

Fear of COVID-19 and Anxiety in the Arabic Language Learners in Kuala Lumpur

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic contributed to distress and affected mental health in many sectors, including education, which triggered fear and anxiety among learners and educators. Therefore, this research aimed to perceive mental health issues such as fear, stress, and anxiety during the pandemic, especially among learners aged between 15 to 25 from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The questionnaire consisted of seven questions related to the Fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCV-19S). The respondents were invited to participate via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Emails, and Facebook. The link to the Google form was given to them to allow them to join the survey. Three hundred twenty-four respondents from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, participated in this survey to show their anxiety levels during this pandemic. The findings showed that the level of fear of COVID-19 was high and significant by using SPSS version 26. It also constructed mental health issues among the learners, decreasing their performance in education. This research is applicable to distinguish and describe the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic, which influences learners' mental health. The findings also revealed that fear and anxiety were high and affected students' performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a contagious disease caused by a newly discovered in late 2019. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily via droplets of saliva or release from the nose after infecting individual coughs or sneezes; hence, practicing respiratory etiquettes such as by coughing into a flexed elbow and following the prescribed Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and physical distancing is essential (World Health Organization, 2020). Moreover, the spread of COVID-19 from inhalation of the virus in the air could happen at distances greater than six feet. Particles from an infected person can travel throughout an entire room or indoor space. The particles can also remain in the air after a person has left the room – they can persist airborne for hours in some cases (United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA), 2021).

One of the global challenges worldwide is handling and managing new infectious diseases that still have no suitable one-for-all solution vaccine to stop the infection (Ahorsu et al., 2020). Besides, Wang et al. (2020) reported in their research that the most common symptoms, such as fever, fatigue, dry cough, myalgia, and dyspnea, could last within 2 to 14 days, and some cases are categorized as long COVID-19 patients (World Health Organization (WHO) [YouTube], 2021). However, many researchers, such as Dong et al. (2020), claimed that the recent treatment for COVID-19 is focused on infection control, effective vaccine, and treatment cure rate.

According to (Izhar et al., 2021), the COVID-19 explosion affected many sectors in Malaysia, including population health, economy, social life, and education. Furthermore, Dhawan (2020) reported that many educational institutions had taken the initiative to break the chain of the outbreak of COVID-19 by discontinuing in-school teaching and learning. In addition, according to the findings in the research, half the world's students are still affected by school closures, and over 100 million children will fall below the literacy in reading because of the health crisis. Hence, the reduced or zero physical interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to mental health issues among the learners, such as fear, anxiety, and worry (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly affected psychological aspects as mental health issues increased immediately, including the commission of suicide, public stigmatization, and discrimination. Moreover, the high level of fear involves individuals' state of mind as most people initially cannot think rationally and clearly when reacting to COVID-19. Furthermore, many researchers, such as Bharatharaj et al. (2021) and (Rajkumar, 2020), claimed that COVID-19 influences anxiety and depression symptoms such as stress and insomnia. Besides, (Harper et al. 2020; Knipe et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2020; Winter et al., 2020) revealed that the level of COVID-19 fear increased dramatically in various population sectors such as learners, educators, and healthcare professionals, which was similar to previous viral epidemics. According to

data Ministry of Education Malaysia (2020), in Malaysia itself, the Ministry of Education was ordered to close 142 schools affected by COVID-19 because it was located under the red zone. Thus, fear of COVID-19 is connected to mental health issues contributing to anxiety among learners, including Arabic language learners in Malaysia.

Arabic Language in Malaysia

The Arabic language has become one of the five most spoken languages in the world. Malaysia is among the countries where the Arabic language is widely taught in primary and secondary schools as an elective subject up to universities (Mohd Husni et al., 2021) (Mohamed Mokhtar & Che Haron, 2020). There is an everyday use of the Arabic language in the mass media of Malaysia as it constantly relates to religious content, mainly Islamic (Mohd Husni et al., 2021).

Furthermore, (Rahmah Ahmad H. et al., 2022) reported 7 thousand students majoring in Arabic Studies in Malaysia, 232 million Arabic native speakers, and 260 Arabic speakers worldwide. Arab language is one of the most challenging languages listed by UNESCO (Mohamed Mokhtar, 2020). Anxiety exists during the classroom learning process, especially in speaking skills, because it is a foreign language and they are not native speakers (Mohamed Mokhtar & Che Haron, 2021).

Moreover, due to the difficulty for the learner in mastering the language, many studies in Malaysia, such as (Abdul Razif et al., 2016; Hasnurol, 2010; Izzah Syakirah & Rosni, 2020; Saifudin, 2002; Siti Aisyah & Zamri, 2016; Zainur Rijal et al., 2016) reported the findings that Malaysian students only have a moderate Arabic vocabulary size which does not reach a satisfactory level. Ismail et al. (2020) reported the results to indicate that Arabic-speaking anxiety among secondary religious school students in Malaysia is moderately high. Researchers such as Mokhtar (2021) said that Arabic is the most difficult foreign language and triggers anxiety among learners, especially in speaking skills. Nevertheless, according to (Haron, 2021), many findings showed that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has caused a significant transformation in the education system entire world.

Fear, Anxiety, and Mental Health

Anxiety is one of the mental health issues related to COVID-19. Pressure is generally understood as the human body's natural reaction to stress. It is a feeling of fear or apprehension and worries about what is to come. For instance, during the first day of school, an interview session or giving a speech may cause most people to feel worried, fearful, and nervous (Holland, 2020). The finding showed that Malaysian people changed their behavior during the pandemic, which started with panic buying, worry, stress, fear, and anxiety during the Movement Control Order (MCO) (Boon Yau et al., 2020).

Similarly, many findings reported, such as (Al-Awadhi et al. 2020; Laing 2020), showed that the negative impact of the COVID-19 disease pandemic affects not only worldwide economics but includes the mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and fear, which affect society regardless of different ages and cultural backgrounds (Liu et al. 2020; Rajkumar 2020). Furthermore, there are research findings (Cowan, 2020; Huang & Zhao, 2020; Qiu et al., 2020; Sønderkov, Dinesen, Santini, & Østergaard, 2020; Stankovska, Memedi, & Dimitrovski, 2020; C. Wang et al., 2020; Y. Wang, Di, Ye, & Wei, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) that reported the mental health issues such as the levels in depression, anxiety, general stress, and posttraumatic stress related to COVID-19 are increased gradually.

The findings reported that people below the 25-year-old and females have significantly higher fear of COVID-19, depression, anxiety, and stress. Then, single people have higher depression levels (Kassim et al., 2021). Moreover, fear is rising and affecting mental health, especially concerning education and access to medication (Knipe et al., 2020). Thus, COVID-19 changed education methodology during and after the pandemic. It triggered the stress level among the learners and educators to adopt a new learning and teaching style during the pandemic (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The finding showed that fear exists and is significant while facing the pandemic, triggering mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19, a novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) outbreak, rose in December 2019 from Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, and spread to the rest of the world. The pandemic affected many sectors, such as education, economics, and, the worst, public health (Elengoe, 2020). COVID-19 is so dangerous and influenced many countries, namely 215 countries, and until March 2022, the number of cases was more than 442 million. Moreover, according to the data from WHO, 6,001,844 people died from the pandemic worldwide (Worldometers, 2022). Besides, according to (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021), the virus SARS-CoV-2 which causes COVID-19, can change over time, is mutant, and become many variants, for instant, Alpha, Delta, and Omicron, which can adapt based on the change of environment and countries.

Besides, fear of COVID-19 related to anxiety and mental health issues, which is significant in the United States of America, which the sample size ($n = 10,368$) reported increased dramatically based on high location risk or a red zone based on the findings (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). Moreover, Daniel (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the learning and teaching process among learners and educators because it contributes to neglecting the content of education and material in courses. Therefore, the aim of the study was first to find out if there was any fear of COVID-19 during this pandemic among Arabic learners. The second was to determine the fear of COVID-19 among Arabic learners, and the

third was to determine whether girls were more afraid of COVID-19 than male students.

METHODS

The research instrument used the questionnaires developed by Ahorsu (Ahorsu et al., 2020), called the Fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCV-19S), which has seven constructed and reliable items. Other researchers use FCV-19S to explore the phenomenon of fear facing the pandemic, such as (Chi et al., 2021). The study reported that the FCV-19S had high internal consistency in handling the research (Winter et al., 2020). This study's total number of participants is 324, randomly selected by purposive sampling based on age and gender categories. The respondents are learners who study Arabic Languages as a foreign language at secondary schools and represent the Kuala Lumpur population. The reliability (*r*) value is more than 0.9, which is 0.906, which is strong, as mentioned in Table 3.1. It also related to the research objective to show that a mighty instrument associated with the fear of the COVID-19 phenomenon exists among Arabic Language learners during the pandemic. The respondents received the Google Form link to answer the questionnaires sent to WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, and emails.

Table 1. Reliability (*r*) Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardised Items	N of Items
0.906	0.906	7

Source: SPSS Data Analysis

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study involved 324 students who learned Arabic as a foreign language in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, either in secondary schools or higher education institutions. The nominal data is described easily in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 below based on the results.

Table 2. Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	129	39.8	39.8
	Female	195	60.2	100.0
	Total	324	100.0	100.0

Source: SPSS Data Analysis

Based on the study, male students as participants are 39.8 percent, and female students 60.2 percent. Female students are higher than male students in the study because they are the majority population in the education area.

Table 3. Age Categories

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Group 1 (15 - 18)	147	45.4	45.4	45.4
Valid Group 2 (19 - 25)	177	54.6	54.6	100.0
Total	324	100.0	100.0	

Source: SPSS Data Analysis

Moreover, Table 4.2 displays the age categories in the study joined as participants in the research survey. The age can be understood easily in two age groups to explain the level of education among the learners. Group one is secondary school learners, who are 45.4 percent, and group 2 is Higher Education Institution learners, 54.6 percent.

Furthermore, the findings show that fear of COVID-19 has existed because the mean and standard deviation (SD) value shows that phenomenon among the learners and is significant, as seen clearly in Table 4.3 below. Based on the instruments, the mean value for items 1, 2, 3, and 5 explains the respondents' real feelings about the pandemic. Besides, the value for mean in items 3, 6, and 7 shows the standard curve. The normal curve explains that the fear of COVID-19 has happened among the learners. The SD value for seven items has described the data spread very widely and is valid to show the phenomenon in the study because the value SD is more than 1.

Table 4. Item Statistics for Mean and Standard Deviation (SD)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1. I am most afraid of Corona	4.2346	.95757	324
2. It makes me uncomfortable to think about Corona	4.0062	1.03497	324
3. My hands become clammy when I think about Corona	2.9383	1.29391	324
4. I am afraid of losing my life because of Corona	3.9969	1.10585	324
5. When I watch news and stories about Corona on social media, I become nervous or anxious.	3.5062	1.25037	324
6. I cannot sleep because I'm worrying about getting Corona.	2.5648	1.27082	324
7. My heart races or palpitates when I think about getting Corona.	2.8302	1.29259	324

Source: SPSS Data Analysis

Fear of COVID-19 among the Arabic Language learners

Based on the instrument FCV-19S, seven items explain the fear of COVID-19, and 80.2% of respondents agree with the statement item 1, "I am most afraid of Corona." The findings data is obvious to perceive fear among the learners. Moreover, the findings support item 2, in which 72.5% of respondents agree, "It makes me uncomfortable to think about Corona." Besides, item 4 is the statement, "I am afraid of losing my life because of Corona," chosen by respondents as 67.9% agree. Lastly, item 6 supports it because 48.8% of respondents agree with the statement, "I cannot sleep because I'm worrying about getting Corona." Hence, the findings clearly show that fear of COVID-19 among Arabic language learners is significant while facing this pandemic in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The Level of Fear of COVID-19 among the Arabic Language learners

The level of fear of COVID-19 is reported in Table 5.2.1. below clearly. The findings show that the level of feeling fear of COVID-19 is significant among Arabic language learners. Based on the percentage displayed in table 5.2.1, item number 1, the value percentage is 80.2%, indicating that phenomenon among the learners who study Arabic as a foreign language. Many respondents agree, "I am most afraid of Corona." The level of fear is supported by item 2, item 4, item 5, and item 6 which the value percentages for the highest category are more than 40%. Hence, the results show that the respondents' fear of COVID-19 is significant.

Table 5: Item Statistics for Percentage Level of feeling Fear COVID-19

	Highest	Average	Lowest
Item 1	80.2	14.5	5.3
Item 2	72.5	17.9	9.6
Item 3	36.1	31.8	32.1
Item 4	67.9	23.1	9
Item 5	53.7	24.1	22.2
Item 6	48.8	28.4	22.8
Item 7	42	25	33

Source: SPSS Data Analysis

Females have more fear of COVID-19 than male learners

The researcher used the independent T-test in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26 to show which sex groups are more scared of COVID-19. Many researchers have utilized SPSS for complex statistical data analysis purposes. The findings via independent samples T-test explain no significant difference between the two groups because the p-value is higher than 0.005. The conclusion reveals no significant difference between the female and male groups in fear of COVID-19 because the p-value is 0.0068. Thus, the fear level between females and males is similar and significant among 324 respondents.

It is interesting to pay attention to the results of this study if it relates to the previous results on anxiety between men and women. The study found no significant difference in anxiety between male athletes and female athletes in the sample of this study, as evidenced by a significance value of 1,000 ($p > 0.05$) Nurdiansyah, E. W., & Jannah, M. (2021). However, several other cases showed different results. A study that examined the difference in stress between men and women showed that the prevalence of stress among yoga participants in Denpasar was 40%. Most of the research subjects were female (72.2%), and the average age was 37. There were differences in stress levels between men and women in yoga participants in Denpasar ($p = 0.000$). Likewise, what was found in research related to fear related to surgery? Data analysis used statistical tests, namely independent sample T-Test. The results showed that male respondents were not anxious (40%), had mild anxiety (26.67%), and moderate anxiety

(33.33%), while female respondents showed no anxiety (23.53%), had mild (17.65%), moderate anxiety (35.29%), severe anxiety (23.53%). Based on the statistical test, the P-value of 0.024 means that H₀ was rejected and H_a was accepted, meaning that there is a difference in the level of anxiety between male and female patients before laparotomy (Erawan, W., Opod, H., & Pali, C. (2013). The fear, when observed in several events, showed different results. There are times when women are more afraid than men and vice versa. Sometimes, men are more afraid than women.

CONCLUSION

The fear of COVID-19 among Arabic learners as a foreign language exists and is significant. The findings reported that anxiety and fear were the most dominant among the learners. The level of feeling fear between a female and male group of learners was similar and had no significant difference between them. The fear is related to mental health issues that can trigger anxiety, which is expected if it happens during the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators and policymakers must understand the phenomenon and work together to reduce fear among the learners because it is crucial and related to students' performance. The mental health issue recently increased dramatically because of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide.

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