

EFL Islamic Elementary Students' Anxiety in Learning English

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Abstract

This study investigates elementary school students' anxiety over learning English, the influential factors of their anxiety, and the teacher's strategies to reduce their anxiety. Anchored in a mixed research method, 75 fifth grade students at SDIT Robbi Rodhiyah in Curup, Bengkulu, Indonesia were involved as the sample for quantitative investigations into their learning anxiety levels and the influential factors of their anxiety. In addition, one English teacher was recruited as the qualitative subject to be interviewed on the teacher's strategies to reduce students' anxiety. The quantitative investigations deployed the FLCAS questionnaire developed by Horwitz, and the qualitative investigation conducted interviews with the English teacher. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze questionnaire data, and an interactive model was undertaken to analyze interview data. The results revealed that the students were at a high level of English learning anxiety. Their anxiety stemmed from some factors such as anxiety over tests, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension. In efforts to help students cope with and reduce their English learning anxiety, the teacher applied some strategies such as relaxation, music and laughter, self-encouragement, and additional considerations resting upon students' to help them reduce their anxiety.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:

Kecemasan

Pelajar EFL di sekolah dasar

Pembelajaran bahasa Inggris

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki kecemasan siswa sekolah dasar atas pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kecemasan mereka, dan strategi guru untuk mengurangi kecemasan mereka. Berbasis pada metode penelitian campuran, 75 siswa kelas V SDIT Robbi Rodhiyah di Curup, Bengkulu, Indonesia dilibatkan sebagai sampel untuk menyelidiki kuantitatif tentang tingkat kecemasan belajar mereka dan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kecemasan mereka. Selain itu, seorang guru bahasa Inggris direkrut sebagai subjek kualitatif untuk diwawancarai tentang strategi guru dalam mengurangi kecemasan siswa. Investigasi kuantitatif menggunakan kuesioner FLCAS yang dikembangkan oleh Horwitz, dan investigasi kualitatif melakukan wawancara dengan guru bahasa Inggris. Statistik deskriptif digunakan untuk menganalisis data kuesioner, dan model interaktif digunakan untuk menganalisis data wawancara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa berada pada tingkat kecemasan belajar bahasa Inggris yang tinggi. Kecemasan mereka berasal dari beberapa faktor seperti kecemasan atas ujian, ketakutan akan evaluasi negatif, dan ketakutan komunikasi. Dalam upaya membantu siswa mengatasi dan mengurangi kecemasan belajar bahasa Inggris mereka, guru menerapkan beberapa strategi seperti relaksasi, musik dan tawa, dorongan diri, dan pertimbangan

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tambahan yang bertumpu pada konteks siswa untuk membantu mereka mengurangi kecemasan mereka.

INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalization, the need to master foreign languages is increasing. English as a lingua franca makes English become the language commonly used as a liaison between countries with different languages of instruction and speakers (Iriance, 2018; Liu, 2019; Mauranen, 2018; Sherman, 2018; Sung, 2017). Various countries in Southeast Asia have designated English as the number one foreign language taught and studied at various education system levels (Handayani, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2018; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). In Indonesia, English is the main foreign language taught in various secondary schools and universities, based on the Decree of the Minister of Education No. 060 / U / 1993 dated 25 February 1993. There have been many developments in the curriculum and learning methods in teaching English, but it is challenging for Indonesian learners to use English even in simple conversations. The students seemed hesitant and preferred to refuse to participate in English teaching and learning processes in the classroom from the author's grand tour observations. One of the reasons is feeling anxious when using English in class and communicating with one another.

Anxiety is often seen as being related to self-focus, negative feelings, and nervousness during interactions (Aslan & Thompson, 2018; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2019). Learning English is not always fun for some people, considering that they have to speak or write down something they are not good at. Especially in English classes, they have to express their views using words they have never used before. A couple of studies conducted by Chen and Hwang (2020); García-Pastor and Miller (2019); Hamzaoğlu and Koçoğlu (2016); Phongsa et al. (2018); and Saghafi et al. (2017) depicted that anxiety is one of the big factors that may hamper the ideal continuity of teaching and learning processes. As reviewed from scientific works dedicated by the experts of psychology, such as Moxnes (2018); Murrough et al. (2015); Renner et al. (2018); and Tsekova et al. (2021), it can be noted that anxiety itself is some sorts of tensions associated with subjective feelings, the extent of apprehension, and the degree of nervousness as well as worries correlated with nervous system stimulation caused by the fear that is more or less caused by one's illusions or bad projections of something. In the case of the present study, anxiety is associated with anxiety in the context of foreign language learning. According to Horwitz (2011), foreign language anxiety is negatively sound understanding, belief, feeling, and attitude that occur in an individual due to the foreign language teaching and learning method's difficulty. Three forms of foreign language anxiety occur, namely apprehension of communication (Jeong, 2017; Saadatnia et al., 2016; Sato, 2019; Sheybani, 2019), the anxiety of taking tests (Coohey & Cummings, 2019; Putwain & von der Embse, 2021), and fear of negative assessment (Letzring et al., 2016; Teale Sapach et al., 2015).

Several studies have demonstrated that anxiety is at some point caused by affective factors in the processes of learning a language (Cox et al., 2018; Matt et al., 2016; Twivy et al., 2020). Regarding the cognitive aspects, anxious students seem to find it challenging to process input and are not very responsive to output in language learning (Mella et al., 2020; Poulin et al., 2019). The cognitive stages of information processing, namely input, processing, and output, are also negatively influenced by anxiety. Regarding performance and achievement in learning a foreign language, anxiety generally harms students' language skills extending to listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (García-Pastor & Miller, 2019). Anxiety dramatically interferes with the process of language acquisition, retention, and production (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2019; Kruk, 2019). Even though anxiety has a negative impact on foreign language learning, teachers, parents, and students have not seriously considered the issues related to anxiety.

It is still rarely found studies on Islamic elementary students' anxiety in learning English. Most studies discussed anxiety in mathematics and other science subjects (Aisyah et al., 2020; Istikomah

& Wahyuni, 2018) and anxiety in learning English among high school or university students (Alnatour, 2018; Amiruddin & Suparti, 2018; Hidayati, 2018). Therefore, to fulfill this void, this study investigates Islamic elementary students' anxiety in learning English in a favorite Islamic elementary school in the Rejang Lebong district. This school has several English programs for the students, namely, storytelling, scrabble, poetry, and reading contests. Meanwhile, in an interview with one teacher, there were still many students who got English scores below 75 on average. It is interesting to determine whether the students have anxiety problems, what factors cause the problems, and how the teacher helps students overcome their anxiety.

Based on some pre-interviews with some English teachers of some elementary schools in Rejang Lebong District, most of the elementary students feel nervous. They fear when they have English class even it is not visible. They express their fears and feelings of uneasiness against learning English. English can be a subject that they hate the most for anxious students, and sometimes they tell their teacher directly that they hate English. They seem so uncomfortable and look so nervous in English class. When the teacher asks those anxious students questions, they are just silent and do not say a single word. The anxiety can provoke many problems in the language's production performance and can hinder students' ability to improve their English. It is necessary to overcome anxiety from this level, formally in elementary students. It will be helpful when they get to the higher level, they have already known the strategies to overcome their anxiety, and their English could be improved. Moreover, the manifestation of anxiety differs between younger and older children. A Study by Jarret et al. (2014) found that older children with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) typically display comparable levels of worries to younger children, except for higher school-related worries, attention problems, and the risk of getting upset. In contrast, younger children displayed more significant avoidance of harm than older children. Teachers faced more significant learning problems and less happiness concerning older children.

Furthermore, in learning a foreign language, language anxiety is a problem. According to Krashen's (2004) hypothesis about affective filters, there will be a mental filter or obstacle to learning language in an incorrect effective state. This will prevent students from completely using feedback for more linguistic mastery. That is, anxiety triggers affective filters that inhibit students' feedback, and then their learning of language will fail to make progress. In their studies, Benati and Batziou (2019) implied a strong affective filter for anxiety acquired in the course of language development, which prevents language acquisition. Affective variables, therefore, play a critical role in language learning.

As the literature void highlighted above, this study aims to analyze anxiety of elementary students in learning English, particularly the levels of their anxiety; the factors that influence their anxiety; and teacher's strategies in helping them overcome their anxiety. This study contributes to providing empirical data that support the existing theory of Krashen's (2004) comprehensible input and lowering affective filter. This study confirms that the lower students' anxiety in learning English, the higher the possibility they can acquire English as desirable.

METHODS

This is a descriptive mixed-method study aimed at investigating elementary school students' anxiety in learning English, the factors of their anxiety, and the teacher's strategies to deal with students' anxiety over learning English. This study used questionnaires and interview guidance as the instruments for collecting the data. There were 75 fifth grade elementary students taken as the samples considering that they had already studied English from the first year, and they were assumed to have a low level of anxiety in learning English. Also, one English teacher was engaged to be interviewed in order to answer the third research question. The questionnaire consisted of 5 scales of options as the given answers. The questionnaire was used to answer the first and the second research questions. The researcher adopted the questionnaire of Foreign Language Classroom

Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire proposed by Horwitz et al. (2011). The FLCAS questionnaire consisted of 33 questions validated using Pearson Correlation Coefficient from SPSS 22. The reliability of the internal consistency of the scale was measured by using Alpha Cronbach coefficient as guided the following table 1 (Sugiyono, 2011):

| Table 1. Reliability of FLCAS questionnaire | |
|--|----------------------|
| Cronbach Alpha | Internal Consistency |
| 0.0 – 0.20 | Poor |
| > 0.20 – 0.40 | Questionable |
| > 0.40 – 0.60 | Acceptable |

Students' total score from the questionnaire was calculated to see the students' levels of foreign language anxiety: high, moderate, and low anxiety levels. In order to know the index of each level, the researchers used the formula below:

| Table 2. The formula of reliability's index levels | |
|---|----------------|
| —————→ | High Level |
| M + 1.SD | |
| —————→ | Moderate Level |
| M - 1.SD | |
| —————→ | Low Level |

Finally, the researcher calculated the score of the total frequency. The formula based on the Likert scale was described as follow (Cohen et al., 2011; Fraenkel et al., 2012):

$$X = ((f SA \times 5) + (f A \times 4) + (f U \times 3) + (f D \times 2) + (f SD \times 1))$$

Note:

F = frequency

SA = strongly agree

A= agree

U = uncertain

D= disagree

SD = strongly disagree

In terms of interviews, the researcher used some indicators, which became the interview protocol's bases. Those indicators were summarized from Horwitz's et al.'s (2011) theories of learners' anxiety. The indicators are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Strategies in Helping EFL Students Overcome Their Anxiety in Learning English

| Theory | Indicators | Sub-Indicators |
|--|---------------------------------|---|
| To promote relaxation and place students in a good mood by using shooting music and humor. | Relaxation, music, and laughter | To encourage laughter in their classrooms and make students feel more at ease, teachers can use funny videos, jokes, amusing dialogues, role-plays, games |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | and other enjoyable activities. |
| Teaching students to empower themselves is another constructive practice that can help minimize levels of anxiety. | Self-encouragement | Any constructive comments that students should say to themselves should be modeled by the instructor, such as "I understand a lot more of what is said to me now" or "It's OK if I make mistakes." |
| | | After doing successful work or achieving a personal goal, students should also be motivated to reward themselves. |
| Journal writing will help students focus on their experiences and anxieties to resolve feelings of insufficiency and develop more optimistic attitudes about their success. | Keeping journal | Teachers may provide students with periodic opportunities to share journal entries with the class if they feel comfortable doing so. |
| For these students, anxiety can be minimized if they are given extra waiting time to respond and allowed in the classroom to use their native language. | Additional considerations for the second language context | Teachers need to consider the affective factors that can affect learning and be sensitive to the difficulties faced by these students in terms of language, culture, and community. |
| Incorporating students' home languages into the classroom will help alleviate anxiety by making students feel respected for their language, culture, and identity. | | In particular, teachers should be mindful of newly arriving immigrants who are likely to experience feelings of cultural shock and require extra time to adapt to their new environment and become comfortable engaging in class. |

Meanwhile, the interview result was analyzed based on Miles' et al. (2014) interactive model, which consisted of data collection, data condensation, data display, and concluding.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Islamic Elementary Students' Anxiety level in Learning English

The possible score of the FLACS questionnaire was attained which ranged from 33 to 165. Nevertheless, in this research, the researcher already removed some questions (18 and 23) because they would have been automatically answered by questions of numbers 1 and 7. Therefore, the possible score ranged from 31 to 155, but the participants' score in this research ranged from 50 to 114. The mean score of all score was 82.17 (≥ 82) indicating a high level of anxiety level. The

remaining mean score was 69.33 ($69 \geq$ moderate < 82). It means that a total score was above 69 and below 82, indicating a moderate level of anxiety. The total score below 69 indicated a low level of anxiety. Based on the score of students' responses to the questionnaire, the level of students' anxiety in learning English was tabulated as presented in table 4 below:

Table 4. Islamic Elementary Students' Anxiety in Learning English

| Level | F | Minimum | Maximum | % |
|------------------|----|---------|---------|------|
| High Anxiety | 38 | 82 | 114 | 51.4 |
| Moderate Anxiety | 24 | 69 | 81 | 32.4 |
| Low Anxiety | 12 | 50 | 68 | 16.2 |
| Total | 74 | 50 | 144 | 100 |

And in the following diagram:

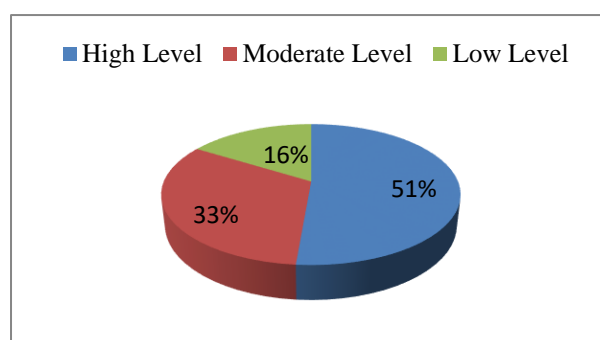


Figure 1. Diagram of Islamic Elementary Students' Anxiety Level

The result showed that 51% of students were at a high level of anxiety. In the learning process, anxious EFL/ESL students tend to show reluctance to produce complex words or sentences in speaking activities. Anxious ESL/EFL students tend to avoid disclosing information in complex sentences (Horwitz et al., 2011). Negative anxiety between two or each other has a causal effect on the perception that second or foreign language classes are challenging. Difficulties in learning contribute to low scores and lack of skills to be further developed (Benati & Batziou, 2019). Anxious students tend to think that language learning is always complex, so that they always feel inferior when learning a second language or a foreign language (Aslan & Thompson, 2018; Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2019; Kruk, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). This assumption is partly influenced by the history of learning frustration which finally can cause difficulties for students to learn the language (receive and understand input). Due to their poor understanding, their learning seems unsuccessful, which will be reflected in their low scores. Their low scores indicate that the material being studied does not seem to be absorbed and digested. In the end, because learning does not happen, their language skills will not develop significantly.

Factors That Influence Students' Anxiety

The data revealed that test anxiety reached 68.4% as the dominant factor that caused students' anxiety. For the second factor, fear of negative evaluation reached 65.5%. In English class, students found themselves worrying about being incorrect while speaking. The third factor was communication apprehension which reached 57.0%.

Table 5. The Percentage of Factors that Influence Students' Anxiety

| No. | Factors | Items | Total Score | Percentage |
|-----|-----------------------------|---|-------------|------------|
| 1. | Test anxiety | 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24 and 26 | 3798 | 68.4% |
| 2. | Fear of negative evaluation | 2, 7, 13, 18, 29 and 31 | 1461 | 65.5% |
| 3. | Communication apprehension | 1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 22, 25, 27, 28 and 30 | 2112 | 57.0% |

Those factors were described in the diagram bellow:

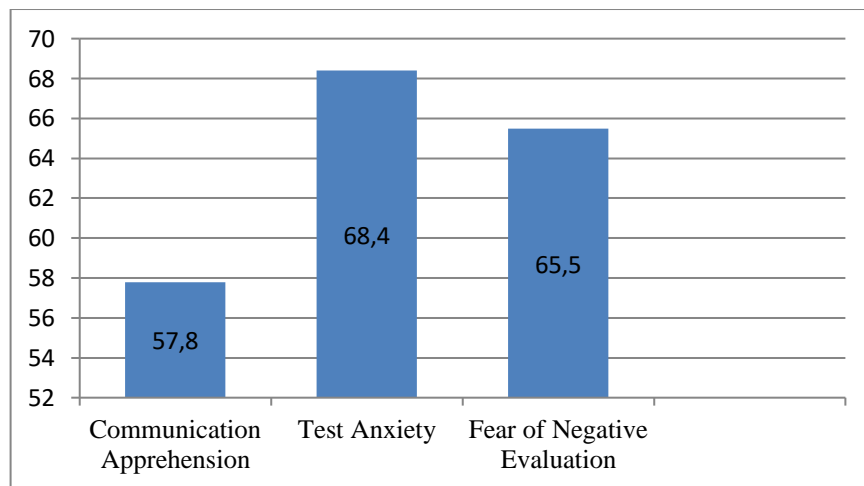


Figure 2. Diagram of the Distribution of Three Factors that Influence Students' Anxiety

Language anxiety is triggered by personal and interpersonal anxiety, the expectations or beliefs of learners about language learning, the self-confidence of the educator in teaching, teacher-learners in contact procedures in the classroom, and language testing (Chen & Hwang, 2020; Phongsa et al., 2018; Putwain & von der Embse, 2021; Saghafi et al., 2017; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2019). Anxious learners can suffer from anxiety in relation to a variety of aspects of the language teaching-learning process, talking to other learners, the language class, their peers' actions, and taking exams (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2019; El-sakka, 2016; Kruk, 2019). Foreign language anxiety is correlated with a range of aspects of the teaching-learning process, instructors, language itself, speaking in front of other students, language classes, peer actions, assessments, and motivation for attitude (Nilsson, 2019). Learning can cause anxiety too. Students cannot learn a lot if they have poorly scored on previous tests or are anxious about making mistakes on future tests (Coohey & Cummings, 2019; Putwain & von der Embse, 2021). If the material that students learn is not in the test material, it can result in fear and anxiety. This can decrease students' achievement in learning a foreign language.

Teachers' Strategies in Helping Students Overcome Their Anxiety

From five indicators as the guidance of interviewing the teacher, it was found that the teacher used most of the negotiated indicators as displayed in the following table 6:

Table 6. Teacher's Strategies to Help Students Overcome Their Anxiety

| No. | Strategies | | Descriptions |
|-----|---|---|--|
| 1. | Relaxation, music, and laughter | - | - Play a game as ice-breaking - Explain in both English and Indonesian |
| 2. | Self-encouragement | - | - Saying it's OK to make a mistake - Give a reward |
| 3. | Keeping journal | - | - I didn't provide the students with a journal because they have a textbook |
| 4. | Addition considerations for the second language context | - | - Allow students to use their native language - Give extra time to students to answer questions |

Besides teacher's strategies, learners' self-positioning during learning also helps decrease their anxiety. An ideal self-positioning during learning is positive thinking. Positive thinking is a strategy that has a palliative function in suppressing problematic cognitive processes that underlie students' anxiety, becoming a part of self-encouragement (Efl et al., 2018). This strategy could also include self-perception that a person can perform well or try to enjoy the tension of learning situations (Dewaele & Pavlescu, 2019; Kruk, 2019). In speaking learning situations, positive thinking is very likely to occur when a student has good preparation and is relaxed. These two facts support the perception that things will go well and smoothly. Therefore, when a student believes that his presentation will be well, he will refer back to what he had done before and realize that he does not need to be panic. In this way, positive thinking will increase his self-confidence. In the end, he will gain more. A lot of control over his emotions and cognitive abilities will reduce his anxiety.

In addition to the data presented in table 6, this study also found that the English teacher made an effort to reduce students' anxiety by making use of the bilingual principle of English teaching, wherein the teacher does not use full English, but use both English and Indonesian to make sure that students did not feel anxious and consider English a disaster. This can be seen in the following transcript of the interview.

"Because English is not our first language, so usually I used fifty-fifty in class. I am not using full English in class. After I explain in English I will translate it in Indonesian so students will easily understand and fade their fear. I used fifty-fifty in order to decrease the feeling of anxiety in students. Because some students get nervous and afraid cause of they don't understand. After they understand, they will have confidents to answer our questions."

The above transcript, to some extent conforms to the cross-cultural paradigm of English teaching. The bilingual principle the teacher used demonstrated his positively focused views on this paradigm as a way to help decrease students' anxiety over English learning. As stated by Noviyenty (2020), Indonesian EFL teachers' positively focused views on Teaching English across Culture (TEAC) paradigms indicate that they are ready enough to carry TEAC paradigms when teaching English in the classrooms. Her study urged the Indonesian government to help improve the Intercultural English curriculum and provide intercultural English teaching training for EFL teachers to assist EFL teachers in meeting the needs of Indonesian multicultural students to learn English. Besides, with the practice of TEAC paradigms, EFL teachers had one way to, at some point, decrease students' anxiety over learning English. The other perspective also suggested that teachers had to treat students to be relaxed during learning for the sake of reducing their learning anxiety. By doing so, students can reduce their nervousness and fear when they encounter language classroom situations (Efl et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

The present study revealed that most of the elementary school student participants at SDIT Rabby Radhiyah suffer from a high level of anxiety over learning English. Their anxiety is affiliated with some factors ranging from test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension. In efforts to help students cope with and reduce their English learning anxiety, the teacher has applied some strategies such as relaxation, music and laughter, self-encouragement, and additional considerations for the second language context to help students overcome their anxiety during learning English. The study implies that by identifying the extent of students' English learning anxiety as well as the influential factors of anxiety *per se*, the English teacher should be more prepared in making use of varied strategies to reduce students' anxiety. Applying the paradigm of teaching English across cultures (TEAC), in a way that uses both English and Indonesian in a compatible manner while providing students with English input, can to some extent, help reduce learners' fear of learning English. In so doing, developing learners, those at elementary school ages, will not perceive English as something too much fearful. Theoretically, the present study supports the existing second language acquisition theory, the so-called comprehensible input and lowering affective filter. The present study's data demonstrated that students' high anxiety levels are caused by some factors that are not of the low effective filter, such as fear of tests, corrections, and

communicative participation. This study confirmed the aforesaid theory that lowering students' affective filter and providing comprehensible input, such as compatible English-Indonesian instructional language using the TEAC paradigm, can reduce students' anxiety over learning English.

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