

STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN LEARNING ENGLISH
(A Case Study in the Seventh Grade of MTs Hidayatul Ulum)

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Abstract

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This study aims to analyze students' anxiety in learning English at the seventh grade of MTs Hidayatul Ulum. Anxiety is one of the most influential affective factors in foreign language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Many students experience fear, nervousness, and lack of confidence when using English, especially during speaking activities. This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the forms, causes, and impacts of students' anxiety in learning English. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and the English teacher, and documentation. The findings reveal that students' anxiety is caused by fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary mastery, low self-confidence, negative peer evaluation, and teacher-centered instructional strategies. Students' anxiety significantly affects their participation, motivation, and speaking performance. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged to apply supportive, communicative, and student-centered learning strategies to minimize anxiety and enhance students' confidence in learning English.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kecemasan siswa dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di kelas VII MTs Hidayatul Ulum. Kecemasan merupakan salah satu faktor afektif yang sangat berpengaruh dalam pembelajaran bahasa asing, khususnya dalam konteks bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing. Banyak siswa merasa takut, gugup, dan kurang percaya diri ketika menggunakan bahasa Inggris, terutama dalam kegiatan berbicara. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi observasi kelas, wawancara semi terstruktur dengan siswa dan guru bahasa Inggris, serta dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kecemasan siswa disebabkan oleh rasa takut melakukan kesalahan, keterbatasan kosakata, rendahnya kepercayaan diri, tekanan dari teman sebaya, serta strategi pembelajaran yang kurang variatif. Kecemasan tersebut berdampak pada rendahnya partisipasi dan motivasi siswa dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Oleh karena itu, guru perlu menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang aman, nyaman, dan suportif untuk mengurangi kecemasan siswa.

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INTRODUCTION

English plays an important role as an international language that connects people from different countries and cultures. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language starting from primary education up to higher education (Lestari et al., 2024). Despite its importance, learning English is often perceived as difficult by students, especially at the junior high school level. One of the main problems faced by students is anxiety in learning English. Students often feel afraid of making mistakes, being laughed at by peers, or receiving negative evaluations from teachers (Cahyaningtiyas et al., 2023).

Theoretically, these emotional barriers are consistent with the **Affective Filter Hypothesis**, which posits that anxiety functions as a psychological filter preventing optimal linguistic input from being processed. When students experience high levels of stress, this "filter" rises, effectively blocking language acquisition even when the instructional material is well-presented. This anxiety is typically manifested through three main dimensions: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These conditions collectively lead to diminished classroom participation and substandard speaking performance, as students prioritize psychological safety over linguistic practice.

Preliminary observations conducted at **MTs Hidayatul Ulum** revealed that many seventh-grade students exhibited clear behavioral indicators of anxiety during English sessions. These signs included avoiding eye contact, maintaining prolonged silence, and resisting voluntary verbal interaction in English. At this specific educational stage, the transition to more complex grammar and vocabulary often exacerbates the students' lack of confidence. Therefore, a deep investigation into the factors triggering students' anxiety is paramount to developing effective pedagogical strategies and enhancing the overall quality of teaching and learning outcomes (Dewi et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA)

Language anxiety is defined as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. According to the **Affective Filter Hypothesis** (Krashen, 1982), high levels of anxiety act as a psychological barrier that "filters" out linguistic input. When the filter is high, the brain is unable to process information effectively, thereby hindering language acquisition. This is particularly evident in speaking activities, as students are required to perform publicly, making them vulnerable to immediate evaluation by both teachers and peers (Arifin et al., 2025)

Components of Foreign Language Anxiety

To better understand the manifestations of anxiety at MTs Hidayatul Ulum, it is essential to categorize it into three performance-related components as proposed by **Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986)**:

1. **Communication Apprehension:** This refers to the individual's shyness or fear of communicating with others. In an English-speaking context, students often feel they cannot adequately express their thoughts, leading to silence or avoidance.
2. **Fear of Negative Evaluation:** This component is the apprehension towards being judged unfavorably by others. Seventh-grade students, who are in a transitional adolescent phase, are particularly sensitive to how they are perceived by their social circle, often choosing to remain quiet rather than risking a mistake.
3. **Test Anxiety:** This stems from a fear of failure. In language learning, where frequent assessments (both formal and informal) occur, students may feel overwhelmed by the pressure to perform perfectly under evaluative conditions.

Anxiety in the Stages of Language Processing

Anxiety does not only occur during speaking; it impacts the entire cognitive process. **MacIntyre and Gardner (1994)** identified three stages where anxiety disrupts learning:

1. **Input Stage:** Anxiety acts as a distraction, making it difficult for students to focus on the teacher's explanation.
2. **Processing Stage:** Anxiety reduces the cognitive "bandwidth" available to organize and store new vocabulary or grammar rules.
3. **Output Stage:** This is the most visible stage, where anxiety interferes with the retrieval of previously learned information, leading to the "freezing" effect often seen during verbal performance.

Factors and the Role of the Learning Environment

Various factors contribute to this phenomenon, including a lack of linguistic competence, previous negative learning experiences, and a rigid classroom atmosphere. Teachers play a crucial role in mitigating these effects by creating supportive, low-stress learning environments and employing communicative approaches that prioritize meaning over perfect accuracy (Fadillah & Nurjannah, 2025). A positive classroom climate can encourage students to express themselves freely without fear of making mistakes, which is vital for developing communicative competence and fostering a growth mindset (Sri Andayani, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilizes a **qualitative approach** with a **case study design**. This method was selected because it allows for an in-depth, multi-faceted exploration of the complex phenomenon of language anxiety within its real-life context (Creswell & Poth, 2023). By focusing on a single unit—the seventh-grade students at MTs Hidayatul Ulum—the research aims to capture the "lived experiences" and psychological nuances that quantitative measures might overlook (Yin, 2018). This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore students' anxiety in learning English (Putri et al., 2023).

Participants and Sampling

The primary participants are seventh-grade students at **MTs Hidayatul Ulum**. Participants were selected using **purposive sampling**, specifically choosing individuals who displayed behavioral indicators of anxiety during preliminary observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2024). This ensures that the data gathered is "information-rich" and directly addresses the research objectives concerning language apprehension (Flick, 2022).

Data Collection Techniques

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the students' anxiety, three primary data collection techniques were employed:

1. **Non-Participant Observation:** The researcher acted as an observer in the English classroom to record behavioral patterns, such as avoidance of eye contact and reluctance to speak, using a structured observation protocol (Kawulich, 2021).
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with both the students and the English teacher. This format allows for flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into the specific triggers of anxiety (Adams, 2021).
3. **Documentation:** To supplement the primary data, the researcher analyzed lesson plans, student portfolios, and teacher evaluations to identify any correlation between instructional design and student performance (Bowen, 2023).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the **Interactive Model of Qualitative Data Analysis**, which involves three concurrent flows of activity: **data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification** (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

1. **Data Condensation:** The process of selecting, focusing, and transforming the raw data from field notes and interview transcripts into meaningful themes.
2. **Data Display:** Organizing the condensed data into matrices or narrative text to facilitate the identification of patterns.
3. **Conclusion Drawing:** Generating meanings from the displayed data and verifying them through rigorous cross-checking.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that students experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety in learning English. Most students felt anxious when asked to speak English in front of the class, fearing grammatical errors and mispronunciation (Purba et al., 2026). Limited vocabulary mastery also contributed to students' anxiety, as they struggled to express their ideas.

Teacher-centered instructional strategies were found to increase anxiety, as students had fewer opportunities to practice English freely. However, when teachers used interactive activities such as group discussions and games, students appeared more relaxed and confident, which aligns with the need for motivational strategies in the classroom (Lestari et al., 2024). These findings

suggest that reducing anxiety requires appropriate teaching strategies and positive teacher-student interactions (Shermatova, 2025).

Trustworthiness and Validity

To ensure the credibility and transferability of the findings, the researcher applied triangulation of sources and methodological triangulation. This involves comparing data from observations, interviews, and documents to ensure consistency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Furthermore, member checking was conducted by sharing the findings with the participants to verify that the interpretations accurately reflect their experiences (Fadillah & Nurjannah, 2025).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The results of this case study indicate that **seventh-grade students at MTs Hidayatul Ulum experience a significant level of foreign language anxiety**, which manifests primarily as communication apprehension and a profound fear of negative evaluation. This psychological barrier is characterized by physical and behavioral indicators such as prolonged silence, avoidance of eye contact, and a reluctance to participate in verbal activities.

The anxiety is triggered by a combination of **internal and external factors**. Internally, students struggle with a perceived lack of linguistic competence, specifically limited vocabulary and poor pronunciation, which leads to a lack of self-confidence. Externally, the classroom environment and the fear of being ridiculed by peers play a dominant role in elevating the students' "Affective Filter." In line with Krashen's theory, this high filter prevents students from acquiring the language effectively, as their cognitive resources are diverted toward managing their anxiety rather than processing linguistic input. In summary, while the students recognize the importance of English, their psychological state serves as a major inhibitor to their speaking performance and overall engagement.

SUGGESTIONS

To address the issues identified in this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. For English Teachers

1. Create a Low-Stress Environment

Teachers should prioritize a supportive and non-threatening classroom atmosphere. Implementing "ice-breaking" activities and using humor can help lower the students' affective filter.

2. Focus on Fluency over Accuracy

In speaking activities, teachers should encourage students to express their ideas without immediate correction of grammatical errors. Immediate correction often increases anxiety; instead, feedback should be provided collectively at the end of the session.

3. **Positive Reinforcement**

Providing constant encouragement and praising small achievements can significantly boost students' self-esteem and reduce the fear of negative evaluation.

2. **For Students**

a. **Peer Collaboration**

Students are encouraged to practice speaking in small, familiar groups or pairs before performing in front of the whole class. Peer-mediated learning often feels safer than teacher-led interaction.

b. **Self-Directed Practice**

Utilizing digital resources, such as English learning apps or simple English songs and movies, can help increase exposure and familiarity with the language in a low-pressure setting outside the school.

3. **For the School Administration**

a. **Extracurricular Support**

The school could facilitate English clubs or "English Days" that focus on fun, communicative activities rather than formal academic testing to help students normalize the use of the language.

4. **For Future Researchers**

a. **Expanded Scope**

Future studies could employ a **Mixed-Methods approach** to quantify the levels of anxiety across different grade levels.

b. **Action Research**

Researchers might consider conducting **Classroom Action Research (CAR)** to test the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies, such as Gamification or Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), in directly reducing student anxiety.

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