

# HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY: A CASE STUDY AT ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF IAIN LANGSA

by:

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## Abstract

This study discusses EFL learners' foreign language anxiety at a higher education institution in Langsa. It further explores factors that contribute to language apprehension and how it manifests in the students. This study employed a qualitative approach with the type of case study research. The subjects of this research were 10 students of the English Education Department of IAIN Langsa. The data were collected through observation, focus group discussion, and in-depth interviews. Data analysis techniques included data reduction, data presentation, and data conclusion. This study found that the majority of the students experienced anxiety in learning English as a foreign language. Factors that trigger anxiety include inadequate vocabulary and knowledge of grammar, unintelligible pronunciation, individual learning preferences, and afraid of negative evaluation. Some learners suffered various symptoms when practicing the target language, such as shaky hands, wobbly legs, stuttering, headache, and a sense of dread. Such factors affected their attitudes toward the foreign language learning, such as language inhabitant, demotivated, and worried in language classrooms. Nevertheless, few of them conducted efforts to deal with the anxiety include participating in the classroom activity, preparing notes before speaking, and learning with peers.

**Keywords:** *Anxiety, foreign language, foreign language anxiety*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language involves three fundamental aspects include cognitive, affective, and linguistics (Brown, 2007). Affective factors, which deal with emotion, feeling, and mood to a circumstance, play a significant role in learning and acquiring foreign language skills. It includes self-efficacy, anxiety, language attitude, motivation, and learning style. Anxiety is one of the common obstacles experienced by many language learners, especially those who learn English as a foreign language. Experts agree that anxiety contributes negatively to learners' foreign language performance (Gardner, 1985; Woodrow, 2006; Young, 1990). Kratochwill, Cook, Travers, & Elliott (1996) define anxiety as an unconscious feeling, worries, and fears of an uncertain situation. Similarly, it is a subjective experience faced by a person (Ghufron & Suminta, 2010), and it is a normal reaction towards a pressure situation in one's life (Ramaiah, 2003). In the context of foreign language learning, (Sadighi & Dastpak (2017) describe anxiety as an emotional factor that contributes to one's negative perception of learning a language. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Young, 1991). Within this context, anxiety means a feeling of tension and worry that someone experience when he has to use a foreign language; to speak, listen, read, or write. Humphries (2011) insists that someone may experience stress, nervousness, confusion, doubt, lack of self-

confidence, worry when using the target language. The common symptoms they experience are the feeling of uncertainty, fear, and nervousness. The factors that influence such problems are complex that include biological, psychological, and social aspects. Hashemi & Abbasi (2013) mention social and environmental or place where the language learned as one of the indicators that generate anxiety. It means that foreign language anxiety can happen both inside and outside of the classroom.

The majority of non-native foreign language learners experience anxiety. It includes those who learn at a higher education level. Some of them consider learning English is challenging. One of the reasons is because they have to deal with a new language in which the vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation are significantly different from their mother tongue. Students of the English Education Department of IAIN Langsa also experience the foreign language anxiety. Most of them chose the study program because they aimed to be English educators and practitioners. Some others were interested in learning English. However, they could not show such enthusiasm in the teaching and learning process. Some of the learners were passive in most language classrooms. They felt reluctant to get involved in classroom discussions and unable to express their opinion in English fluently. Even worst, a few of them resigned from the study program and decided to study other majors. They were assumed to

have a poor ability to learn English. Thus, the researchers explore fundamental problems that lead to the students' anxiety, which affects their language proficiency and disturbs their creativity in practicing the language. This study aims at finding out factors that generate the apprehension and how it manifests in them. The purpose is to figure out solutions to assist the students in learning the foreign language effectively, not only to acquire the skills but also to develop professional prospective teachers' candidates within their expertise.

Language learning involves one's cognitive and affective aspects. Historically, Brown (1997) proposes that in the 1970s, the humanistic trend in education and psychology influenced language teaching. Experts in the humanistic language teaching movement have emphasized the significance of combining knowledge of individual learners and affective aspects in language teaching. Some methods in language teaching, which promote humanistic approaches such as Total Physical Response, Communicative Language Learning, Silent Way, and Suggestopedia, emphasize principles in language teaching. These include language learning must be carried out in an anxiety-free atmosphere, providing opportunities for students to achieve their self-confidence and language proficiency, and observing learners' cognitive, emotional, and physical aspects. Arnold (2011) adds that language learning should include meaningful personal experiences, preparing learning materials and sources, and developing learners' autonomy.

Anxiety includes affective aspects in foreign language acquisition. An individual may experience stress, fear, nervousness, confusion, doubt, lack of self-confidence, and worry in using a language (Humphries, 2011). Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986) classifies three types of foreign language anxiety. They are fear of communication, fear of examination, and fear of negative evaluation. Some students feel shy to communicate with others due to they have lack self-confidence. Walker (1997) notes that those students often answer a question shortly to minimize errors. Some of them also tend to answer questions by reading notes aloud rather than expressing them spontaneously. Anxiety in an examination is characterized by their ambition to obtain perfect scores and consider failing if the result is unsatisfactory. Research shows that speech-oriented activities produce higher anxiety for students than other activities in the classroom (Young, 1990). Meanwhile, fear of negative evaluation is characterized by agreeing with others' evaluations, avoiding evaluative situations, and being anxious that others will evaluate them negatively.

In addition, Brown (2007) classifies two categories of anxiety. The first is innate anxiety. It is a tendency to feel anxious, as some people tend to worry about all things. The second is situational anxiety, which is an uncertain feeling due to specific

circumstances. Situational anxiety occurs in everyday life, especially in a social situation such as being a speaker in a forum and attending a job interview (Macintyre, 1995). In the context of foreign language learning, situational factors include course levels, in-class activities, and classroom atmosphere (Chou, 2018). The third is specific anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). This type of anxiety arises due to certain conditions in the classroom, such as students' inability to understand instructions in a foreign language and their inability to speak and write in the target language.

Meanwhile, Oxford (1993), as cited in Brown (1997), categorizes two types of anxiety; debilitating and facilitative. The former contributes negatively to students' language learning process. Meanwhile, the latter is a positive one. It contributes positively to reduce one's tension. It encourages someone to perform efforts to develop his language skill. Spielmann & Radnofsky (2001), as cited in Brown (1997), notes that anxiety is natural in foreign language learning. He further insists that it can contribute to both detrimental (dysphoria) and beneficial (euphoria). The majority of individuals consider anxiety as a negative factor. However, facilitative tension views that a little worry and fear about a task that someone should accomplish may keep him or her being alert. One of the examples is an experienced speaker who feels anxious before making a presentation in front of the public. Such a feeling may encourage him to finish his job professionally as he will be well-prepared

Furthermore, one of the factors that cause anxiety is the students themselves Szyszka (2018). She further categorizes it into internal and external factors. On the one hand, the internal factor reveals when a learner has an assumption that learning a language is problematic. Horwitz et al., (1986), as cited in Ohata (2005), elaborates that anxiety often results from learners' misconceptions about foreign language learning. Those include learning words' accuracy is significant before learning how to pronounce them, speaking with native speakers is an approach to obtain the proper accent, and guessing difficult words is inappropriate. Moreover, learning a language means translating the first language into a foreign language, two years is the length to gain language fluency, and some learners are born to acquire the skill while others are not. On the other hand, the external factors of anxiety derived from learners' identity, self-perception, and completion in learning. Other factors involve approaches used by teachers in teaching and learning, teacher and student interaction, procedures in the classroom, and examination.

In the context of foreign language learning, most learners experience anxiety due to self-efficacy, a huge ambition to be perfect, and fear of receiving negative perceptions from classmates when they make mistakes in practicing the language. All of

these may affect their foreign language performance, achieving unsatisfactory results, and frustration. Nevertheless, another point that is subject to debate regarding anxiety in learning a foreign language is whether it is the main reason that leads a learner to have poor language performance or it is a result of such unsatisfactory performance. Language performance, in this context, means a concrete and observable manifestation of competence include actual production (speaking and writing) and understanding (listening and reading). Competence defines as someone's basic knowledge of a concept. Meanwhile, foreign language competence refers to the ability to use language systems, grammar rules, vocabulary, and aspects of language as a whole (Brown, 1997).

## 2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method with the type of case study research. McMillan (2008) defines a case study as an in-depth analysis of one or more events, settings, programs, social groups, communities, individuals, or other bounded systems in their natural context. The objective is to provide detailed descriptions of a case by looking at a phenomenon in its real-life context (Cohen, Manion, & Morrioso, 2009). This study explores foreign languages anxiety, which further elaborates factors that trigger the apprehension and how it manifests in the students. The primary data were obtained from direct observation, focus group discussion, and interviews. The research subject involved 10 students of the fourth semester of the English Department in the 2019/2020 academic year. To analyze the data, the researcher applied qualitative research data analysis constructed by Miles and Huberman, which consisted of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Sugiono (2016) elaborates that the data analysis has started before the researcher enters the research field in qualitative research. The analysis is directed on the data from the preliminary study to determine the research focus. Then it will be developed as the researchers enter the research field. The analysis is carried out during and after the data collection within a certain period.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the interview revealed that almost all participants experience anxiety in learning and practicing English. The factors that generate the apprehension include:

### a. Inadequate vocabulary and grammar

The majority of the students expressed that the common problems they encountered in using the target language were a lack of vocabulary and knowledge of grammar. These influenced their performance in practicing the foreign language. In speaking activities, most of them had difficulties expressing their thought orally. They had to note down their ideas and translate few words before

speaking. Consequently, they felt uncomfortable, acted passively, and were reluctant to participate in the classroom activities. One of the participants expressed:

*"I found it difficult to express my thought because I did not know how to say them in English. I missed some vocabulary while speaking. I was worried that the lecturer would not understand what I said. It made me shy for sure. So, I decided to keep silent in speaking class".*

Some of them also could not respond to a question in English spontaneously. They frequently felt anxious when a lecturer asked impromptu questions during the learning process. Due to the insufficient vocabulary, they often suffer from rapid heartbeat, sweaty hands, trembling voices, and stuttering when using the target language. Not only in speaking, but also in reading few participants mentioned that defining complex vocabulary and technical words in passages are overwhelming. A participant proposed:

*"I felt confused to comprehend a text with difficult words. I was not sure about the information provided in the text and it took time for me to accomplish the task. I felt really stress in a reading examination when I had to deal with such complicated texts and we were not allowed to use the dictionary. I couldn't control my heartbeats and get worried about my exam result".*

Furthermore, lack of grammar knowledge and structure was another issue that triggers anxiety. Most of the participants were anxious about using proper English grammar in both writing and speaking. Thus, they often avoid participating in language activities. A participant stated that:

*"To me, the most complex part of English is its grammar. I always doubt to use of proper structure and grammar in writing and in speaking. I am always afraid of making mistakes in speaking as it may affect my score".*

Similarly, other participants stated that their inability to construct effective sentences made them anxious in writing class. They also assumed that English is a complicated subject to learn due to the language has complicated patterns.

### b. Unintelligible pronunciation

Learners also avoid participating in language learning activities due to their inability to speak clearly. Unintelligible pronunciation often leads to misunderstanding. It made the learners reluctant to develop their language proficiency, especially in speaking. Some of them inhibit practicing the target language inside and outside of the classroom. A participant expressed that she had an unpleasant experience when she mispronounced a word in a

conversation. Few students laughed at her. She felt embarrassed and quitted speaking. She stated that:

*"Once, I practiced speaking with my friend. I meant to say a 'tourist guide' but I mispronounced the word 'guide'. Suddenly, other students laughed and stared at me cynically. I felt shocked as they paid attention to what I said. They just laughed but not telling me how to pronounce the word correctly. I felt weird and reluctant to continue practicing".*

Other participants added that their classmates were often laughing at them when they mispronounced some vocabulary. They felt doubt to speak in the classroom. Thus, they tend to give short answers and utter short expressions to avoid mispronunciation. They also felt worried about being judged negatively by their friends due to their poor language proficiency.

#### c. Individual learning preferences

Every learner has different learning preferences. Some learners can learn in any circumstances, such as in the classroom, in a cafeteria, and in other crowded places. Meanwhile, some others prefer to learn in quiet situations. Disruptive learning environments potentially increase one's anxiety, especially in listening class. A participant proposed:

*"It is difficult for me to understand the information from the recorder when the class is crowded and many disruptive noises around. It ruins my concentration very badly. I am anxious that I cannot accomplish the task"*

Some participants also mentioned that they tend to learn in group effectively than individual learning. Collaborative learning reduces their nervousness, especially when they face problems in fulfilling a task. They also have opportunities to share and discuss with their friends the challenging topic they encountered. The majority of learners encountered problems with anxiety in learning English as a foreign language. Kirova, Petkovska, & Kuzmanovska (2012) investigate various factors that underlie the issue include students' sense of self, language learning barriers, different cultures between the learners' and the target language, and the fear of losing self-identity. Another factor is learners' previous learning experience (Yayli, 2012). Jiang & Dewaele (2020) in their study found that socio biographical variables such as; gender, ethnic groups, geographical background as well as language variables include language achievement level, self-perceived oral competence, and frequency of language use are also significantly influence the foreign language anxiety. The result of the current research showed that one of the most factors that trigger anxiety was the lack of participants' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Thus, they are overwhelmed to express their thought both orally and verbally in a foreign language. These affect their overall

performance in language activities. In speaking, for example, the participants tend not to participate in classroom activities due to their inability to convey their ideas fluently. They often feel nervous during the learning process, afraid of being asked to speak, and passive.

Besides practicing the productive skills; speaking and writing, the participants also feel nervous when encountering complex vocabulary in reading passages. Research carried out by Faruq in 2019 showed that difficult words in English texts lead learners to be overwhelmed in reading, which affects their reading comprehension significantly. Some of the participants must read a passage several times to comprehend the text thoroughly. It indicated that they were struggling with applying strategies for reading comprehension. Al-sohbani (2018) adds variables that triggered reading anxiety which involve foreign text themes, sophisticated vocabulary, various cultural backgrounds, and grammar. Therefore, learners should allot time to do independent reading, practice strategies to develop reading comprehension, and read diverse text topics to enhance their reading skills.

Every learner has different language capabilities. Some of them may learn grammar and vocabulary quickly, but some others are not. Factors that influence their capability involve cognitive, affective, and other factors such as age and socio-cultural experience (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992). Cognitive factors include intelligence, language aptitude, language learning strategies, and former language learning experience. The affective factors include attitude, motivation, language anxiety, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and learning style. Learners who encounter problems with cognitive aspects may find understanding language structure in a short period is difficult. It requires process and sufficient time. Thus, support from other elements such as teachers, classmates, and a supportive environment is necessary to develop their competency.

Some participants admitted that they tend to learn effectively in a particular situation, especially in a quiet place. A crowded environment tends to distract their concentration and arouse apprehension, especially in accomplishing tasks. Listening activity, in particular, can be challenging because listeners comprehend spoken language. Spoken language consists of chunks, fillers, colloquial expressions, and various rates of delivery (Brown, 2007). *Research by Prastiyowati (2019) also found that the learning environment triggers anxiety, especially in listening.* Some participants focus more easily on listening in a quiet learning atmosphere than in a crowded situation. In addition, some other participants prefer to learn in groups. Individual learning led them to feel anxious as they could not accomplish a task. Working in teams generates collaboration, learning assistance, and building self-confidence.

Some of the participants proposed that they did not execute particular efforts to develop their language skills. One of the reasons was because assignments overload. They reviewed lessons while accomplishing the tasks. Hence, some others conducted several attempts to encounter the language anxieties. They set a target to develop their vocabulary by memorizing them, listening to an English song, and watching English movies. In general, foreign language apprehension led some students to avoid participating and taking risks in language learning. This was in line with the affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen in 1982, who claimed that apprehension causes learners to fail to respond to an input appropriately, which affects their learning performances. In this case, anxiety distracts the language learners from practicing effective learning. However, other participants have an awareness to deal with the problems.

Furthermore, some participants mentioned that, even though they experienced shaky hands, stuttering, were afraid of making mistakes, and had a headache when learning and practicing the target language, they continued fostering themselves to participate in the learning activities. It showed that they have high motivation and self-confidence in learning. According to Alcalá (2007), there is a strong relationship between self-confidence and proficiency. Developing proficiency may enhance an individual's self-confidence, which also relates to self-efficacy. Poor self-efficacy affect negatively on one's language learning. Reasoner (1992), the founder of the International council of self-esteem, has developed a model to enhance learners' self-esteem, which consists of several components. The first is security. It deals with the feeling of being safe. It means that the students will not receive verbal and nonverbal punishment when they make mistakes in practicing the target language in the classroom. The second is identity, which means to identify oneself. The third is belonging. The students may perceive that they belong to one another and support each other in foreign language learning. Students may appreciate somebody else effort in learning English and building teamwork. The fourth is purpose. It aims at finding out and understanding what to do and what to achieve. The fifth is competence, which means that someone believes that he can accomplish a task. Therefore, promoting activities to develop self-esteem and facilitating a supportive learning environment are significant to reduce learners' tension of foreign language apprehension.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

##### a. Conclusions

Anxiety in foreign language learning influences learners' foreign language learning. The apprehension encourages learners to avoid participating and practicing within the classroom environments and out of the classroom, lacks self-

confidence, demotivated, and encounter low self-esteem. Factors that generate the problems include a lack of knowledge of English elements such as insufficient vocabulary, knowledge of grammar, and unintelligible pronunciation. Other factors involve individual learning preferences and afraid of negative evaluation. Some learners experience various symptoms when using the target language include trembling voices, sweaty hands, rapid heartbeat, shaky, wobbly legs, stuttering, headache, and a sense of dread.

##### b. Suggestion

Students are encouraged to develop their autonomy in learning English. They have to figure out effective ways to learn and enrich their vocabulary, knowledge of grammar, and pronunciation. They also have to set up the learning target, develop a habit to practice the language both inside and outside of the classroom, and find feedback for improvement. Moreover, lectures are also suggested to provide an anxiety-free language learning environment, promote collaboration, and generate activities to enhance students' self-esteem.

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