

Social Media as a Tool to Mitigate Foreign Language Anxiety

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Abstract—Foreign language anxiety is usually experienced as a spontaneous and inevitable reaction to the language learning process. Unfortunately, this anxiety badly affects the language learning process and therefore, this field has attracted a lot of research. Research across the world has established that it is a universal phenomenon with multiple causes. Foreign language anxiety becomes a vicious circle to the process of language learning. Lack of understanding creates anxiety, which affects the ability to learn. In other words, FLA becomes both the cause and effect of poor learning. Anxiety has positive and negative impacts on learning and rather than try to avoid anxiety, the focus should be on managing anxiety (Tran et al, 2015). This study was conducted in this context to explore whether the use of social media for English learning can mitigate the anxiety. The results from the sample studied show social media is definitely a useful tool for mitigating anxiety during English language learning. While those with urban and English medium schooling had slightly stronger perception on this, the correlation is statistically weak. This study reveals that learning with the help of social media is definitely useful in reduction of criticism, but does not exactly prepare the student to face a live class or elsewhere.

Index Terms—Foreign Language Anxiety, Social Media for Education, Language Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

A. Concept of Foreign Language Anxiety

Almost everyone has felt anxiety at various stages of life and it can be safely agreed that it is unpleasant and not a productive phenomenon. Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson (1979) describe anxiety as a psychosomatic concept, commonly considered by psychologists as “a state of uneasiness and fear, a vague anxiety that is specifically associated with the particular object or phenomenon”. Psychologists use the term anxiety reaction to distinguish between persons who are usually fearful in general circumstances from those who become nervous only in language-specific situations (Horwitz et al., 1986).

In the context of language learning, there has been a lot of research on foreign language anxiety (FLA), which is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al, 1986, p.128). Foreign language anxiety is usually experienced as a spontaneous and inevitable reaction to the language learning process. Unfortunately, this anxiety badly affects the language learning process and therefore, this field has attracted a lot of research. Language anxiety negatively affect all kinds of learning; the anxiety specifically connected with L2 learning is called second/foreign language anxiety. Tanveer (2007) posits that studying learners’ reactions under anxiety enables the teacher to help them to achieve the required performance goals in the target language.

FLA is not restricted to the learning of English as a foreign language, but can well apply to a student learning French or German or Tamil as a foreign language. However, English is the major language of communication and literature in technical, medical, legal, or business matters, the anxiety for learners of

English as a foreign language is a much more serious phenomenon. Fluency and competence in English is also considered as a matter of prestige in many countries, especially in Asia and Africa.

Many studies have shown that foreign language anxiety prevails among foreign language learners, negatively affects foreign language learning. There are four major categories of sources of FLA, namely,

- the classroom environment,
- learner characteristics,
- the target language, and
- the foreign language learning process itself.

B. Universality of FLA

According to Horwitz (2001), among all foreign language learners, one in three learners experience some level of anxiety. Tran (2015) had catalogued research on FLA and found that it is observed in almost all parts of the world: Asia (China, Hong Kong, India, Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Iran, Qatar, and Israel), Europe (UK, Austria, Croatia, Spain and Turkey), South America (Chile and Venezuela) and North America (USA, and Canada).

Sidhu et al (2016) found that in Malaysia, “when students move from schools to tertiary institutions where the medium of instruction is English, there is bound to be a feeling of anxiety (p.52)”. According to these researchers, most of them did not make any effort to overcome their limitations and most of them were not self-learners of language. The findings imply that tertiary language learners must be helped to equip themselves with skills, so that they can learn on their own.

Aldarasi (2020) has observed anxiety among Libyan students speaking in English. Songbutamis (2017) described the impact of FLA among Indonesian students. In Saudi Arabia, Hakim (2019) found various factors that cause language anxiety, of which learners’ excessive self-consciousness and self-awareness concerning their oral reproduction and performance are predominant.

In India, English is taught as a subject right from primary classes. A shift from a regional language institution in higher classes or college raises serious concerns. To learn science or history in English, without the ease of clarifying doubts due to unfamiliarity in English, make the students anxious and result in poor academic performance. Studies on English language anxiety in India since the beginning of this millennium include research articles by Kaur and Bhangu (2013), Kaur and Singh (2017), Vanika and Sankhiyan (2018) and Vazalwar (2011), all cited by Kumar and Suresh (2021).

B. Causes of FLA

There are many causes of foreign language anxiety. Hashemi (2011) cites learners’ own sense of self, their self-related perceptions, language learning difficulties, differences in cultures of L1 and L2, differences in social status of the teacher and the taught, and the fear of losing their self-identity as the major causes.

Students, as well as teachers, name speaking as the main source of FLA. However, the teachers attributed the cause to the students’ inefficiency in the language, while the students attributed their communication apprehension or unwillingness to talk mainly to the teachers’ negative evaluations and teachers’ personalities (Aldarasi, 2020).

While students faced problems of lack of vocabulary, low concentration, lack of discipline, and speaking problem, teachers’ faced problems of shortage of teachers’ training, language proficiency issues, lack of command of teaching methods, unfamiliarity to IT, lack of professional development. and time constraint (Songbutamis, 2017).

The classroom environment plays a critical role in learning foreign languages. Where the teacher as well as a significant proportion of the students have moved from regional language to English medium, they may empathize more and create an environment conducive to English learning and usage. The problem is exacerbated when most of the students have studied in English medium classes earlier and mock those who have difficulty with English. The most important fear is often the deterrent fear of causing damage to one’s self-identity.

Language anxiety is a comprehensive concept of anxiety and a rudimentary human reaction possibly induced by amalgamations of situational factors (McIntyre, 1995, as cited in Tittle, 1997). Language anxiety could be possibly caused by incompetence to use L2 or English and, also, a lack of knowledge (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991; cited in Horwitz, 2001). In other words, it may be due to the linguistic difficulties the learners face while learning and using the target language.

Jones (2004) found that the fear of making errors and the subsequent uneasiness before the classmates constituted the main cause of language anxiety. Tanveer (2007) corroborates the above finding of Jones (2004). Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found a strong link between students' fear of making errors and their concern to maintain a positive image before their teachers and peers/fellow learners.

According to Pica (1987), a, real or assumed, status gap between learners and teachers could be one further cause of anxiety for learners. A lack of confidence in one's linguistic competence leads to low self-confidence and anxiety on the side of learners in their interactions with speakers who have a good command of the language like the native speakers (Peirce, 1995). Many researchers view the anxiety as a loss of individual self-confidence which is intensely ingrained in the first language (Guiora, 1972; Peirce, 1995; Rardin, 1988; Leary, 1982; cited in Ohata, 2005).

Language teachers often believe that oral presentations help learners to feel less anxious, whereas, it actually does the exact opposite by making them go through the stressful situation of trying to recall what they have memorized (Tanveer, 2007).

C. *Impact of FLA on Learning*

Foreign language anxiety creates many negative effects on language learning. Lack of understanding creates anxiety which affects the ability to learn. Thus, foreign language anxiety becomes both the cause and effect of poor learning

A lot of research across the world have found negative correlation anxiety levels and English education; the impact is on

- learners' cognition (Krashen, 1981, 1985; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, 1995),
- learning attitudes and emotions (Tran, et al, 2013),
- inclination to share or exchange ideas (Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010), and
- achievement and performance (Aida, 1994; Tran et al., 2013).

D. *Managing FLA*

Tran et al (2015) argue that "FLA should be managed rather than reduced and that an effective solution to deal with FLA is to accept it and find ways to make the best out of it (p.1)". They broadly classified possible strategies for managing FLA into student strategies and teacher strategies, with support and encouragement from friends and families. Student strategies were broken down into problem solving strategies, FL learning strategies and attitudes to learning. Teacher strategies were sub-classified into problem solving strategies, teaching strategies and relationship with students.

Learning from mistakes is very important, according to Tran and Moni (2015). A student should also equip himself with tools for self-learning and practice. The advent of internet and the social media has opened up immense opportunities in autonomous English learning.

FLA also has some positive effects for learners, it can make them want to learn, as the students may not make much progress in learning, if they have no challenges. Therefore, FLA should be managed rather than reduced (Tran and Moni, 2015). It is not practical to be free from anxiety, the aim should be to handle FLA and not to waste time trying to eliminate it (Bigdeli & Bai, 2009).

A lot of research is available on the correlation of FLA with various factors. The teachers' perceptions are not always in alignment with those of their learners (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). Managing foreign language anxiety involves active efforts by the insiders (the teacher and the taught), as well as external stakeholders (Tran and Moni, 2015).

E. *Role of Language Teachers in Overcoming FLA*

Djafri (2018) explains that the increasing modern-day pressure to communicate 'only in English' in language classes leads to anxiety in some students, as it exposes them in front of their fellow learners. He found that a friendly attitude and a relaxed classroom setting helped lessen anxiety. Language learners feel less nervous and anxious in classroom settings that focus on student-centered and interactive activities. A popular solution is to have more casual and less formal classroom settings with a friendlier atmosphere. According to the constructivist theory of language learning, such classroom settings provide language learners with a good environment where students can afford to make mistakes without looking stupid.

Tanveer (2007) asserts that, in order to reduce anxiety, teachers have a critical role in making the classroom a more cheerful learning place and less anxiety-inducing. Instructors should establish an environment wherein making mistakes while learning a language is not only acceptable but welcome as learning opportunities. Teachers should offer constructive feedback on errors rather than disturb and correct students repeatedly.

Language teachers are also encouraged to warn against perfectionism and instill the idea in the students that learning a language requires working tolerantly and often making mistakes during the process. Many learners have also reported teachers' patronizing and insensitive attitude and treatment of learners, particularly when committing errors and mistakes, as a factor that adversely affects their willingness to participate in classroom activities.

The findings of many studies in this field include the following common suggestions:

- Language teachers should be aware that anxiety in language learners is a realistic fact.
- A friendly classroom with teachers who are approachable, and supportive should be created.
- Teachers should have the insight to encourage learners who are afraid of making speaking errors.
- Teachers' familiarity with learners' cultural background and showing genuine interest in their educational history and background can help them better understand & treat, students' anxiety.

In order to manage the pressure, anxiety and nervousness in their classes, Djafri (2018) recommends that language teachers should undergo training on psychology, including specific courses on FLA.

F. *Social Media and FLA*

Social media usage has been growing at a phenomenal rate across the world, more so among the young people. While it started off as an entertainment and networking tool, its potential for business, and education soon became very evident. While many of the reasons for foreign language anxiety stemmed from the students' fear of being mocked at by the other students and the teacher, the relative anonymity of the social media is enabling foreign language learners to observe others across the world speak, and write in the foreign language with different levels of competence.

Social media platforms can provide a relaxed learning environment, which facilitate ease of learning and a stress-free learning environment, and most English language materials are accessible via social media (Alghasab and Alfadley, 2018). Alshumaimeri (2011) found that the motivation and self-confidence of students get boosted when they start using social media for communication in a foreign language. A study by Hamad (2017) found that WhatsApp has been observed to enable students to build their English language competence, expand their vocabulary and learn from the mistakes of their classmates without damaging their self-confidence.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main focus of the research was on addressing the following:

Q1: Do students consider social media as useful to learn English without anxiety?

Q2: The pros and cons of using social media as a tool for mitigating anxiety during the learning of the English language

3. METHODOLOGY

Primary data was collected from 108 teachers and 225 students of English language. Data was collected through structured questionnaire, with both multiple choice as well as open ended questions. Individual responses on the open-ended questions were categorized on the basis of similarity in views (even if not in terms of actual words used), which was subsequently analyzed. Data collected from the teachers and the students included their personal background, kinds of social media used by them and their individual preferences, their views on social media usage for managing FLA, and the benefits and problems of using social media from their respective perspectives.

The interrelationship between the personal profile of the respondents and their views on FLA were analyzed by correlation analysis. Conclusions were drawn on the basis of analysis of the data collected.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses of the faculty and students of English language in this sample study on the usefulness of social media for mitigating FLA was analyzed. The sample was analyzed to check the correlation, if any, between their profile classifications and the respondents' views on social media and English language anxiety.

52 % of the teacher respondents were from a rural background, 29 % were from semi-urban and 19 % from urban educational institutions. 36 % were schooled in regional language medium.

Research Q1: Do students consider social media as useful to learn English without anxiety?

Result 1: The students definitely perceived social media as useful for learning English with lesser levels of anxiety. 72 % of the students found social media to be a useful tool for reducing anxiety levels (Fig.1)

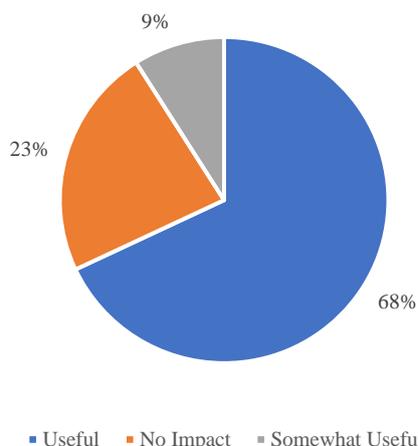


Fig.1 Impact of Social Media to Reduce Anxiety in English Learning - Perception of Students

Similarly, 68 % of the faculty respondents found social media to be useful for reducing anxiety levels (Fig.2)

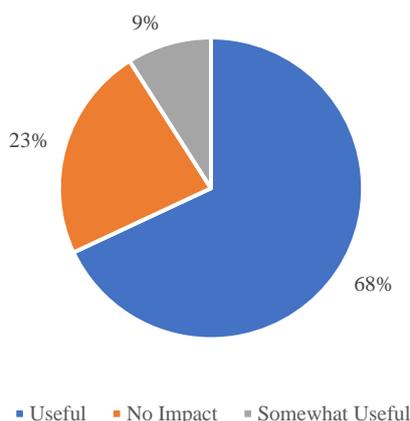


Fig.2 Impact of Social Media for Reducing Anxiety in English Language Learning - Perception of Teachers

The respondents’ personal profile was analyzed for possible correlation with their views regarding social media usage and FLA. Age and gender revealed no correlation. The medium of education and urban vs rural background revealed some correlation, though weak (r between 0.30 and 0.45) (Table 1). This is understandable as city bred students or teachers with English medium education have better exposure to English. However, the correlation is not strong enough.

Table 1: Correlation Coefficient between the Profile of the Respondents and Their Perception on Use of Social Media to Mitigate FLA

Factor	Anxiety in English Language Education	Usefulness of SM for Reducing FLA
Age	0.11	0.18
Gender	0.04	0.07
Schooling Location	0.30	0.37
Medium of schooling	0.36	0.42

Research Q2: The pros and cons of using social media as a tool for mitigating anxiety during the learning of the English language

Result 2: The responses of the respondents on impact of social media for mitigating anxiety during English learning were analyzed.

Major positive impacts of using social media for mitigating anxiety while learning / teaching English according to the teachers are (Fig.3):

- a) Useful to stay abreast of information on topics and teaching methods of English.
- b) The absence of a live audience, unlike in a classroom, creates less tensions for all the participants
- c) Helps to make education fun multimedia inputs.
- d) It provides exposure to a variety of methodologies and content to make the teaching impactful.
- e) Provides easy access to supplement teaching materials for all types of teachers – beginners as well as the experienced ones.
- f) Facilitates interactions with students at an individual level as well as in groups. Conferencing tools enable group interactions.

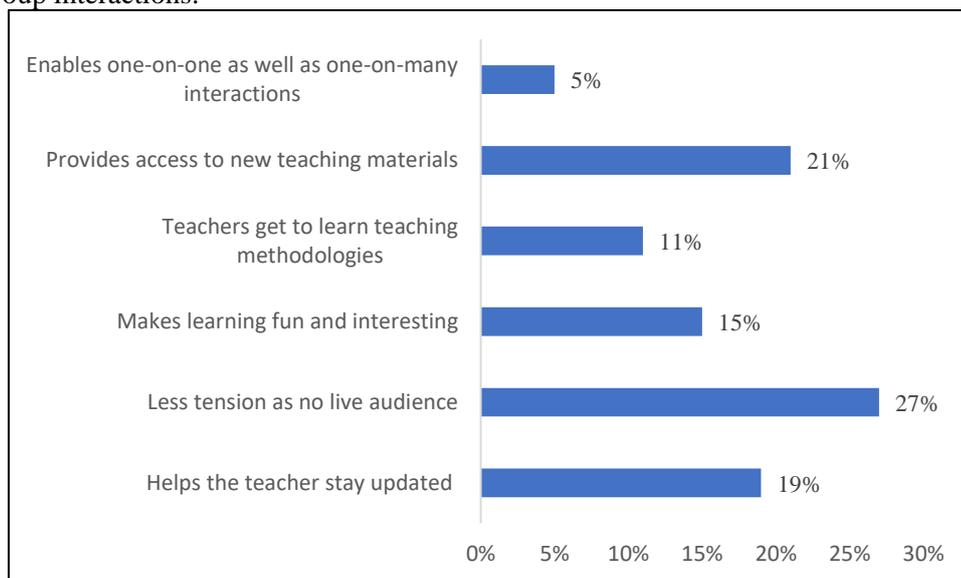


Fig 3 Positive Feedback from Teachers on Use of Social Media for Minimizing FLA

Students’ Perception (Fig.4):

The most positive features of using social media, according to the students, were the absence of criticism in making mistakes (27%), improvement of English vocabulary and pronunciation (32%), making learning fun and interesting (14%), improving reading, writing and speaking skills (16%), and instant availability of information on any topic from anywhere (7%).

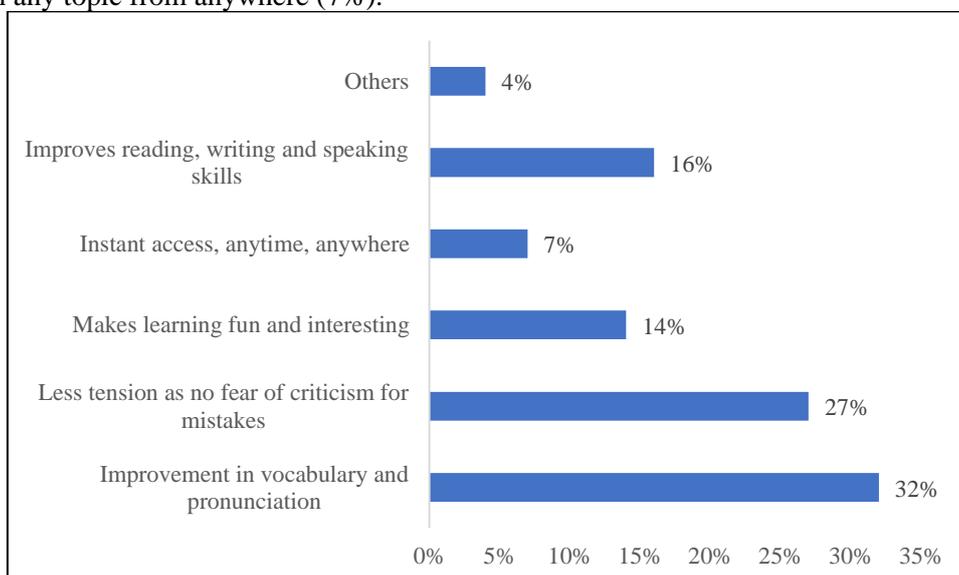


Fig 4 Positive Feedback from Students on Use of Social Media for Minimizing FLA

Respondents from both categories also had their views on the negative aspects of social media for reducing anxiety during English learning.

The major negative impacts perceived by the teachers (Fig.5) were:

- a) Distraction to students from learning. Also overload of information on the net confuses the student.
- b) Does not really prepare for facing a live audience in class or elsewhere
- c) Possible loss of privacy and technology challenges in the form of malwares, hoaxes, phishing, and other frauds.
- d) Slang, emojis and wrong grammar
- e) Connectivity and net speed issues make the medium hard to use at times.

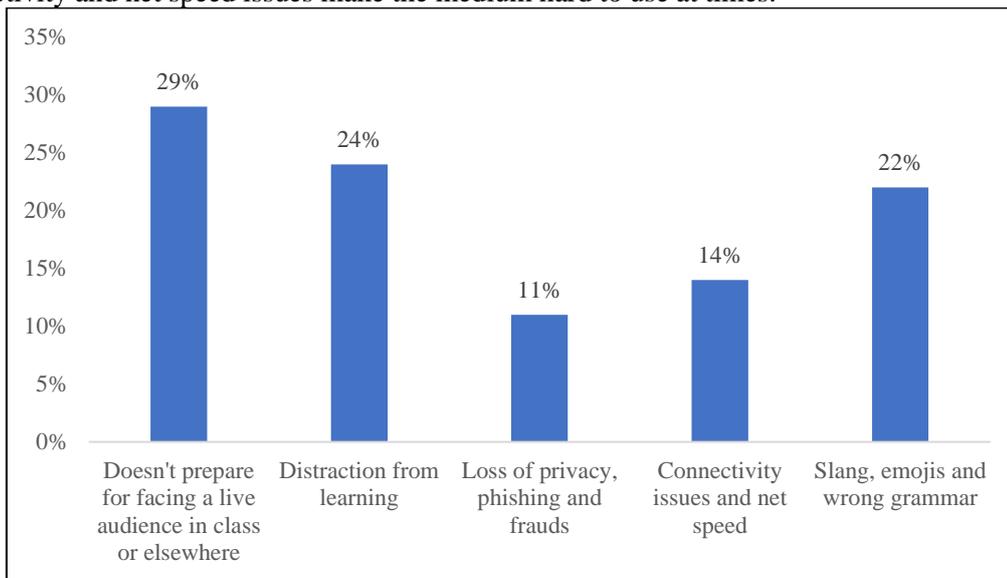


Fig 5 Responses from Teachers on Negative Aspects of Using Social Media to Mitigate FLA

Students' Perception:

Feedback received from the students cited four major negative consequences on the use of social media for L2 learning (Fig.6), namely,

- a) it becomes highly addictive
- b) Does not really prepare for facing a live audience in class or elsewhere
- c) it is highly distracting and leads to a lot of wastage of time, and
- d) privacy theft and cyber frauds

Network and connectivity issues and the concern that social media spoils their language through slang, emojis, and wrong grammar, are the other major factors which are significant.

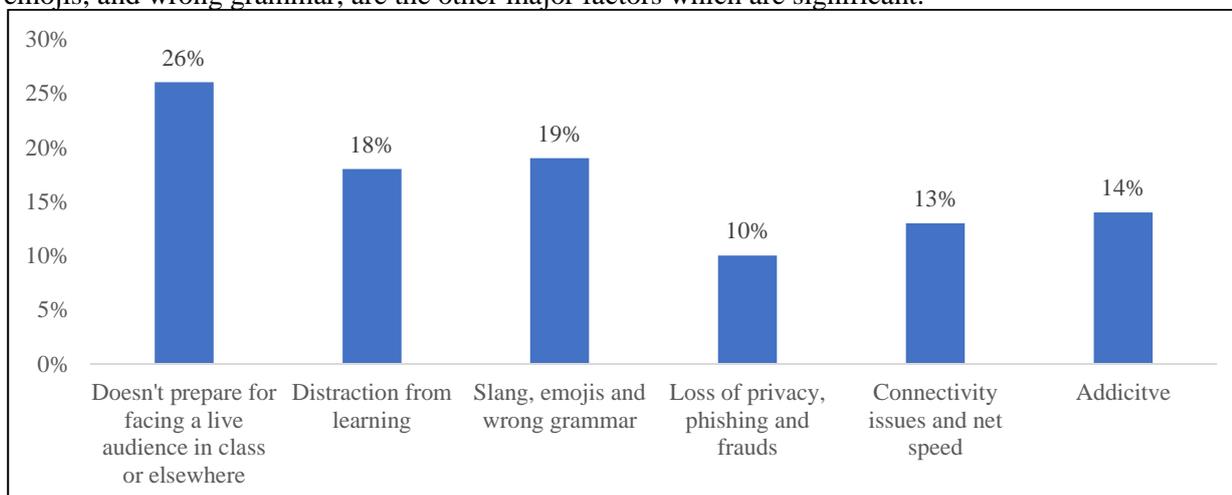


Fig 6 Responses from Students on Negative Aspects of Using Social Media to Mitigate FLA

Thus, while both the students and the teachers agree that the use of social media for English language education reduces the anxiety levels in learning, they are also united in their view that it does not fully prepare them for facing a live audience in class or elsewhere.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, foreign language anxiety is a universal phenomenon; there are multiple causes – both psychological and physiological - for such anxiety. Anxiety has positive and negative impacts on learning and rather than try to reduce anxiety, the effort should be on managing anxiety through proper strategies, which can be student-centric, teacher-centric, or a combination, along with a relaxed classroom setting. Social media as a tool for mitigating anxiety during English learning is definitely perceived as useful by the sample of students and teachers contacted. This perception is not really much different across the sample. While those with urban and English medium schooling had some stronger perception on this, the correlation is quite weak.

In terms of impact of social media as a tool for mitigating FLA, while it is definitely perceived to diminish anxiety of criticism while learning, it is also admitted that such learning does not fully prepare the student to face a live audience in class or elsewhere. As it is well established that anxiety cannot be totally eradicated, but only managed, the study concludes that social media is definitely a useful tool for mitigating FLA.

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