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Exploring the Relationship Between Foreign Language Anxiety and Students' Online Engagement at UK Universities During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a well-documented phenomenon among speakers of English as second/foreign language affecting students' engagement with learning. Yet FLA is poorly understood in university students studying in English as a second language. The relationship between FLA and student engagement, in particular, needs to be further explored in the online learning setting triggered by the COVID pandemic as this has brought new challenges for learners in UK universities. Therefore, the present study explored the relationship between FLA and student engagement with online learning in university students. We tested 65 international students, studying at UK universities, using two newly developed scales for measuring FLA and student engagement with online learning. The results of multiple linear regression analysis suggest that FLA has a significant negative influence on students' engagement with online learning.

Paper: Background

Foreign language anxiety (FLA), is a specific type of anxiety (Horwitz, 2010) that typically surfaces when students communicate in a second/foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, Pichette, 2009). It has been documented in previous literature that FLA has an effect on students' engagement, in their socialisation with peers and academic achievement (Awan et al., 2010; Gargalianou et al., 2016; Yan & Horwitz, 2008) with both face-to-face and online learning (Horwitz et al., 1991; Hurd, 2007). The manifestations of FLA in online learning can be largely the same as in face-to-face classroom learning, but its sources tend to be different. For example, Hurd (2007) suggested that FLA may be intensified in online environments as students are physically separated from their peers and tutors leading to isolation and this makes it harder to identify learners who need additional support.

Student engagement has also become a popular topic of interest in recent years due to its potential to significantly influence students' academic performance, course approval rates and overall well-

being (Assunção et al., 2020; Wonglorsaichon et al., 2014). With the rise of the COVID-pandemic, most UK universities had had to switch to online provision of their course with anecdotal evidence suggesting a decrease in student engagement with their learning in the online setting.

Engagement with online learning has been a particular concern for international students at UK universities, who often have variable or even lower English language proficiency than English native speakers, and we expect would be influenced by FLA. However, FLA has not been sufficiently investigated in the university population thus far but limited research suggests it is present in this particular population (Gargalianou et al., 2016; Haley et al., 2015). Furthermore, the relationship between FLA and student engagement in university students is even less understood.

Aims

The present study presents one of the first explorations of the relationships between FLA and students' online engagement with their university course in the UK context, with the following research questions:

1. To what extent is FLA present among international students studying in L2 English at UK universities?
2. To what extent does FLA affect engagement with online learning of international students studying in L2 English at UK universities?

Methods

We recruited a total of 65 participants with the average age of 24 years ($SD = 4.92$), most of whom were female. The participants' average self-reported IELTS score was 6.6 ($SD = 0.67$) which places the participants between upper-intermediate and advanced proficiency according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). There were 21 undergraduate and 44 Masters participants. For the purposes of the present study, we adapted and developed two new scales for measuring FLA (Fondo & Jacobetty, 2019) and student online engagement (Dixson, 2015; Lee et al., 2019; Lin & Huang, 2018) in the university setting respectively.

The data were analysed using multiple regression, with student engagement as the outcome variable and FLA score, proficiency type of degree and self-reported stress during the pandemic as the predictors.

Results

First, our results confirm the finding from previous research that FLA is indeed present among the international students studying at UK universities and suggest that FLA has a statistically significant negative association with student online engagement. In other words, students who experienced higher levels of FLA tended to engage less with their online course provision. Second, we found a statistically significant negative association between type of degree and student engagement, suggesting that students studying at undergraduate level engaged less with their course than students studying for a Masters degree. However, our sample included more Masters than undergraduate students so this result should be interpreted with caution. Finally, we found a statistically significant positive association between self-reported stress during the pandemic and student online engagement. Still this finding is somewhat unusual as it suggests that students who

experienced more stress during the pandemic engaged more with their online course, however it is possible that students who were stressed during the pandemic engaged more with their course out of fear of missing out in this new format of delivery. Importantly, this finding indicates that stress during the pandemic operates independently of FLA in our sample. This is further confirmed by a lack of a significant interaction between FLA and stress during the pandemic in our model. These findings suggest that FLA is a specific type of anxiety in its own right.

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