

Investigating the Students Anxiety in Learning English as Foreign Language at VIII Grade in SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar

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ABSTRACT

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) encompasses feelings of fear, nervousness, and negative self-perceptions that can impede learners' progress in acquiring a new language. Within the Indonesian educational landscape, where English is introduced as a foreign language, such anxiety presents a formidable obstacle to achieving language proficiency. This research explored the various types and intensities of foreign language anxiety experienced by eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar in their English learning journey. Employing descriptive qualitative approach, this research gathered data through surveys administered to eighth-grade students, complemented by classroom observations and open-ended student responses. The findings indicated that anxiety levels are most pronounced during speaking activities and examinations, primarily driven by limited vocabulary, apprehension about making mistakes, and classroom environment factors. The predominant manifestations of anxiety included communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, with many students expressing feelings of embarrassment and reluctance to actively participate. To cope, students resorted to strategies such as self-research, note-taking, and seeking help from peers; however, these methods tended to be simple and unstructured, limiting their effectiveness. The research underscored teachers' role played in cultivating a supportive, non-threatening classroom atmosphere where students feel safe to practice English without fear of judgment. Ultimately, this research enriched understanding of foreign language anxiety within Indonesian educational context and provides valuable insights for teachers aiming to implement strategies that reduce anxiety and foster greater confidence among students in English learning.

Keywords: *Anxiety; English; Foreign Language; Students*

INTRODUCTION

The mastery of a foreign language, especially English, has grown ever more vital in our increasingly interconnected world, serving as a key to academic achievement, career advancement, and broader international engagement. Yet, for learners in non-English-speaking environments like Indonesia, acquiring English presents notable challenges (Rachmawati & Jurianto, 2020; Nasution et al., 2022). Among these,

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) stands out as a particularly formidable barrier. This form of anxiety can impede students' ability to listen, speak, read, and write with confidence, ultimately diminishing their overall language proficiency and potential.

Foreign Language Anxiety is understood as a specific form of apprehension that emerges within the context of acquiring and utilizing a new language. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) characterized it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning." This form of anxiety often presents itself through feelings of nervousness, fear of failure, and diminished confidence, all of which can hinder the language learning journey. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that Foreign Language Anxiety significantly diminishes learners' willingness to engage in communicative activities, constrains their willingness to take risks in language use, and ultimately hampers their academic success (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Scholars widely acknowledge that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) encompasses three principal dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Kianinezhad, 2024). Communication apprehension pertains to the discomfort and reluctance individuals experience when expressing themselves in a foreign language, especially in the presence of peers or instructors. Test anxiety involves the stress and worry associated with language assessments, often prompting avoidance strategies. Meanwhile, the fear of negative evaluation reflects concerns about how one's language performance will be perceived by others, which can hinder active participation in classroom activities. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) has emerged as a prominent and reliable tool for empirically assessing these interconnected facets of FLA.

In Indonesia, where English is introduced as a foreign language within educational settings, the experience of anxiety is profoundly shaped by both pedagogical and cultural influences (Ayuningtyas et al., 2022; Mustamir, 2024). The classroom environment and the nature of teacher-student interactions are pivotal; a nurturing and encouraging atmosphere can alleviate students' apprehensions, whereas overly critical or competitive settings tend to heighten them. Teachers who cultivate positive relationships with their students are more likely to foster confidence and a sense of security, in contrast to authoritarian approaches that may inadvertently increase stress (Dörnyei, 2001). Additionally, cultural values play a significant role. As a collectivist society, Indonesia prioritizes group harmony and adherence to communal expectations. As a result, students often harbor fears that errors in learning English could not only reflect poorly on their individual efforts but also disappoint teachers, peers, or family members (Fauzi & Asi, 2023). This apprehension about failure intensifies anxiety and can diminish motivation, underscoring the complex interplay between educational practices and cultural norms in shaping learners' emotional experiences.

Recent research further emphasize the widespread significance of anxiety within modern society. For example, Bandelow and Michaelis (2022) delineate the global prevalence and societal repercussions of anxiety disorders, while Jehi et al. (2023)

observe a notable rise in anxiety and depression amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights imply that foreign language anxiety transcends mere academic concern, representing a broader psychological issue that impacts learners' overall well-being. Consequently, a nuanced understanding of anxiety's dynamics within foreign language education becomes crucial, serving both scholarly inquiry and practical application.

The Indonesian educational landscape presents distinct and complex challenges (Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2020). The transition from primary to secondary education frequently marks a period of considerable anxiety for students. Specifically, at the junior high school level—particularly in eighth grade—students face escalating academic expectations, more rigorous English curricula, and heightened performance standards. For those attending SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar, these academic pressures coincide with the profound developmental changes of adolescence, a stage marked by increased sensitivity to social evaluation and self-image. The interplay of academic demands and psychological vulnerability can significantly amplify foreign language anxiety, underscoring the importance of exploring this phenomenon in depth.

This research endeavors to explore the nature and intensity of anxiety encountered by eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar in their English language learning journey. By investigating the origins and impacts of this anxiety on language acquisition, the research aims to offer valuable insights into how teachers and policymakers can develop more effective strategies to mitigate anxiety and cultivate a nurturing learning environment. Ultimately, addressing Foreign Language Anxiety is essential not only for improving students' proficiency and motivation but also for supporting their psychological well-being and overall academic achievement in mastering English as a foreign language.

METHOD

This research utilized a quantitative descriptive approach to elucidate the nature and extent of foreign language anxiety (FLA) experienced by eighth-grade students. The descriptive research design is particularly suited for providing an accurate portrayal of a phenomenon without the influence of variable manipulation, thereby capturing the authentic characteristics of the participants (Nassaji, 2015). In this context, the methodology was employed to explore how students encounter and perceive anxiety in their pursuit of learning English as a foreign language at SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar.

The research was carried out at SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar. The participant cohort comprised 23 eighth-grade students, representing adolescents navigating the pivotal transitional phase of their development. As Eccles and Roeser (2011) observe, students at this stage encounter a confluence of developmental challenges and increasing academic pressures, often leading to heightened levels of school-related anxiety. The deliberate selection of eighth graders was strategic, aiming to glean profound insights into the intricacies of language anxiety during this vital and formative period of educational growth.

The principal instrument employed in this research was a questionnaire adapted from the renowned Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), originally developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). Celebrated for its reliability and validity, the FLCAS has been extensively utilized to assess various dimensions of anxiety associated with foreign language acquisition across diverse cultural settings. In this research, the instrument comprised primarily closed-ended Likert-scale items crafted to quantify three fundamental facets of anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. To enrich the quantitative findings, two open-ended questions were incorporated, inviting students to share their personal insights regarding the significance of listening in English learning and their impressions of the TOEFL listening test. This methodological blend of structured quantitative data and qualitative responses aimed to capture both overarching patterns and the subtle, emotional nuances underlying students' experiences.

Data collection was conducted within the familiar setting of regular English classes, thoughtfully chosen to foster student comfort and to minimize disruptions to their ongoing learning routines. Before distributing the questionnaires, the researcher thoroughly explained the research objectives and reassured participants that their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous. This clarification was vital in alleviating any concerns that might lead to response bias, encouraging students to share their genuine feelings openly. Adequate time was allotted for students to complete the questionnaires independently, and the open-ended questions were submitted in written format, allowing them the freedom to thoughtfully reflect on their experiences.

The data analysis was conducted using a descriptive methodology. Likert-scale responses were examined to determine frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, thereby elucidating students' anxiety levels across the three identified dimensions. This method facilitated a lucid and accessible presentation of emerging patterns within the dataset, in accordance with Cheng & Dörnyei's (2007) advocacy for the efficacy of descriptive statistics in capturing learner perceptions. Concurrently, open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis, whereby recurring ideas and illustrative statements were clustered to highlight both shared experiences and individual perspectives. The integration of quantitative and qualitative insights through this triangulation approach not only bolstered the validity of the findings but also yielded a richer, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Meydan, & Akkaş, 2024).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Findings

The data collectively reveal that anxiety is a prevalent challenge that considerably impacts students' academic performance and motivation in learning English. These findings underscore the critical need to cultivate a nurturing and low-anxiety classroom environment, fostering greater confidence and active engagement among learners. The

insights presented herein are derived from questionnaire responses, complemented by classroom observations, to provide a comprehensive understanding of this issue.

Data Analysis

This research employed qualitative descriptive methodology to comprehensively examine the manifestations, underlying causes, and personal experiences of anxiety among Grade VIII students at SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar during the 2024/2025 academic year. Data collection was conducted directly with students through an adapted Likert-scale questionnaire, complemented by open-ended comments that offered nuanced qualitative insights. Participants indicated their level of agreement using a four-point scale: 1 = Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Agree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree, facilitating a detailed exploration of their emotional landscapes and perceptions.

The subsequent section offers a detailed presentation of the findings for each questionnaire item, complemented by illustrative figures.

“Statement 1: I’m worried about not being able to afford English lessons.”

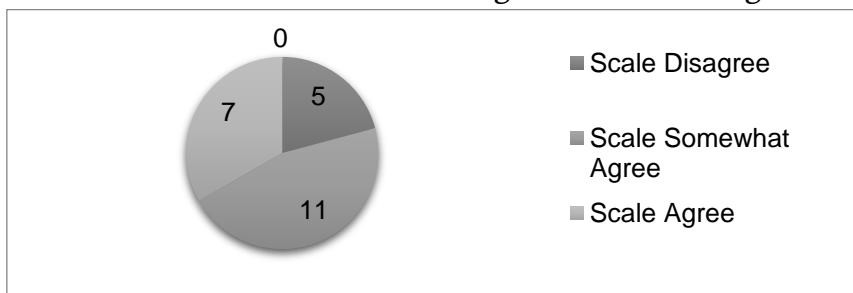


Figure 1. Students’ Worry about Affording English Lessons.

A total of 23 students provided responses to this item. Among them, 5 students expressed disagreement, 11 indicated partial agreement, and 7 affirmed their concurrence, with no students strongly agreeing. This distribution suggests that the majority of students exhibited a moderate level of concern, implying that financial considerations related to English lessons were present but not overwhelmingly significant for all students.

“Statement 2: I feel embarrassed when someone notices me because I don’t speak English.”

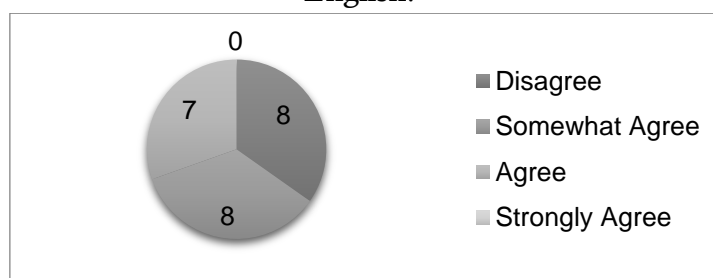


Figure 2. Students’ Embarrassment About Not Speaking English.

This response was provided by 23 students, among whom eight expressed disagreement, eight indicated a moderate level of agreement, and seven concurred, with none expressing strong agreement. These findings reflect a diverse range of perceptions among the student body, with many acknowledging feelings of moderate embarrassment. Such results imply that a number of students experience a lack of confidence when their limited English proficiency is observed by others.

“Statement 3: Before the English lesson started, my heart was already pounding.”

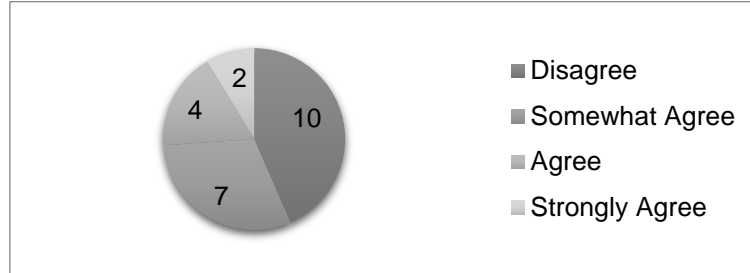


Figure 3. Students' Physical Reactions Before English Lessons.

In this item, 10 students expressed disagreement, while 7 students indicated partial agreement, 4 students concurred, and 2 students strongly agreed. These results suggest that although a subset of students experienced physical symptoms associated with anxiety, such as a racing heartbeat, a significant portion did not. Overall, the data implies that physiological manifestations of anxiety were present only among a minority within the class.

“Statement 4: I'm worried that my friends will make fun of me.”

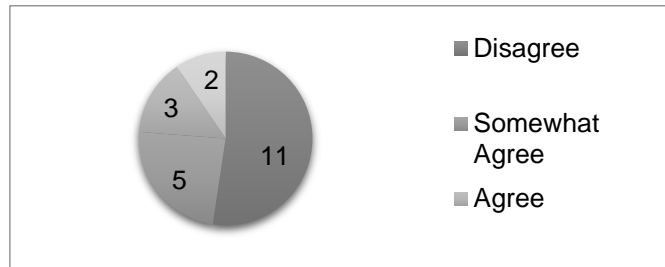


Figure 4. Students' Fear of Peer Teasing.

Eleven students disagreed, five somewhat agreed, three agreed, and two strongly agreed. Most students expressed little fear of peer teasing, indicating that peer pressure was not the main source of anxiety for many learners.

“Statement 5: I feel anxious and afraid if the homework I do is wrong.”

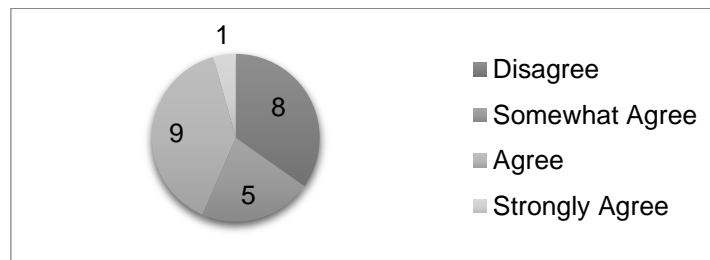


Figure 5. Anxiety About Making Mistakes in Homework.

The responses showed that 8 students disagreed, 5 somewhat agreed, 9 agreed, and 1 strongly agreed. This indicates that anxiety about making mistakes in homework was relatively common, with many students showing moderate concern about correctness.

“Statement 6: When learning English, I try to stay calm to cover up my anxiety.”

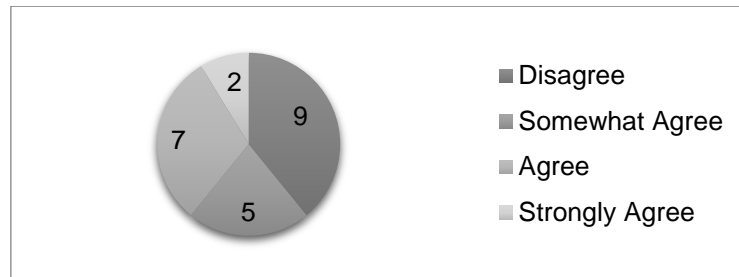


Figure 6. Students' Efforts to Hide Anxiety During Lessons.

Of the students, 9 disagreed, 5 somewhat agreed, 7 agreed, and 2 strongly agreed. These results suggest that several students made conscious efforts to mask their anxiety during English lessons.

“Statement 7: During the English lesson, I felt anxious because I was afraid of being teased by the teacher.”

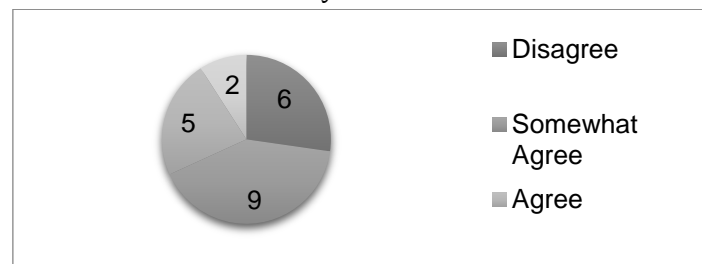


Figure 7. Fear of Teacher Related Anxiety.

Six students disagreed, nine somewhat agreed, five agreed, and two strongly agreed. The results indicate mixed responses, with some students experiencing concern about their teacher's reactions, although not all shared the same worry.

“Statement 8: If there is an English assignment, I start to feel like I'm afraid of not being able to do it.”

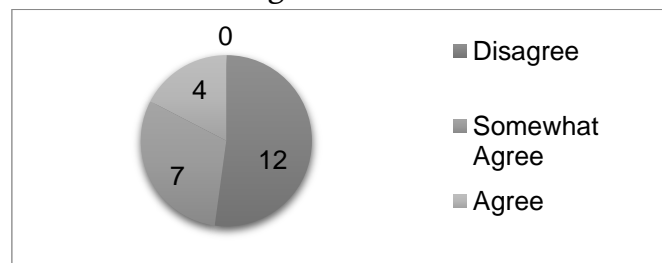


Figure 8. Students' Anxiety About English Assignments.

The data showed that 12 students disagreed, 7 somewhat agreed, 4 agreed, and none strongly agreed. The majority of students reported low levels of anxiety regarding assignments, showing greater confidence in their ability to complete them.

“Statement 9: I tend to think that I am not good at English.”

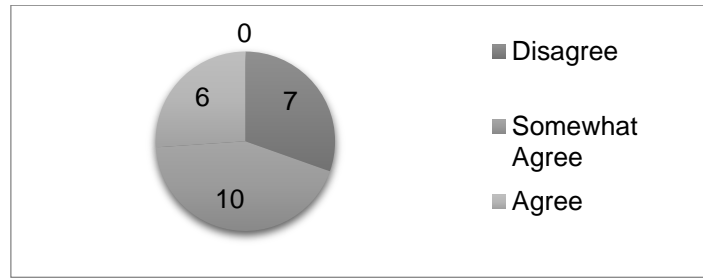


Figure 9. Students’ Self-Perception About English Ability.

Seven students disagreed, 10 somewhat agreed, 6 agreed, and none strongly agreed. This demonstrates that selfdoubt was moderately present, as a number of students lacked confidence in their English ability.

“Statement 10: Anxiety made me not focus on my English lessons.”

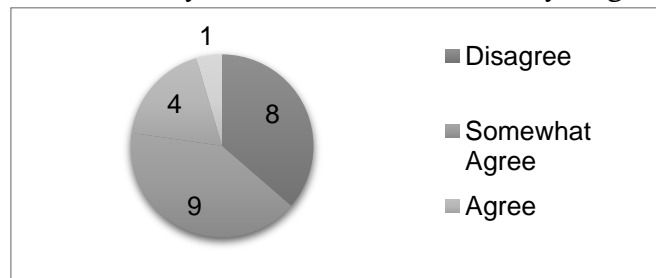


Figure 10. Lack of Focus Due to Anxiety.

Eight students disagreed, nine somewhat agreed, four agreed, and one strongly agreed. The data reveals that anxiety influenced focus for some learners, although the majority were only moderately affected.

“Statement 11: When the teacher delivered the English subject matter, I understood little because I was nervous.”

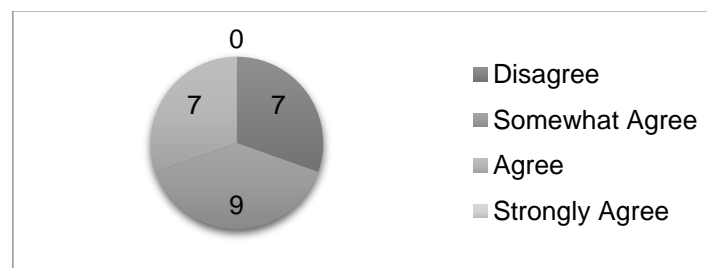


Figure 11. Nervousness Affects Comprehension.

Seven students disagreed, nine somewhat agreed, seven agreed, and none strongly agreed. These results suggest that nervousness interfered with comprehension for some students, though the effect was moderate overall.

“Statement 12: I felt anxious and didn’t understand because the alphabet is different from the way it is pronounced.”

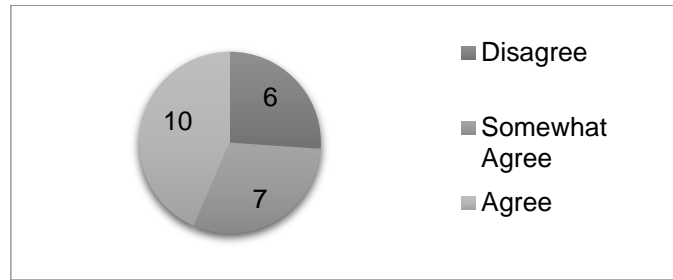


Figure 12. Anxiety Over English Pronunciation.

Six students disagreed, seven somewhat agreed, ten agreed, and none strongly agreed. The majority of students found English pronunciation challenging, and this was a significant source of anxiety.

“Statement 13: To control my anxiety when learning English, I sometimes tap my fingers on the table.”

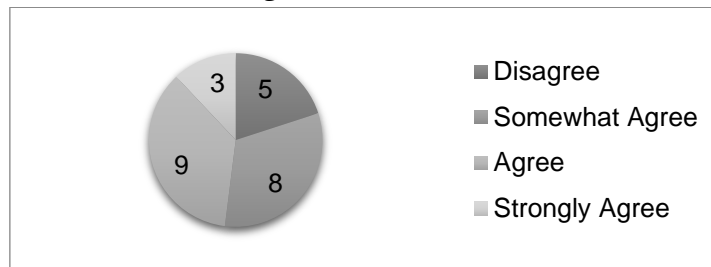


Figure 13. Physical Coping Strategy During English Lessons.

Five students disagreed, eight somewhat agreed, nine agreed, and three strongly agreed. This shows that many students relied on physical coping mechanisms to manage their feelings of anxiety during class.

“Statement 14: To control my anxiety when learning English, I sometimes tap my fingers on the table.”

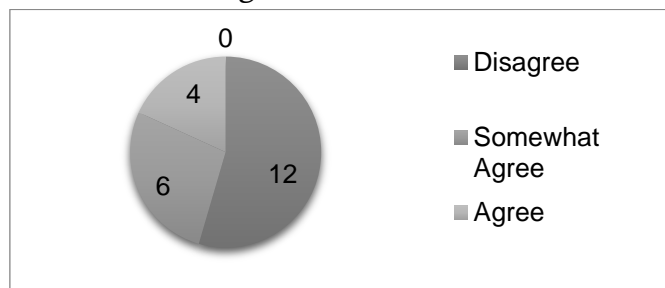


Figure 14. Repetitive Coping Behavior in English Learning.

In this statement, 12 students disagreed, 6 somewhat agreed, 4 agreed, and none strongly agreed. The data suggest that most students did not use this coping strategy consistently.

“Statement 15: Because of anxiety, I felt incapable of taking English lessons.”

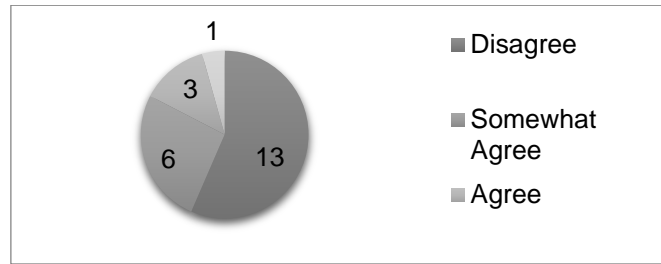


Figure 15. Anxiety Impact on English Learning Confidence.

Thirteen students disagreed, six somewhat agreed, three agreed, and one strongly agreed. These results show that most students did not feel entirely incapable, although some students reported a stronger sense of anxiety affecting their confidence.

“Statement 16: After completing the English exam, I thought I should have focused more on completion.”

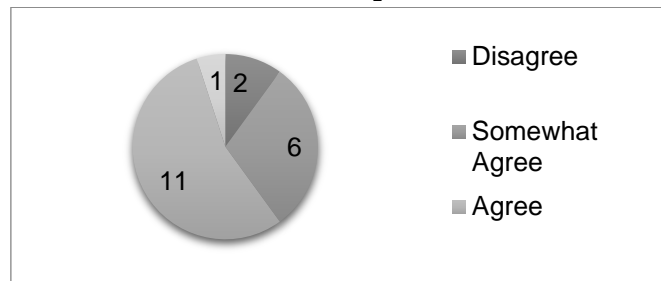


Figure 16. Post-Exam Regret Related to Focus.

Two students disagreed, six somewhat agreed, eleven agreed, and one strongly agreed. Many students felt regret after exams, suggesting that anxiety had interfered with their ability to focus effectively.

The data collected encompass both descriptive and narrative dimensions, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of students' experiences. Specifically, these include: 1. Personal reflections on their emotional responses when speaking English—be it during examinations, classroom interactions, or spontaneous conversations; 2. Anecdotal accounts detailing situations that evoke anxiety, such as fears of making errors, concerns about being ridiculed, or the pressure associated with public speaking; and 3. Students' perspectives on the English learning process, highlighting both the supportive factors that foster comfort and the challenges that contribute to stress. This comprehensive approach ensures a deeper insight into the emotional and cognitive facets of their language acquisition journey.

The findings reveal that although a subset of students did not exhibit elevated anxiety levels, a significant number experienced moderate degrees of concern, apprehension, and diminished confidence in their English language learning journey. These results substantiate the framework proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), which delineates foreign language anxiety as intricately linked to communication apprehension, test-related stress, and the fear of negative evaluation.

The findings of this research reveal that eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar encountered eight distinct forms of anxiety in their English language learning journey. These varied experiences were identified through a comprehensive combination of questionnaires, classroom observations, and open-ended interviews, underscoring nuanced challenges faced by students in mastering a foreign language.

1. Self-Perceived Low Ability – Students experienced a sense of inadequacy in engaging with lessons, resulting in passive participation, hesitancy to communicate, and diminished motivation. This phenomenon mirrors widespread classroom anxiety and is characterized as debilitating, as it obstructs the learning process.
2. Social Anxiety – Many students faced anxiety in social contexts, particularly when participating in class discussions or engaging with teachers and classmates. This apprehension largely stemmed from a fear of negative judgment, as noted by Horwitz et al. (1986). Several students shared that, "Even before the English lesson began, my heart was already pounding," illustrating the intense emotional response associated with these situations.
3. Physical Anxiety – Some students felt nervous before or during lessons. Their bodies showed signs like a racing heart, sweating, shaking, or stomach aches. This is called anticipatory anxiety, which means feeling worried about something that is about to happen.
4. Cognitive Anxiety – Some students felt worried, scared of doing badly, and unsure if they could do well. This is common when people get nervous about tests or worry about what others might think (Horwitz et al., 1986; Sheen, 2008).
5. Behavioral Anxiety – Some students felt nervous and tried to hide it. They might avoid talking, stay quiet, or act like they are busy so others don't see they are scared. Some also held back their feelings or forced a smile to hide their fear. This happens because they are worried about making mistakes or being judged unfairly (Horwitz et al., 1986; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).
6. Situational Anxiety – Some students feel worried or nervous in certain situations, like when the teacher asks a question out of the blue or when they're doing classwork. They might be scared of making mistakes or being embarrassed in front of their friends.
7. Trait Anxiety – Some students feel anxious because of who they are, and this makes them doubt themselves. They often don't believe they can do well in English, which makes it hard for them to pay attention and understand things. This idea is like what Eysenck et al. (2023) explained, that feeling anxious can get in the way of focusing and remembering, and what Krashen (in Sheen, 2008) called the "Affective Filter," which is like a barrier that stops learning when someone feels worried or nervous.
8. Affective Anxiety – When students felt worried or nervous, it was hard for them to understand what they were learning, even if they knew the answers. This was because they got confused with spelling and how to say words, and they felt shy or scared to talk (Saltafossi et al., 2025).

Among the eight categories, Cognitive Anxiety stood out as the most prevalent form among the students.

Discussion

The findings reveal that English learning anxiety among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar is a complex phenomenon, encompassing cognitive, social, behavioral, and emotional dimensions. This aligns with the framework established by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) regarding Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which comprises elements such as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and a fear of negative evaluation.

The widespread presence of Cognitive Anxiety indicates that students' negative self-perceptions significantly undermine their confidence and academic performance. When students are consumed by fears of failure or judgment, their ability to concentrate, assimilate information, and engage fully is markedly diminished. This phenomenon aligns with Krashen's (in Rahman et al., 2019) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that anxiety elevates an emotional barrier, thereby impeding the process of effective language learning.

The manifestation of Physical Anxiety—such as a pounding heart and trembling—and Behavioral Anxiety—like avoidance and silence—reveals that anxiety extends beyond mere cognition, impacting both the body and classroom engagement. These responses align with the findings of MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), who contended that anxiety detrimentally influences an individual's willingness to communicate and overall performance.

It is noteworthy that both Situational Anxiety and Trait Anxiety illuminate the fact that anxiety is not solely elicited by external classroom circumstances but can also originate from enduring personality characteristics. Students possessing trait anxiety often grapple with persistent worry that persists irrespective of the situation, thereby increasing their susceptibility to challenges in language acquisition.

The findings further illuminate the unique landscape of Indonesian EFL learners, who encounter limited opportunities for authentic English practice beyond the classroom. This scarcity of real-world engagement can exacerbate social and affective anxieties, as students grapple with fears of negative evaluation when speaking English in front of peers. Dörnyei & Clément (2001) underscores the vital influence of a supportive classroom environment and proactive teacher encouragement in alleviating these barriers, fostering greater confidence and willingness to communicate.

The research highlights the critical significance of acknowledging and addressing various forms of anxiety within EFL classrooms. Educators are encouraged to implement supportive strategies, including offering constructive feedback, fostering gradual engagement, and cultivating a welcoming, non-threatening environment. Such approaches can empower students to better manage their anxieties and foster increased confidence in their English language learning.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the survey data collected from eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar indicates that levels of anxiety related to learning English are notably elevated, especially during speaking exercises and assessments. Contributing factors encompass limited vocabulary knowledge, apprehension about making errors, previous negative experiences, and the influence of the classroom environment. The results identify communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation as the predominant forms of anxiety, with many students feeling self-conscious or worried about judgment from teachers and peers when speaking English. While students have adopted various coping mechanisms such as self-study, note-taking, and requesting assistance from friends, these strategies tend to be informal and lack structure, leaving many students still struggling to effectively manage their anxiety. Consequently, the pivotal role of educators becomes evident; their encouragement, constructive feedback, and the creation of a nurturing classroom atmosphere are essential in alleviating anxiety and nurturing students' confidence in using English.

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