



Investigating Students' Anxiety Factors in Learning English at Junior High School

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to find out the level of students' anxiety in learning English at SMP N 1 Aceh Barat Daya and to describe its factors. The type of this research is descriptive qualitative research. The sample was 30 students of class VIII C and selected by using a random technique. There were two techniques of data collection: a questionnaire and an interview. The result of this study showed that 14 of the students (46,89%) had high anxiety, 11 of the students (37,5%) had middle anxiety, and five of the students (15.63%) were categorized as experiencing low anxiety. In addition, factors that contributed to students' anxiety in learning English were a lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being judged. Students often doubt their ability to use English correctly, feel scared of saying the wrong thing, and worry about their errors.

1. Introduction

English is one of the foreign languages commonly learned in Indonesia, and it is regarded as a complex process influenced by linguistic and non-linguistic factors (Ulfaika & Pratama, 2023), which together shape students' success and challenges in acquiring the language. Linguistic factors relate to the components of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and sentence structure, which affect students' ability to understand and use a language effectively. Moreover, non-linguistic factors, including cognitive, metacognitive, and affective aspects, are closely linked to anxiety.

Anxiety refers to feelings of nervousness or fear when attempting to speak, write, or understand a language (Wati & Afrida, 2022). It often arises from a fear of making mistakes and the embarrassment of speaking in front of others. These feelings can hinder the learning process, making English lessons more challenging and less enjoyable (Opriorika, 2023). Students avoid speaking, answering questions, or engaging in discussions. They try to skip class or remain silent throughout the lesson. As a result, students become passive to participate in lesson activities.

Research into the investigation of students' anxiety in learning English has long recognized foreign language anxiety as a significant barrier that creates a variety of difficulties for language learners. Based on the results of the study, Febriana et al. (2024) showed that most eighth-grade students experienced anxiety when learning English, especially in speaking. Many students felt nervous and uncomfortable when asked to speak in front of their classmates. Some students also displayed signs of stress, like fidgeting, sweating, or looking down at their desks.

Moreover, Mae and Rodriguez (2022) found that many Indonesian students experience anxiety when learning English as a foreign language. Anxiety impacts their confidence, participation, and overall learning progress. Test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation were the most significant causes. Students who felt anxious tended to be less active in class and relied heavily on their teachers.

Previous studies have shown that language anxiety is one of the biggest obstacles to learning English. It not only affects students' performance in speaking and writing but also impacts their ability to process and understand spoken or written language. Additionally, previous studies indicate that anxious students are more likely to experience mental blocks during communication, which further affects their fluency and confidence in using English.

Based on preliminary observation, many students at SMP N 1 Aceh Barat Daya get anxious when learning English. This anxiety is visible when they should answer questions in class or avoid it. Some students show signs of nervousness, speaking softly or taking a long time to respond. Their body language also indicates discomfort, with some students fidgeting or avoiding eye contact with the teacher.

During English lessons, students with anxiety tend to participate less in discussions and group activities. Their anxiety seems to increase when they are required to perform in front of the class, such as during presentations or role-playing activities.

This research investigates the factors contributing to students' anxiety about learning English at SMP N 1 Aceh Barat Daya. It aims to identify the specific causes of this anxiety. By understanding these factors, the study seeks to analyze how anxiety affects students' learning processes and classroom participation. The findings will help educators develop strategies to reduce anxiety and create a more supportive learning environment for students. The research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How is the level of students' anxiety in learning English?
2. What factors contribute to students' anxiety in learning English?

2. Method

This research employs a descriptive qualitative method to figure out students' anxiety in learning. The population in this study was the seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Aceh Barat Daya. The sample was selected using a cluster random sampling technique. This technique was applied to make the selection sample more efficient and practical for large or geographically dispersed populations and allowing the researchers to obtain representative data from each selected group (Creswell, 2022). The students of class VIII.C were taken as a sample; it was decided by the pre-observation that the students of this class have the lowest score in English, rather than in other classes. The total number of samples was 30 students.

The data were collected by using two techniques: a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire was purposed to know about students' level of anxiety. It consisted of 33 statements. Each statement was rated by students using a five-point Likert scale, which ranges from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Disagree). Data regarding students' anxiety is collected through questionnaires in the form of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) devised by Horwitz et al (1986).

The interview was aimed at knowing the factors contributing to students' anxiety in learning. The question for the interview was adopted from Asyifa et al (2019). From a sample of 30 students, 5 students were selected as interview informants because qualitative interviews emphasize depth of information rather than the number of participants. Five students were sufficient to obtain rich, detailed, and meaningful data, especially when participants were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their ability to provide in-depth information (Creswell, 2022; Patton, 2022).

The technique employed to analyze the questionnaire in this study is descriptive analysis. This involves examining how students responded to each statement and counting how many selected each level on the Likert scale. The

results were then presented using numbers and tables to determine which statements exhibited the highest or lowest levels of anxiety. Afterward, students' scores from the questionnaires were categorized based on the following anxiety classifications.

Table 1. Level of Anxiety

Level	Total Score
Very Relaxed	33-65
Relaxed	66-86
Low Anxiety	61-87
Middle Anxiety	88-113
High Anxiety	114-119

Adopted from: Diana and Rosswanna (2022)

The interview data were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify key patterns and insights related to the research objectives. Initially, all interview transcripts were carefully reviewed and coded to highlight significant statements and recurring ideas. These codes were then categorized into broader themes that reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives. During the analysis, similarities and differences among responses were examined to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data.

The findings indicated that participants shared several common challenges and perceptions, which were further interpreted in relation to existing theories and previous studied.

3. Result & Discussion

Level of Students' Anxiety

The following table presented data on the levels of anxiety among students learning English at SMP N 1 Aceh Barat Daya. Understanding students' emotional responses to language learning was crucial, as anxiety can significantly impact their performance, motivation, and classroom participation. By analyzing the varying levels of anxiety experienced by students, educators could identify areas of concern and implement targeted strategies to create a more supportive learning environment.

The data were collected from a sample of 30 students and categorized into five levels of anxiety: very relaxed, relaxed, low anxiety, middle anxiety, and high anxiety. The distribution of students across these categories is shown below.

Table 2. Level of Students' Anxiety in Learning English

Level Anxiety	Total	Percentage
Very Relaxed	0	0%
Relaxed	0	0%
Low Anxiety	5	15,63%
Middle Anxiety	11	37,5%
High Anxiety	14	46,89%
Total	30	100%

The data in the table revealed students' anxiety levels in learning English. Among the 30 students, none reported feeling "very relaxed" and "relaxed" when engaging in English learning activities. This indicates that all students experience some degree of anxiety. 14 of the students (46,89%) had high anxiety, and 11 of the students (37,5%) had middle anxiety. This result indicated a significant prevalence of anxiety among students, with nearly half of them experiencing a high level of nervousness when learning English.

Furthermore, 5 of the students (15.63%) are categorized as experiencing "low anxiety." While this group represents a relatively more positive emotional state, it still indicated that even the most comfortable students were not entirely free of anxiety.

The findings of the study showed that many students experience different levels of anxiety when learning English, with most of them showing signs of moderate to high anxiety. Students with low anxiety were usually more confident and willing to participate in learning activities. They were not afraid of making mistakes and saw errors as part of the learning process. This positive attitude helped them stay active in class and improve their language skills. According to Putra et al. (2022), students with low anxiety were more successful because they felt comfortable using the language without fear.

On the other hand, students with moderate anxiety often feel nervous but still try to take part in class. They hesitated before speaking or answering questions and sometimes doubted their abilities. This type of anxiety can affect their learning progress if not managed well. Mariah (2023) explained that students with this level of anxiety need more support and encouragement from teachers to help them stay motivated and confident in their learning.

Based on the result of the analysis questionnaire, it showed that most students at SMP N 1 Aceh Barat Daya were categorized into high anxiety. Nuraini and Widodo (2020) found that high levels of anxiety can reduce student participation and lower their academic achievement in English. To help these students, teachers need to build a supportive classroom environment, use fun and low-pressure learning activities, and show understanding toward student difficulties.

Factors contributing to students' anxiety in Learning English

Lack of confidence

Lack of confidence was one of the factors contributing to students' anxiety in learning English. This psychological barrier not only reduces their willingness to participate in classroom activities but also affects their overall performance and motivation.

An interview with some students is below:

"I'm always afraid of saying something wrong. My grammar is not good, and sometimes my friends laugh, even if they don't mean to. That makes me scared to try" (Student 1)

"I want to answer when the teacher asks a question, but I feel nervous. I think my pronunciation is bad, and everyone will look at me. That makes my heart beat fast and my hands shake." (Student 2)

"Even though I understand the lesson, I still don't speak because I feel like I'm not good enough. Maybe the teacher will correct me in front of everyone, and I will feel ashamed." (Student 3)

"When I speak English, I always think I sound stupid. Other students are better, so I just keep quiet." (Student 4)

"I never get a high score in English. So I think maybe I'm just not good at it. I feel nervous every time we have English class, and I don't enjoy it anymore." (Student 5).

Lack of confidence was one of the main reasons why students feel anxious when learning English. Many students were afraid to speak or write because they were not sure if their grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation was correct. They were worried about making mistakes in front of the teacher or their friends. Because of this fear, they often choose to stay quiet in class. Hamdani and Risah (2021) stated that when students perceive themselves as not being proficient in English, they become more anxious, particularly when required to speak.

This lack of confidence often came from past experiences. For example, if a student got a low score in English or was corrected in front of the class, they felt embarrassed or discouraged. Misrah et al., (2018) found that students who had bad experiences in English class before were more likely to feel nervous and shy. Because they feel anxious, they avoid using English, which in turn weakens their skills. When their English does not improve, they lose even more confidence.

The way a teacher teaches also influences student confidence. If a teacher talks constantly and does not give students opportunities to practice, the students may feel unsupported. However, if the teacher provides constructive feedback and allows students to practice in pairs or small groups, they feel safer and more

confident. Melinda (2021) said that students feel better about learning English when they receive help, encouragement, and small chances to succeed. Therefore, helping students build confidence can make learning English easier and less stressful for them.

Fear of making mistakes

Factors contributing to students' anxiety in learning English included the fear of making mistakes. Based on interviews conducted with five students, it was found that this fear significantly affects their confidence, willingness to participate, and overall attitude towards English learning. All five students expressed discomfort and nervousness when they were expected to speak or write in English, primarily due to the concern that they might make grammatical or pronunciation errors.

"I often feel nervous when asked to speak in English because I'm afraid of mispronouncing words or making grammar mistakes. I fear my friends will laugh at me" (Student 1)

"If I make a mistake, I feel embarrassed and don't want to answer again. It's better to stay quiet than be wrong" (Student 2)

"I actually understand the material, but when I'm asked to answer or speak, I'm afraid I'll stumble over my words and say something wrong" (Student 3)

"During oral tests or presentations, I feel very anxious. I'm afraid of making grammar mistakes or forgetting vocabulary, and then getting a bad grade" (Student 4)

"I feel unconfident because if I make a mistake, sometimes the teacher corrects me in front of the class. That makes me even more afraid" (Student 5)

Fear of making mistakes was one of the main causes of students' anxiety in learning English. Many students were afraid to speak or write because they worry they will make grammar or vocabulary mistakes. They were scared their classmates would laugh or judge them. Dewi (2018), explained that students often feel nervous because they believe their English is not good enough. This makes them quiet and less active during lessons.

Negative experiences from the past can also make students more afraid. For example, if a student was corrected severely or laughed at for saying something wrong, they may feel ashamed. Nuraini and Widodo (2020), found that students who had bad experiences when learning English before were more passive and had high anxiety.

Fear of being judged

Fear of being judged was a strong reason why many students feel anxious when learning English. They were often afraid that if they made a mistake, their classmates or even their teacher would laugh at them or think they were not smart. This fear made them choose to stay silent, even when they knew the answer. As stated in the following interview,

"I feel nervous when I speak English in class. I worry my friends will laugh if I mess up. That's why I stay quiet."

"Sometimes I know the answer, but I don't want to say it. I'm afraid the teacher or my friends will judge me if I make a mistake." (Student 2)

"I don't like to read or speak English in front of the class. I feel nervous. I think people will say my English is bad." (Student 3)

"When I say a wrong word, some friends look at me and smile. I feel shy. After that, I don't want to try again." (Student 4)

"I want to learn English, but I am scared people will laugh at my pronunciation. So, I don't speak much in class." (Student 5)

Fear of being judged was one of the main factors that caused students to feel anxious in learning English. Research showed that many students avoid speaking or participating in class because they are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by their peers. They often felt nervous when they had to speak in front of the class, especially if they were unsure about their pronunciation or grammar. This fear leads them to stay silent, even when they knew the correct answer. As a result, their speaking skills did not improve, and their confidence became even lower.

According to Nuraini and Widodo (2020), students who fear being judged often experience high levels of anxiety. They were less active in class and tended to avoid tasks that required them to speak or write in English. The study also found that this fear was stronger in classrooms where students did not feel safe to make mistakes. When classmates laugh or the teacher gave negative feedback, the students' anxiety increases.

This finding was also supported by Suryani (2021), who explained that a supportive and friendly learning environment can help reduce students' fear. When teachers encouraged students and accepted mistakes as part of the learning process, students felt more comfortable. Therefore, reducing the fear of being judged was important to help students become more confident and active in learning English.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that a considerable proportion of students experience anxiety in learning English. Specifically, 14 students (46.89%) were categorized as having high levels of anxiety. Meanwhile, 11 students (37.5%) fell into the moderate anxiety category. Only five students (15.63%) were identified as having low anxiety, reflecting a relatively small group who feel more comfortable and confident when engaging with English.

Furthermore, several key factors were found to contribute to students' anxiety in learning English. A major factor was the lack of confidence, as many students doubt their ability to use the language correctly. This was closely related to the fear of making mistakes, where students became overly concerned about producing incorrect sentences or mispronouncing words.

In addition, the fear of being judged by teachers or peers further intensifies their anxiety, making them hesitant to participate in classroom activities. As a result, students often remain silent, avoid speaking tasks, and experience increased pressure during learning. These findings suggest that both internal factors (such as self-confidence) and external factors (such as social evaluation) play important roles in shaping students' anxiety levels.

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