

# EFL Distance Learning and Foreign Language Anxiety Management: Exploring FL Anxiety within Distance Learning

Hasnae Kadiri<sup>1</sup> and Adiba Bousfiha<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Faculty of Arts and Humanities Fes Sais, Morocco

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## Abstract

Foreign Language anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that accompanies the process of foreign language learning that can change according to a variety of variables such as the teacher-students relationship, language attitudes and learning environment. The purpose of this study was to examine the potential relation between students' foreign language anxiety levels and learning environments (traditional or distance learning) in a university setting (Faculty of arts and letters Fes Sais, Morocco). Students showed higher levels of anxiety within the distance learning setting compared to traditional education. A survey using a 5 point Likert scale was employed. Semi-structured interviews were also adapted. The results indicated a significant increase in Communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in distance learning compared to face to face setting. The factors behind this have been questioned and analyzed. The current study concludes with the current study's limitations as well as suggestions for further future research.

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**Index terms**— foreign language anxiety- distance learning-anxiety “” traditional education- covid-19.

## 1 Introduction

Teacher-student relationship is a vital part of the teaching-learning process that have been a topic of deep interest with the rise of communicative language teaching approaches to learning in the mid 60's. An effective teacher is usually described as one that manages to hold strong emotional as well as intellectual ties with their students, therefore engendering a secure, accepting and safe environment that acts as a motivational element resulting in a stress and anxiety-free learning atmosphere. Many teachers spend considerable time and effort thinking about ways to refine their methods of transfer at the expense of the emotional and relational aspect of the teaching-learning process, which are often neglected and overlooked. In this respect, Marzano states that 'an effective teacher-student relationship may be the keystone that allows the other aspects to work well' (2003).

Though not as familiar as it is nowadays an unusual form of teaching and learning that calls for a very peculiar teacher-student relationship saw the light in the mid 19 th century. Distance learning emerged in what is called 'correspondence courses'. The earliest example was created by British teacher Isaac Pitman in mid 19 th century, who taught a system of shorthand by mailing transcribed texts into shorthand and getting transcriptions from his students in return for correction. Distance learning kept evolving slowly until it witnessed a qualitative leap with the emergence of the World Wide Web.

With the emergence of the World Wide Web distance learning gained interest as it had been much more reliable and faster than ever to the extent that it was claimed by many to have the potential to fully replace face to face education. Nevertheless, distance learning is still a subject of conflicting attitudes, some advocate distance online teaching, as it offers interaction, flexibility and low cost and it can be at times a freeing and motivational experience that gives more space for shy and introvert students as well as students with other special needs. This

view is generally referred to as the 'no significant differences' that holds that "online learning can be as good as or even better than in-person classroom learning" (Greenhow, 2020). While on the other part, others regard it as a deficient version of traditional education that cannot be an efficient alternative. As it is deemed inefficient and of limited efficiency to be only employed in advanced stages of learning as it requires a considerable amount of autonomy, engagement and maturity from the part of students, a range of characteristics that are absent when it comes to beginner and child learners. Children instruction and language teaching requires more than any other school subject interpersonal relationships to guarantee interaction and motivation that eventually result in some students falling in what is called the 'online penalty' causing harm to those who need the most help (Dynarski qtd. in Greenhow, 2020). In this regard, Greenhow explains "average students would do worse in an online course than in a face to face class, but researchers in different contexts have found the online penalty to be more severe among students with low prior achievement, students from ethnic and racial minorities, and students with other markers of low socioeconomic status" (2020) .

This worldwide pandemic of Covid-19 opened the way to the reconsideration of old methods as well as Abstract-Foreign Language anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that accompanies the process of foreign language learning that can change according to a variety of variables such as the teacher-students relationship, language attitudes and learning environment. The purpose of this study was to examine the potential relation between students' foreign language anxiety levels and learning environments (traditional or distance learning) in a university setting (Faculty of arts and letters Fes Sais, Morocco). Students showed higher levels of anxiety within the distance learning setting compared to traditional education. A survey using a 5 point Likert scale was employed. Semi-structured interviews were also adapted. The results indicated a significant increase in Communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in distance learning compared to face to face setting. The factors behind this have been questioned and analyzed. The current study concludes with the current study's limitations as well as suggestions for further future research. a necessary adaptation with the current event. This transition was an inescapable necessity as well as a challenge especially for institutions that used to rely solely on proximate teaching. Since the overwhelming majority of educators in Morocco lack training on online language design and have been put without prior notice under the imperative of teaching in the virtual space. Foreign language Anxiety among other variables is one of the most challenging facets of distance learning in Corona times, as it operates within a different studentteacher relationship pattern that can have diverse repercussions on different aspects of the teaching & learning process, as Gibbs & al explain:

'Anxiety causes students to consistently underperform. Anxiety in distance learners stems mainly from their life experiences, and expectations/ assumptions they make as a result. The distance learners tend to fear failure, yet conversely can have high, even unrealistic expectations of themselves. They may have had negative experiences of educations in the past, and assume that distance learning education may provide the same disempowering learning environment as that experiences by many school.' (Gibbs & al, 1989) The research questions considered in the present study are the following: 1. Do classroom and distance foreign language learners show different anxiety profiles? 2. How are the three dimensions of foreign language anxiety (communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety) affected within the two modes of learning? 3. How can the results be interpreted? II.

## 2 Review of the Literature

This brief review of the literature is meant to provide a general overview of the proposed research and locate briefly the issue under study within the existing literature.

### 3 a) A General Defintion of Anxiety

As individuals, we have all experienced anxiety at some point of our lives. This feeling would generally accompany us while waiting for the outcome of specific situations such as waiting for the success of a medical operation, the result of a medical test or academic examination; it can be defined as a feeling of discomfort or fear that leads individuals to anticipate possible difficulties even before they have occurred. Oxford dictionary stresses the same idea by defining anxiety as "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome". We all experience different degrees of anxiety in our everyday life and this feeling can affect enormously students in the sense that they are daily confronted with various sources of stress: classroom, exams, homework, underdeveloped skills, job markets' requirements and sometimes teachers are all considered stressors for students. Because of the various changes, frightening uncertainty, poor time management and fear of failure, students are subjects to fatal pressure which often affect their academic achievement.

### 4 b) Defining Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign Language anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that accompanies the process of foreign language learning. Anxiety as part of affect factors in teaching and learning became a topic of considerable attention with the rise of humanistic approaches to teaching and learning in the late 80's. The Longman applied linguistics dictionary defines it as 'subjective feelings of apprehension and fear associated with language learning and use. (Anxiety, Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics).

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The importance of affective factors gained interest with the emergence of the affective filter hypothesis that argues that the learning process is not only a matter of a series of objective factors but it rather relies notably on affective factors. Therefore, an awareness of the affective variables is vital for effective teaching. According to Krashen, affect includes four important variables that are as follow: -Motivation, Anxiety, Attitude and Self confidence. These variables can either contribute positively or negatively to the learning process. Krashen argues that language input is not sufficient for a full language acquisition since affective factors act as filter that blocks students from fully and effectively putting the input into effective use. In this regard, Krashen explains:

"Studies have shown that several affective variables are related to success in language acquisition -anxiety (low anxiety is correlated with more success in language acquisition), self-esteem (more self-esteem is related to success in language acquisition), and motivation, with 'integrative motivation,' (a desire to belong to a certain group) related to long-term success in language acquisition (until membership is achieved), and 'instrumental motivation' (to accomplish a task) related to shorter term success (until the task is done)." - (Krashen, 2008).

Consequently, foreign language anxiety along with other affective factors can act as a barrier that impedes students' language acquisition. Gardner and McIntyre explained that Foreign language anxiety starts as 'an undifferentiated, negative affective response to some experience in language class' that 'with repeated occurrences becomes reliably associated with the language class and differentiated from other contexts' ??Gardner & McIntyre, 1991). While Horwitz & al defined it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (1986), he also adds that there are three dimensions to foreign language anxiety that any foreign language teacher need to pay appropriate attention to and are as follow: 1-Communication apprehension, 2-Fear of negative evaluation and 3-Test anxiety (Ibid).

different forms: Sharing of syllabus documents, video conferences, interactive platforms such as: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Moodle, Whatsapp groups, Facebook lives and groups?.

According to these findings, it can be said that a general inconsistency of findings governs this issue since an unanimity of results is far from being obtained. A potential explanation for this could be found in the inherent nature of the FLA as well as the learning environment variables that can 'be related in a complex way to a number of demographic, cognitive, affective, and instructional factors, including learners' cultural background, learners' personal characteristics and learning experiences, classroom activities, to name a few' (Bollinger, 2017).

## 5 III.

## 6 Research Methodology a) Participants

The given investigation was conducted on the basis of "The English Department of the faculty of letters and humanities-Sais" (Fes-Morocco) during the academic year 2020-2021. It involved 108 students of the 2 nd and 3 rd year. First year students were excluded because unlike the other levels they have not experienced both modes of education and have only been subject to distance learning and therefore are not fit for our study. Therefore, for the purposes of this study the population chosen has experienced both face to face education and distance learning during their academic experience. It is worth mentioning that distance learning has been adopted for the first time in Morocco on the 14 th of March, 2020 so as to meet the quarantine requirements due to the outburst of Corona virus. Surveys were administered online due to sanitary constraints. The total number of respondents was 108 and convenience sampling was used. Females were slightly overrepresented (57.4%) compared to male participants (42.59%). It is noteworthy that distance learning was conducted online and mainly through 'Moodle' platform.

## 7 b) Instruments

The purpose of this causal comparative study was to examine if there was a statistically significant difference in students' foreign language anxiety levels (dependent variables) based on and their learning environment (independent variable) at the English department of Sais faculty. To fulfill this aim the first To date, a limited body of research sought to uncover potential correlations between FLA and learning environments (Traditional vs. Distance education). Some studies have implied that the adoption of distance learning may influence negatively students' levels of anxiety in comparison to proximate learning (Bollinger, 2017). While other research found no significant correlation between the learning environment and levels of anxiety (Pichette, 2009).

One of the main stressors of students is the classroom, as it is the place where students confront many sources of anxiety, namely the relationships that they experience either with their peers or teachers. Student-teacher relationship is considered the more frequent source of stress in the sense that it is what determines students' experience in the classroom. In this regard, Gregerson and McIntyre stress the importance of the teacher in this equation stressing the fact that FL anxiety can originate from the learner or the teacher or more likely from the incompatibility of the styles of both (2014). Goodenow and Grady (1993) argue that students' general perception of studentteacher relationship quality is a predictor of global selfworth, school engagement. Thus, students feel more confident when their relationship with their teachers is positive. While Fredriksen & Rhodes (2004) maintain that students "relationships with their teachers can be a crucially important influence, affecting students' connection to school, motivation, academic performance, and psycho-social well-being" including an anxiety free atmosphere. They also add that 'students who reported more positive bonds with their teachers

**11 THE CHALLENGE THAT I FIND IN MY LEARNING, BUT NOW I FIND MYSELF STUCK AND ALWAYS THINK [SIC] ABOUT WHAT I CAN DO". FOR ANOTHER INTERVIEWEE: "I TEND TO WORRY A LOT WHEN EXAMS ARE NEAR, BUT NOW I FEEL TOTALLY LOST AND BLOCKED, I DON'T KNOW FROM WHERE TO START".**

obtained higher scores on self and teacher reported social and emotional adjustment outcomes. Thus, students obtained higher scores on having a healthy relationship with the teacher. The student-teacher relationship plays an important role in students having healthy, successful and fun experience in school.

A large body of research has shown that affective variables have a strong influence on students FL general achievement. McIntyre and Gardner claimed that "anxiety is one the best predictors of success", while Gregerson and McIntyre maintained that anxiety decreases chances for fluency development, as learners are less willing to produce output.

It is worth mentioning that research has shown a general consensus of the debilitating effect of FLA and demonstrated its negative repercussions as a variable that can block learners from functioning correctly (Aida, 1994

## 8 c) The Potential Relationship Between Fl Anxiety and Distance Learning

As has been mentioned priorly the dynamics of the teacher student relationship is a vital factor in predicting students' levels of anxiety and consequently the prediction of the general success of the teaching learning process. The nature of the teacher student relationship hugely depends on the modes of communication which vary according to the learning environments, that can either rely on direct face to face communication or rather depend on what the virtual space offers (online virtual learning), which can take independent variable, foreign language anxiety, was measured using an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) as well as the Foreign Language Virtual Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by (Kaisar and Chowdhury, 2020). The researchers' adapted version included 22 items in total, and was made up of two sections each consisting of 11 items. The first section aimed at uncovering students' general level of anxiety within face to face education, while the second sought to do the same but within the distance learning setting. Besides aiming at uncovering students' general levels of anxiety within the two modes of learning the survey also aimed at evaluating the three dimensions of foreign language anxiety (Communication apprehension, Fear of negative evaluation and Test anxiety).

The independent variable of foreign language anxiety has three levels: low, moderate, and high. The survey comprises 5-point Likert scale. Points from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) have been awarded for each answer, this scale has found to fulfill the aims of the current study. In the present paper, the survey was administered using Google forms platform and the responses were analyzed using SPSS software. So as to gather qualitative data semi structured interviews with 6 students were conducted through 'Zoom' and 'Whatsapp' calls. Demographic data was collected about students: gender and age.

## 9 c) Results

### 10 i. Overview of Anxiety Profiles

As it is the case with all Likert scaling, a value was assigned to each of the five responses varying from 1 to 5, whereby 1 stands for strongly disagree and 5 for strongly agree. This way the researcher was able to yield a score for each respondent, which would then describe their anxiety profiles (high, moderate, low). Since each section of the questionnaire consisted of 11 items, the following score values would reveal the following:  $11 \times 1 = 11 \Rightarrow$  Low anxiety.  $11 \times 3 = 33 \Rightarrow$  Moderate anxiety.  $11 \times 5 = 55 \Rightarrow$  High anxiety.

Accordingly, the scores for any respondent would fall between 11 and 55. If the score happens to be above 33 it would reveal that the respondent has a high anxiety level. A score below 33 would mean that the student is subject to low anxiety, while a score of 33 would be suggestive of a moderate anxiety profile. The findings were illustrated as table number 1 suggests. As the data in table one demonstrate, the majority of respondents (50%) are subject to low anxiety within proximate learning, while a significant increase is observed within the distance learning setting where the overwhelming majority of students' tend to fall within the high anxiety group. In this regard one interviewee mentioned: "I never felt that anxious before, I was always okay and love ??sic]

**11 the challenge that I find in my learning, but now I find myself stuck and always think [sic] about what I can do". For another interviewee: "I tend to worry a lot when exams are near, but now I feel totally lost and blocked, I don't know from where to start".**

The comparative analysis of the results of the scores of both sections of the survey (face to face and distance) reflected considerable changes in the degree of foreign language anxiety under the influence of the teaching setting. The results suggest that considerable foreign language anxiety is experienced by a majority of learners in response to the distance learning setting conditions. According to these findings one can conclude that FLA environment acts as a factor that triggers students' general foreign language anxiety.

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The following is an in-depth analysis of the status of the three main dimensions of Foreign language anxiety both within face to face and distance learning.

ii. Communication Apprehension As shown in table number two, items. No 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 and 8 have been used to obtain a sound grasp of students' general status of communication apprehension and it indicated a noticeable increase on this matter when it comes to the distance learning setting.

Participants report a notable feeling of suffocation and unease within the distance learning setting, an unease that is almost nonexistent within the traditional education setting. Since a majority of 32,4% disagreed with this item 'A real classroom setting makes me feel more suffocated than distance learning setting.' While 46,3% agreed with this one 'The distance learning setting makes me feel more suffocated than a real classroom.' In this regard, one interviewee mentioned 'I am not okay with this way of teaching, I don't feel motivated, I feel like am drowning in information I don't know from where to start' while another interviewee stated 'I am not used to the virtual space at all, I lose interest very fast but in class I used to focus and be more organized'.

As far as students' involvement in the teaching and learning process is concerned, students report a rather neutral position when it comes to face to face education and a negative one when it concerns distance education. 38% agreed with the following statement 'I feel isolated while being a distance learning student', while 33% strongly agreed with it. On the other hand "38.9% kept a neutral stance to this statement 'I feel isolated while being a distance learning student.' Students comments also reflect this anxiety as one interviewee reported: 'I have lost the feeling of belonging to the my class' or as another stated 'I feel very far away from school, it made me lost confidence in myself'. These findings are further supported with the findings that item 5 and 6 reveal. Since almost half of the population under study 46.3% agreed that they didn't feel much involved during their distance learning classes.

Almost half of the participants reported having concerns about the quality of communication as a whole within distance learning. 43.5% of the respondents agreed to feeling frightened of not getting what the teacher is saying in my distance learning classroom. It can be said that the distance learning conditions represent an inhibitory factor that leads students to anticipate the failure of the communication flow. One interviewee explains "Moodle doesn't not give us a chance for communication, the teacher sends documents and practice but I always feel like I don't get what I am supposed to know and develop". It seems that communication apprehension is due to the one way communication pattern that governs the teaching and learning process. iii. As shown in table number three, the analysis has revealed that students' responses reflect a prevailing state of neutrality when it comes to the fear of making mistakes both within face to face and distance learning. Since the majority of students chose a neutral position to both of these statements 'I worry about making mistakes in my face to face language classroom.'(42,6%) and also to this one 'I don't worry about making mistakes in my distance learning course.' In order to interpret fairly this neutrality, the interviews have revealed that holding such a view is to be attributed to the immense lack of communication. In this regard, one interviewee stated: 'How can I be afraid to make a mistake, if I don't have the opportunity to do so'. Therefore, it seems that distance learning creates a rigid space that doesn't allow for interactivity and communication.

## 12 Fear of Negative Evaluation

As far as item no.12 is concerned, a general fear of negative evaluation is observed amongst the majority of students within the distance learning setting while a general state of neutrality prevails within face to face education. 49.1% of respondents adopted a neutral stance to this statement 'I feel anxious thinking that my teacher does not see my seriousness during face to face education', while 39.8% agreed with the following statement "I feel anxious thinking that the teacher does not see my non-verbal response and seriousness during the virtual class". The data is consistent with the interviewees' testimonies. One interviewee mentioned: 'I don't even know how my teacher looks like, I know it's not important but I don't feel okay with this way', another interviewee mentioned: "the idea of not being able to ask my teacher or participate in the classroom scares me".

This general tendency could be explained by the lack of physical contact especially eye contact and also to the remoteness from the campus's atmosphere. This had led students to develop fear, as one interviewee mentioned: 'I feel like my efforts are not seen or acknowledged, I feel like am a stranger to my faculty and teachers, I haven't even seen some of them'. Therefore, it can be said that distance learning develops a sensation of alienation and isolation that aggravates students' general and foreign language anxiety as it fails to meet student's interactive and communicative needs. iv. Test Anxiety There has also been observed a considerable increase in students' test anxiety between face to face and distance learning setting. A vast majority (46.3%) endorsed a neutral position to testing within this statement "I am not usually at ease when am being tested in language courses I've taken in regular classes", while the majority (40,7%) chose to agree with the following statement "I am not usually at ease when am being tested in language courses I've taken in distance learning classes." In this regard one interviewee mentioned: 'before, taking exams used to be fun, but now I go and m very scared, I feel like I don't know anything' this general feeling of unease is to explained by a general feeling of isolation as well as loss of self confidence that accompanies distance learning as item no.15 and 16 This general feeling of lagging behind has been repeatedly verbalized by interviewees, as one respondent stated: 'I feel like I don't belong to my class, that they are succeeding and developing and that I am still in my place which make me worry a lot'. Another respondent explained: 'not being able to communicate with my classmates and exchange experience makes me worry and fear the exam a lot, I hate this pressure'.

## 14 CONCUSION

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The special international circumstances that led to the adoption of distance learning, that is Covid-19, are by themselves circumstances that can highly trigger general anxiety. And with the absence of well thought of distance learning plan that guarantees communication and interactivity, the distance learning environment turns into a factor that.

### 13 IV. Discussion and Recommendations

Generally respondents showed a great deal of unease when it comes to the distance learning setting. The data analyzed indicates that students exhibit a general vulnerability to anxiety within distance learning which is attributable to a range of factors. To put it in other terms, Students become an easy prey to anxiety when being taught online. Apprehension and the suspension of communication flow seems to affect negatively students linguistic, intellectual and communicative development, since the students reported in more than one instance feeling isolated and not being involved. Students also reported getting overwhelmed by the material they have to cover during the semester. This is mainly due to the fact that the students have become more than any other time passive receivers of knowledge. As far as test anxiety is concerned a high increase of worry and negative attitudes prevail when it concerns distance learning, students tend to adopt a doubtful state of their competences as well as their linguistic and intellectual abilities. In the same context, a rather contradictory view of fear of evaluation was noticed. Since students expressed the lack of communication opportunities within distance learning yet they expressed their fear of being negatively judged by their teachers.

Such negative findings make one question the nature of the communication channel employed as it can provide a great amount of clarification to the whole issue. A review of the possibilities that the 'Moodle' platform adopted can offer, revealed that there is a possibility of sharing documents, videos, power point presentation, formulate interactive quizzes, chat windows. Nevertheless, the majority of students' reported only receiving PDF documents and e-mails from their teachers, while only in few cases more interactive approaches were developed. Therefore, we can conclude that it would be presumptuous to assume that the increase in anxiety has been the direct and sole result of distance learning as a method of teaching, but rather a result of the conditions within which this mode of teaching took place. These negative responses are mainly the product of student's restricted access, limited participation and absence of feedback. This perceived deficiency of distance learning, leads us to question what qualifies as online or distance learning as a whole. In this context Fojtik stresses the importance of technical, methodical and didactic preparedness to the success of distance modes, as he mentions: "It is necessary to provide an extensive preparation for the distance and combined forms. Students must already have all study materials, assignment of correspondence tasks, technically prepared control systems, means of communication, and so on. However, this requires a lot of work both technically and methodically and didactically." (Fojtik, 2018) Bearing in mind the features of distance education, policy makers must pay keen attention to the status of communication patterns and classroom dynamics within distance learning. Because of the sudden flow of events both on the national and international events weren't prepared to deal with such nascent events. Both teachers and students lacked the right training and readiness to change abruptly their methods to fit the digital space. Moreover, providing student counseling hotline could lessen students' anxiety as it will provide considerable support and motivation to students.

V.

### 14 Concusion

In our case and under our conditions distance learning seems to have weakened learners' intellectual as well as affective ties with their professors. This can have major negative repercussions on students' linguistic and intellectual development as well as overall academic experience. To conclude, the findings of this study add to the limited number of research dealing with anxiety and distance learning. It can contribute in helping teachers, educators and decision makers to take pedagogical decisions that would guarantee the effective development of foreign language departments throughout the kingdom as well as distance learning trainings for teachers and students. So as to benefit fully from the potential that technology offers and adapt smoothly in times of crisis. Distance learning education presents a rich and unexplored field, which is why different variable of the teaching and learning process must be reexamined within this context. Further research could adopt more exhaustive instruments and add other variables to the research such as achievement and motivation.

Figure 1:

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**1**

	Proximate Learning		Distance Learning.	
	Number of students	Percentage%	Number of students	Percentage %
Total number	108	100%	108	100%
Low anxiety group.	54	50%	7	6.48%
Moderate anxiety group.	42	38.88%	18	16.66%
High anxiety group.	12	11.11%	83	76.85%

Figure 2: Table 1 :

**2**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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Figure 3: Table 2 :

**3**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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Figure 4: Table 3 :

**4**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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Figure 5: Table 4 :

## 14 CONCLUSION

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