxiety, and the coping strategies employed by Syrian learners to alleviate it.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Distance “Online” Learning

Even before the new pandemic, distance instruction and online learning have long existed in various forms with a wide range of features that made the whole process easier and more reliable. Moore & Kearsley (2012) defined distance education as “teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization” (p.2). Among the various forms and subsets of distance education, online learning has always held a prominent position as it allows for more flexible education in terms of time and space (Anderson, 2008, p. 53). Khan (2001) defines online learning as a method of using the internet as a medium for teaching a distant audience (p. 5).

Singh & Thurman (2019) defines online learning as “education being delivered in an online environment through the use of the internet for teaching and learning. This includes online learning on the part of the students that are not dependent on their physical or virtual co-location” (p. 302). They draw a line between two different types of online learning: synchronous and asynchronous. In synchronous online classes, both teaching and learning happen simultaneously in real time, with students and teachers attending together from

different locations. On the other hand, the asynchronous type of online learning offers learners the flexibility to study in a self-paced manner as teachers and learners do not attend at the same time. Learners can access learning materials, which are recorded or uploaded beforehand, and learn what is required.

In the context of the present study, the sample of participants involved in the study were all enrolled in synchronous online EFL classes, in which both teaching and learning processes occur at the same time. This means that all the speaking tasks participants carried out were performed simultaneously at the same time in real life, mimicking the face-to-face type of EFL classes as much as possible.

2.2 Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Irrespective of foreign language learning, Spielberger (1983) defines anxiety as a “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p. 15). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) are widely considered the pioneers who were the first to examine the concept of anxiety in relation to foreign language learning. Their theory of foreign language anxiety influenced the vast majority of research conducted in this area. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FLA as “a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process” (p. 128). Other definitions of FLA were proposed by several other researchers in the domain. A fine example of these definitions was proposed by MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) who defined FLA as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p. 284).

2.3 Factors of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

In the area of foreign language anxiety, numerous studies have been conducted in an attempt to define the causes of this phenomenon. Horwitz et al. (1986) conducted a study that has received considerable attention in almost all research on anxiety in the foreign language classroom. They identified three main causes of language performance anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is defined as “a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people” (p. 127). Test anxiety refers to anxiety caused by a learner’s fear of failure. Learners with this type of anxiety tend to feel anxious as they often “put unrealistic demands on themselves and feel that anything less than a perfect test performance is a failure” (p. 127 - 128). The third source of anxiety is fear of negative evaluation, which refers to the anxiety learners face due to their worries of being under the evaluation of teachers or peers and their expectations of being negatively viewed by them.

2.4 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA)

Foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) is described as the difficulty to speak whether in a group or in front of people occurring in different simple or complicated speaking situations (Samuelson, 2011, as cited in Hadziosmanovic, 2012, p.9). EFL students usually state that speaking in a foreign language is the most distressing experience. A significant number of studies conducted in the area of FLSA concluded that, generally, foreign language speaking competency tends to be affected by learners’ speaking anxiety (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017; Asyfyfa, Handyani, & Rizkiani, 2019; Astuti, 2020; Zetterkvist, 2022). FLSA can be triggered by a variety of factors, such as linguistic (Mulyani, 2018), educational (Kuscu, 2017), individual (Young, 1994), and environmental or classroom-related factors (Palacios, 1998).

In the context of anxiety about speaking a foreign language, Liu (2006) provided a comprehensive list of factors that exacerbate learners' FLSA. In his study on 98 Chinese EFL learners, he concluded that these learners feel anxious when speaking English for the following reasons: lack of practice, limited vocabulary knowledge, low English proficiency, personality, fear of making mistakes, lack of preparation, incomprehensible input, inadequate grammatical knowledge, fear of being laughed at, lack of confidence,

difficulty of the speaking task, poor pronunciation, lack of familiarity with classmates, lack of familiarity with the topic, fear of negative evaluation, fear of being the focus of attention, inability to find proper words to express ideas, inability to express oneself, eagerness to speak English fluently, poor memory, lack of familiarity with the type of activity, family communication pattern, lack of familiarity with the environment, and English is not the student's mother tongue (Liu, 2006, p. 23 - 25).

Since this list provided by Liu (2006) is found to be comprehensive of FLSA factors (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017; Tien, 2018; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020;), it was used in the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted in this study. These factors, and the factors investigated by the present researcher, were used as codes to analyze the interviewees' responses to the interview questions.

2.5 Coping Strategies

A study conducted by Kondo & Ying-Ling (2004) on 209 Japanese university students, who were doing English courses, reported a list of strategies for coping with language anxiety that included as many as 70 strategies. These strategies were categorized under 5 main headings: preparation, positive thinking, peer seeking, relaxation, and resignation strategies. Preparation strategies refer to "attempts at controlling the impending threat by improving learning and study strategies" (p. 262). This category involves coping strategies that require prior or in-class preparation of the learning materials as an attempt to reduce their language anxiety. Relaxation strategies require learners to engage in practices that can help reduce their anxiety symptoms. Examples of such strategies are 'taking a deep breath' or 'trying to calm down.' Positive thinking strategies alleviate language anxiety by "suppressing problematic cognitive processes that underlie students' anxiety" (p. 262). It includes strategies that reassure learners' confidence and self-trust and prompt their learning motivation. Peer seeking is the fourth type of coping strategies that is defined as "students' willingness to look for other students who seem to have trouble understanding the class and/or controlling their anxiety" (p. 262). The strategy of finding a classmate that can identify with one's language anxiety seems to regulate the emotional impact that anxiety causes. The final type of coping strategies is resignation strategies which are understood as disinclination of doing anything that could ease their anxiety. Such strategies include giving up and stopping paying attention.

Therefore, the FLSA coping strategies that are reported by participants of this study will be explicated in light of what Kondo & Ying-Ling (2004) have discussed; that is, the coping strategies that will be derived from the qualitative analysis of the participants' interview responses are to be grouped under the following headings: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation strategies. If the analysis yields different coping strategies that cannot be grouped under the above-mentioned headings, a separate heading will be devoted to fully discuss and explicate these strategies.

3. Statement of the Problem

Given the above-mentioned review of the literature and theories, foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) seems to be a persistent issue in the field of language learning and teaching that has yet to be investigated. Although research on FLSA in relation to face-to-face learning has recently increased, a deep understanding of this concept concerning the unique nature of online learning has not been adequately explored globally and has hardly been addressed in the Syrian context. Therefore, the present study attempts to shed light on the speaking anxiety learners in the Syrian context face during online EFL classes. To this end, 30 Syrian upper-intermediate EFL students, who attended online English courses in different Syrian cities, were included as participants in the study. The study aims to measure the level of FLSA these participants face in the online course, define the factors that contribute to their anxiety, and understand the coping strategies they exploit to overcome this anxiety.

4. Research Questions

1. To what extent do Syrian learners experience foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) in online EFL classes?
2. What factors contribute to Syrian learners' FLSA in online EFL classes?
3. What strategies do Syrian learners use to cope with FLSA in online EFL classes?

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

The sample of participants consists of adult male and female EFL learners in Damascus, Syria, who took online English courses through the apps BigBlueBotton and Zoom. Their age range was between 20 and 38 years old. The total number of participants was 30 intermediate and upper intermediate learners, of which 11 participants were selected for semi-structured interviews. The researcher decided to select intermediate and upper intermediate learners because the interview questions used in this study required a high level of oral proficiency to obtain detailed data \ about FLSA and the factors that cause this anxiety.

5.2 Research Design

This research follows the mixed-method approach of research in which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected. Generally, the mixed-methods approach is exploited by researchers because of its ability to benefit from qualitative and quantitative research to overcome the limitations of both approaches. It is also an intricate approach to research that sheds light on a more comprehensive understanding of research problems and questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, a quantitative and a qualitative tools are used: the former is a Likert-type questionnaire to measure participants' FLSA levels, and the latter is semi-structured interviews to get deeper insights into the reasons behind these participants' foreign language speaking anxiety.

5.3 Data Collection Tools

5.3.1 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire

To measure the participants' level of speaking anxiety, the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) questionnaire developed by Öztürk & Gürbüz (2014) was used (see appendix 1). The FLSAS is a questionnaire composed of 18 items selected from a 33-item questionnaire, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which was originally developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) and is considered the most widely used tool for measuring foreign language anxiety. Öztürk & Gürbüz (2014) selected these 18 items from the 33 items of the original questionnaire because they directly relate to speaking anxiety and other domains of the FLCAS.

Every item on FLSAS questionnaire is given a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), yielding a minimum score of 18 and a maximum score of 90. The FLSAS questionnaire was tested and piloted by Öztürk & Gürbüz and is proven to have an internal consistency rate of 0.91, which "shows that the instrument has a high reliability coefficient" (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014, p. 5). The questionnaire was also successfully implemented and utilized as a valid data collection tool by several researchers (Toubot & Seng, 2018; Babakhouya, 2019; Rachmawati & Jurianto, 2020; and Pan et al., 2022). The questionnaire items were translated into Arabic and administered in a bilingual version that included both languages, English and Arabic. Despite having a high language competence, the reason a translation of the questionnaire was provided is that participants were given the questionnaire to answer at their own convenience, which means the researcher was not with them to explain any unfamiliar terms they might face while answering. A translation of the questionnaire items, therefore, would save both time and effort for the researcher and better help the respondents avoid any misunderstanding of the items. The translation was

checked with and approved by two licensed translators and two English language teachers at the Higher Language Institute, Damascus University.

5.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed for collecting data for the study in which the interviewer “usually phrases his or her requests in a form that is open-ended.” The interviewer “invites the participant to tell stories about experiences, relate memories, and offer reflections and opinions” (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, p. 47). The interview protocol and questions were developed with the expectation that they would provide valuable qualitative support to the statistical results of the questionnaire measuring the participants' FLSA. The interviews were used to collect data on the participants' FLSA factors, the challenging situations these participants encounter that trigger their anxiety while speaking, the reasons behind their FLSA, and how they cope with this anxiety in the online English class.

The questions were designed by the researcher (see appendix 2), referring back to a thorough examination of previous studies following a semi-structured approach. Unlike the items in the questionnaire which were translated into Arabic, interviews were conducted in English as the researcher was present during the interview to provide the necessary assistance to the respondents using the target language in case any type of misunderstanding occurred. The interview protocol and questions were checked and validated by two professors in the English Language Teaching Department of the Higher Language Institute, Damascus University. The interview protocol was also piloted on 5 students who did not form a part of the 11 interviewed participants involved in the study.

5.4 Data Analysis

For the quantitative part, the participants' responses to the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) questionnaire were measured according to the scale Öztürk & Gürbüz (2014) provided. The level of each participant's speaking anxiety is inferred from their total score in the questionnaire. As mentioned above, the questionnaire yields a score that ranges from 18 to 90. If a respondent scores above 72, this means he/she has a high level of speaking anxiety. If the score ranges from 54 to 72, it indicates a moderate level of speaking anxiety, while a score less than 54 presents a low level of foreign language speaking anxiety (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014, p.5). The questionnaire was administered to participants using Google Forms to collect their responses more conveniently and mimic the online learning procedures this study addresses. Their total score was calculated and their speaking anxiety levels were measured according to the above-mentioned scale. Also, the overall mean score of the participants' responses was measured to gain insights into the FLSA upper-intermediate Syrian learners face in online EFL courses.

As for the qualitative part, data obtained from the semi-structured interviews to answer the rest of the research questions were analyzed through qualitative coding analysis. Interviews were conducted with 11 participants out of the overall sample of the study (30 participants). These participants were selected because they scored high and moderate anxiety levels in the FLSAS questionnaire. The questions participants were asked in the interview aimed at eliciting the reasons for their FLSA, the situations in which their FLSA is triggered during the online class, the coping mechanisms they employ to deal with their FLSA, and whether they face the same anxiety in face-to-face classes. Their responses to the interview questions were recorded and then transcribed for qualitative analysis.

The analysis of the data obtained from the interviews is discussed in the form of qualitative coding, which is a qualitative process of research defined as “labeling and organizing qualitative data to identify different themes and the relationships between them” (Medelyan, 2020, para. 6). A code in qualitative research refers to a word or a phrase found in participants' response to an interview questions that assigns a symbolic, summative meaning to “a portion of language based-data” (Saldaña, 2009, p.3). Thus, the researcher closely scrutinizes the transcripts of the participants' responses searching for repeated linguistic patterns and ideas that can be grouped under a code. All ideas grouped under a certain code share similar characteristics and

therefore represent the same concept. The more frequently the code occurs in the participants' reasoning, the more valid it is for understanding the participants' FLSA.

6. Results and Findings

6.1 Research Question One

The first question of this study is set to examine whether Syrian learners face foreign language speaking anxiety in online EFL classes. After conducting the questionnaire and calculating the score, it was concluded that informants do face FLSA in online classes. The other part of the same research question is concerned with the level of these participants' FLSA. To answer this part, participants' total score in the questionnaire and the overall mean score were calculated and analyzed. The following tables summarize the findings attained from the results of the questionnaire:

Table (6.1). The Level of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Mean	Median	Level of Anxiety
54.13	54.5	Moderate

Table (6.2). Number and Percentages of Participants' Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety Levels	No. of Participants	Percentage
Participants with low level of anxiety	11	36.7%
Participants with moderate level of anxiety	17	56.7%
Participants with high level of anxiety	2	6.6%

As table (6.1) indicates, participants in this study, on the whole, demonstrated a moderate level of FLSA during EFL online classes. This was concluded by the mean score (54.13) of the 30 participants' total score in the questionnaire, which falls under "moderate anxiety level" in the scale highlighted above by the creators of the questionnaire.

Table (6.2) shows that only 2 out of the 30 participants, with a small percentage of 6.6% of the overall sample, showed a high level of FLSA. 17 out of the 30 participants, the larger portion of the sample with a percentage of 56.7%, exhibited a moderate level of FLSA, while the remaining 11 participants, with a percentage of 36.7% of the overall sample, exhibited a low level of FLSA (see appendix 3 for a detailed table of each participant's score and FLSA level).

6.2. Research Question Two

The second research question aimed at investigating the factors of Syrian learners' foreign language speaking anxiety in EFL online classes. To that end, 11 participants out of the 30 involved in the study were interviewed (the 2 students with high anxiety and 9 students with moderate anxiety).

Results analysis of the semi-structured interviews was based on the frequencies of the codes extracted from the manually-written transcripts of the audio recordings of each interviewee (see appendix 4 for a sample transcript). The 3rd and 4th questions of the interviews required that participants explain the reasons for the FLSA and the situations in which they feel that anxiety while speaking English in an online class.

Participants reported several points, or codes, that they conceive as the reasons for their anxiety. For a more organized qualitative analysis, these codes were organized under four main categories: namely linguistic factors (5 codes), educational factors (4 codes), individual factors (9 codes), and environmental factors (2

codes). The table below summarizes the categories, the codes they include, and the frequency of each code across the interviewees' responses:

Table (6.3). The Reasons behind Participants' FLSA in Online Classes

Category	Code	Frequency
Linguistic	Limited vocabulary knowledge	3
	Lack of fluency	2
	Inadequate grammatical knowledge	1
	Poor pronunciation	1
	Incomprehensible input	1
Educational	Lack of familiarity with the topic	6
	Lack of practice	2
	Lack of preparation	2
	Lack of adequate English education	1
Individual	Inability to find proper words to express ideas	4
	Lack of confidence	3
	Fear of negative evaluation	3
	Inability to express oneself	3
	Lack of nonverbal communication	3
	Fear of interrupting or getting interrupted by others	3
	English is not the student's mother tongue	2
	Fear of making mistakes	2
	Fear of being the focus of attention	1
Environmental	Physical place distractors	1
	Technical & internet connection problems	1

6.2.1 Linguistic Factors

As shown in table (6.3). The linguistic incompetence category encompasses the codes that have to do with aspects of speaking as a skill among the 4 basic language skills. Abbaspour (2016) specified that speaking as a language skill has five main language aspects that are usually examined in teaching speaking. These components are pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. Each one of the codes listed under linguistic factors corresponds to an aspect of the speaking skill.

The code entitled limited vocabulary knowledge, which corresponds to vocabulary as an aspect of speaking, had the highest frequency among the 5 linguistic codes. Responses that featured this code made it clear that not having the needed vocabulary, or enough vocabulary, to carry out the speaking task is one of the reasons for participants' FLSA.

➤ Participant 9: "I keep repeating the same vocabulary and sentences. When I don't have the right vocabulary or enough vocabulary to talk about the topic, I feel very anxious and I try not to speak."

Other codes under linguistic factors were lack of fluency (the aspect of fluency), inadequate grammatical knowledge (the aspect of grammar), poor pronunciation (the aspect of pronunciation), and incomprehensible input (the aspect of comprehension). In the context of this study, comprehension as an aspect of the speaking skill refers to how well a learner understands spoken language specifically. One participant expressed that not understanding what the teacher was saying during the online session was the reason for her FLSA:

➤ Participant 14: "When I did English online courses, actually, they were by native speakers, so sometimes I don't understand because they speak very quickly, and they use their native or local expressions, so that is hard for me to understand. It made me ask them to repeat what they said a lot. I did other English

online courses but not by native speakers. I mean, the teachers were Chinese, Indian, and sometimes Korean. They used an accent that wasn't understandable at all, and that made me nervous to speak."

6.2.2 Educational Factors

As table (6.3) indicates, 4 codes were listed under the category of education factors. Lack of familiarity with the topic was the most frequent code under this category and across all categories. It refers to the learner's lack of information about the topic that the speaking task revolves around. Having this lack of information seems to be the reason behind FLSA for 6 out of the 11 interviews.

➤ Participant 2: "I get nervous when we talk about a subject that I have no information about even in Arabic, and I have to give an answer. Maybe I have the right vocabulary related to the topic, but I have no ideas about the topic itself, so I feel stressed in that situation."

The second code referred to the lack of practice participants have in the area of speaking English as a foreign language. Despite being at the intermediate\upper-intermediate level of language proficiency, the 2 interviewees referred to the fact that they have not practiced speaking English properly before doing the online course, and that they do not have anyone to practice speaking the language with outside the class.

➤ Participant 1: "... I think that I have that anxiety due to the lack of experience and practice. I don't do a lot of English courses and I rarely practice the language outside the class."

The third code lack of preparation referred to participants' preparation for the language lesson before they actually attended it. Although not always required in their language courses, preparing for the lesson gave these participants a sense of confidence to speak in the online session. Similarly, not preparing for the lesson made them anxious to participate and speak in the online session. This code was grouped under educational factors as it involved the online EFL course as an educational type of training these participants were receiving. The final code, lack of adequate English education referred to the participant's complaint of the unsatisfactory English language education that the participant received in primary and secondary school as the reason behind their FLSA.

6.2.3 Individual Factors

The individual factors category had the biggest number of codes. These codes represent participants' personal factors that usually generate their FLSA in online classes. The most frequent code, inability to find proper words to express ideas, addressed the participants' failed attempts of recalling the words they know to talk about the topic at hand. It differs from the code of limited vocabulary knowledge in that this time, learners have the required vocabulary knowledge, but they face difficulties retrieving these words and employing them in their speech. This could not only be a reason for their FLSA but also a result of it.

➤ Participant 13: "Sometimes, I feel that I have the right words, but when I want to speak, I forget everything, like they just disappear. When I speak, I feel like I am in a hurry, like 'What should I say' or 'what is the word.' Maybe, I should be calmer and more focused."

Lack of confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and inability to express oneself were other frequent codes found in the transcripts of the interviews. Lack of confidence refers to participants' self-doubt about themselves and their language abilities that cause their FLSA, while fear of negative evaluation refers to participants' concern about being evaluated by the teacher or classmates when speaking. This was noted as a reason for participants' FLSA that causes them to withdraw from speaking interactions or make very short contributions to avoid being evaluated by others. Inability to express oneself refers to the difficulties learners face when trying to express their ideas even on a simple topic.

One more frequent code categorized under individual factors was "lack of nonverbal communication." Participants who reflected on this lack as the source for their FLSA in online classes made it clear that using verbal means of communication, i.e. expressing themselves through speech only, was putting pressure on them because they needed to exert more efforts to explain what they have in mind or even express themselves

clearly. For the participants, this lack of nonverbal means of communication did not only trigger their FLSA but also hindered teacher-student communication and affected the clarity of teachers' instructions. It is worth mentioning that these participants were doing online English courses on platforms that did not feature video conferencing, or simply they were not required to attend while their cameras are on.

➤ Participant 7: "I think the most anxiety-provoking or stressful situation in online English courses is when all participants are silent and you have to explain or clarify what you want to say... This is very difficult, especially that you don't have eye contact or body language, so I think that's more difficult than face-to-face classes to maintain your conversation."

Another individual factor for FLSA in online EFL classes is expressed through the code of fear of interrupting or getting interrupted by others found in the interview transcripts. It refers to the learners' hesitation about when is the right time to speak without interrupting a classmate or getting interrupted by others. English is not the student's mother tongue is another code that indicates the anxiety felt by the learners because of the fact that they are using a foreign language to express themselves. Therefore, when these participants use this foreign language, they begin to compare what they said in the foreign language with what they could have said in their native language, and this triggers their FLSA.

Less frequent codes categorized under individual factors were fear of making mistakes and fear of being the focus of attention. The former code refers to the FLSA that is caused by the learners' worries about committing a mistake while speaking the foreign language, which might put them in an embarrassing situation in front of their peers. The latter code refers to the speaking anxiety caused by the learners' fear of holding the floor in a conversation and being the center of attention.

➤ Participant 14: "Sometimes the personality itself: some people are shy, and even when they start talking in Arabic, especially in public, they feel like 'oh my God, I cannot breathe well because people will look at me or listen to me,' so that's why speaking English in online courses is hard for me."

6.2.4. Environmental Factors

The final category found in table (6.3) included the environmental factors that were the sources of participants' FLSA. This group of factors is primarily related to the environment or physical place in which these participants attend their online EFL class. The factors found in this group are peculiar to the Syrian context and should be considered in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic and related educational safety measures it imposed on education. Two codes extracted from the answers of the interviewees were found in this category. The first code, physical place distractors, relates to any source of distraction found in the place from which the students access their online classes.

➤ Participant 10: "Another thing is, I don't know if it is only me, but I am that kind of person who always needs to be in a quiet place without any distractions, especially when it comes to learning in a class. I need to see the teacher standing next to the board. I need to sit at my desk while everyone else is paying attention and focusing carefully. I have to feel the atmosphere of learning to be able to focus. In online sessions, I sit in a totally empty room to feel the atmosphere of learning. If someone walks in, it is a disaster. I feel very nervous. I cannot speak anymore."

Technical & internet connection problems is another code that is related to the environment from which the learners access their online classes. Having a technical problem with the computer device or internet connection that the learner is using to attend the online class is reported to be a reason for learners' FLSA in online classes.

➤ Participant 15: "Having a technical problem after finally having the confidence to speak up and answer a question makes me really anxious. I feel stressed not only in that instance but also all during the class because I keep expecting that whenever I speak, a technical problem will happen."

6.3 Research Question Three

The third research question is concerned with discovering coping strategies employed by Syrian learners to have greater control over their foreign language speaking anxiety during their online EFL learning. The final interview question asked learners to detail their FLSA coping strategies for the researcher to get deeper

perceptions of these strategies. After conducting the interviews with the 11 participants, frequencies of codes in their answers were measured and grouped in light of what Kondo & Ying-Ling (2004) discussed, and the results were as follows:

Table (6.4). FLSA Coping Strategies as Employed by Syrian Learners.

Category	FLSA Coping Strategies	Frequency
Preparation	Prior preparation	4
	Finding a suitable environment for the online class	3
	Practicing more	2
Positive Thinking	Personal encouragement	3
	Teacher encouragement	1
Resignation	Passing the speaking turn	2
Relaxation	Tolerating speaking mistakes	1

6.3.1 Preparation Strategies

The most frequent code found in participants' interview responses was prior preparation which refers to students coping with their FLSA by preparing for the speaking topic before accessing the online class. This code is strongly correlated with the code of practicing more that indicates that participants feel less anxious when they practice speaking the foreign language more outside the online class. An interview response that features both codes was provided by participant 14:

➤ Participant 14: "I think, to practice more outside the class and to prepare before starting the session help me speak more successfully because sometimes anxiety comes from the fact that we don't know anything about the point we will speak about. So, when I prepare before I come to speak helps me a lot, especially when we have to talk about a specific topic or point, it helps me a lot to cope with the stress. Just prepare more before the class and practice more."

Finding a suitable environment for the online class was reported by participants as a coping strategy they use to handle their FLSA in online EFL classes. It refers to the search for an environment that is quiet and free of technical and internet-related problems. An example interview response was provided by participant 28 who maintained:

➤ Participant 28: "Usually, I prepare a comfortable and quiet place to attend the lesson. I prepare some juice or other things. It really helps me avoid being stressed."

6.3.2 Positive Thinking

Personal encouragement is yet another code that shows how learners manage their FLSA in EFL online courses by prompting and motivating themselves to speak up during the online session to calm their anxiety.

➤ Participant 6: "I keep reminding myself that I should and need to speak English and challenge myself. I need this language, and I have to learn it, so I tell myself this every time I feel stressed in the class."

A single, non-frequent code found in this category was teacher encouragement. It refers to the teacher persuading students to feel relaxed and confident to speak. One participant stated that resorting to his teacher's motivating words helps him overcome his FLSA.

6.3.3 Resignation Strategies

Passing the speaking turn is reported by 2 interviewees to be a coping strategy they use in the online session as a way to alleviate their FLSA: it refers to the learner's tendency to avoid speaking or letting a classmate speak instead of him/her.

➤ Participant 10: "Maybe to be silent until someone asks me to speak or to let others speak instead of me. You know me, teacher, I do this most of the time [laughs], or maybe to wait until I feel less stressed and then speak."

6.3.4 Relaxation Strategies

Tolerating speaking mistakes was reported by one participant as a coping strategy that refers to the participant tolerating his grammar and pronunciation while speaking. It was reported that this strategy helps the participant feel less stressed once his FLSA emerges:

➤ Participant 7: "Easy! I speak, speak, and speak repeatedly regardless of how many mistakes I commit in my conversation. As you know, like sonic. So, I would say that I don't limit myself and get confused by the mistakes that I commit in my conversation. When I am stressed, I convince myself that it is not irritating for me to commit mistakes... so I complete my speaking, and that improves my ability and lowers my stress. Step by step, I realize the improvement on me because of this idea."

7. Discussion

This study investigated the levels of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) among Syrian EFL learners who were doing online English classes, the factors that provoke their anxiety, and the coping strategies they exploit to manage this anxiety. According to the results of the study, more than half of the participants exhibited a moderate level of speaking anxiety in online classes, while fewer students demonstrated low anxiety and very few students showed high levels of FLSA. This goes in line with the results of previous studies conducted in a similar vein of the present one (Çağatay, 2015; Asysyfa, Handyani, & Rizkiani, 2019; Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Rachmawati & Jurianto, 2020; Pakpahan & Gultom, 2021) in that most participants in these studies demonstrated a moderate level of FLSA, unlike studies by (Luo 2014; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014) in which participants exhibited low anxiety levels and (Bouddage & Elfatihi, 2018; Eddraoui & Wirza, 2020) where participants showed high levels of that anxiety. The findings of this study revealed that the participants' FLSA seems to be caused by a variety of factors: including linguistic (5 items), educational (4 items), individual (9 items), and environmental (2 items). As for the strategies used to ease FLSA, results of the study indicated that 7 strategies are usually employed by participants that are grouped under the following categories: preparation (3 strategies), positive thinking (2 strategies), relaxation (1 strategy), and resignation (1 strategy).

Although some of above-mentioned factors, such as individual factors, are viewed as learner-related problems that contribute to their FLSA, some other factors should be viewed contextually and understood with regards to the Syrian context during the Covid-19 crisis. Educational factors such as the lack of adequate English education could be attributed to less effective teaching methods in some Syrian public schools that focus mainly on a grammar-translation approach to language instruction. Syrian EFL researchers have unwaveringly pointed out the detrimental effects that such approaches could have on students' language skills and have suggested numerous ways to better address these problems. Lack of practice, which is also an educational factor, could be caused by the fact that English is used as a foreign language in the Syrian context, which means that learners have few to no opportunities to practice the language outside the classroom. This could also be the reason why learners' FLSA is triggered by the individual factor of English is not the student's mother tongue.

These educational factors found in the Syrian context might explain why some linguistic factors occur in the first place. For example, the linguistic factors of lack of fluency and incomprehensible input could be the result of the previously-discussed educational factor lack of practice. The insufficient practice time given to the participants to learn English in the Syrian context explicates why these participants do not have enough experience in forming and expressing a well-structured speech output, and might cause the difficulties they face in attempting to speak the foreign language effortlessly and fluently. Similarly, the educational factor of lack of adequate English education reported by the Syrian participants in this study could cause the linguistic factors of poor pronunciation, insufficient grammatical knowledge, and limited vocabulary knowledge.

Environmental factors such as physical place distractors and technical and internet connection problems are also specific to the Syrian context during the pandemic. Physical place distractors could be a result of the recent necessity of "working/learning from home" that many business and educational institutions have had

to adopt as a safety measure during the pandemic. Today, it is not uncommon that more than one member of a Syrian family are asked to work or study from home, which many Syrians say is impractical due to schedule conflicts, noise, distractions, and lack of space in the same Syrian house. In addition, Syrian learners report that the factor of technical and internet connection problems is a serious problem that hinders their online learning. They attribute this factor to problems related to electricity, internet, and technology that occur in the Syrian context.

The findings of the present study will help EFL educators in Syria develop a deeper understanding of the foreign language speaking anxiety that Syrian learners typically experience in online English classes. The findings also pinpoint the factors that cause FLSA among Syrian learners, which in turn will help educators in the Syrian context identify the roots of their learners' FLSA and ultimately attempt to alleviate that anxiety. Lastly, the study elucidated the coping strategies employed by Syrian learners to reduce their anxiety. This study urges EFL instructors to increase the teaching of positive strategies like preparation, relaxation, and positive thinking strategies, and they are encouraged to teach their students how to get rid of coping techniques like resignation strategies, as these drastically deter learners' motivation and their willingness to communicate in the online class.

8. Limitations and Recommendations

This study was conducted on 30 upper-intermediate Syrian learners learning English in online classes. The small size of the research population and the fact that all participants had the same language level could be considered as limitations of this study. Studies conducted in the same field as this study could consider involving a larger number of participants in order to draw more valid generalizations about the FLSA of Syrian learners based on the results of this study. Future studies could also include participants with different language proficiency levels to examine variables such as differences in language proficiency and their influence on learners' FLSA levels. Another recommendation for further research is to compare the level of FLSA that learners experience in online courses with the level of this anxiety that occurs in face-to-face classes. Therefore, researchers are invited to involve a control group of EFL learners in face-to-face classes and compare their anxiety levels to a comparison group consisting of learners learning English in online settings. For broader research in the area of the study, future research would explore other variables such as cultural aspects, students' learning style, teaching method, motivation, and the correlation between these variables and FLSA in the Syrian context. Exploring some of the aforesaid variables would lead to a more comprehensive framework and a better understanding of Syrian learners' FLSA and the factors that evoke their anxiety.

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