Overcoming Barriers: Exploring English Learning Anxiety Among 10th-Grade Students at Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo

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Abstract

This study investigates the anxiety experienced by 10th-grade students of Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo Jombang in learning English. The research focuses on five types of anxiety: communication, performance, test, assessment, and comprehension. Using a descriptive quantitative approach, the study highlights significant levels of anxiety among students, including nervousness when speaking English, fear of misunderstanding, and stress during exams. Recommendations are proposed, such as implementing supportive teaching methods, providing psychological interventions, and organizing skill-enhancing programs to mitigate anxiety and improve students' English proficiency.

Keywords: Anxiety, Learning English, High-School Students

1. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a pervasive psychological phenomenon that can significantly affect individuals' performance and well-being (Nieuwenhuys & Oudejans, 2017). In the context of language learning, particularly in acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL), anxiety has emerged as one of the most critical barriers to success. Language learners often experience various forms of anxiety that disrupt their ability to engage with the language, affecting both their motivation and ability to perform (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020). English, being a global lingua franca, has become an essential skill for academic, professional, and personal development. However, for many students, learning English is not a seamless process. The fear of making mistakes, the pressure to perform, and the concern about being evaluated can lead to heightened levels of

anxiety, which negatively impacts their ability to learn and use the language effectively.

At Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo Jombang, Indonesia, a school situated in the rural area of Sumobito, many 10th-grade students face significant anxiety related to learning English. Based on initial observations and informal discussions with students, it became clear that these students often experience nervousness and fear when speaking English in front of their peers. Additionally, a lack of confidence in their language abilities and fear of judgment, especially from teachers and classmates, further contributes to their anxiety. This situation mirrors broader trends observed in educational settings worldwide, where foreign language learners are increasingly reporting higher levels of anxiety, which affects their engagement and academic success (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020).

Anxiety in language learning can be broken down into several types, each of which impacts different aspects of the language learning process. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), language anxiety typically manifests in three primary forms: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension refers to the fear of speaking in a foreign language, which often stems from the fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood. Fear of negative evaluation is the concern that others will judge one's language abilities, leading to feelings of embarrassment and insecurity. Test anxiety, on the other hand, is commonly associated with the fear of failure during assessments, which can hinder students' ability to concentrate and perform at their best (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Research has consistently shown that language anxiety can hinder the acquisition of a second language. Anxiety can affect cognitive processing, making it difficult for learners to concentrate and remember new vocabulary or grammar rules (Chen & Chang, 2017; Young, 1991). Furthermore, anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviors, where students deliberately avoid situations that require them to use the language, further limiting their exposure and practice. In the case of English learners at Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo, the fear of speaking in class, participating in group discussions, or taking exams prevents students from fully engaging in the learning process.

The impact of anxiety is not only limited to language performance but can also influence students' motivation and attitude toward learning. A positive learning environment, characterized by low levels of anxiety, can foster greater engagement and higher motivation, whereas high anxiety levels can lead to feelings of helplessness and reduced motivation (Kuhl et al., 2019; Aida, 1994). Anxiety thus creates a vicious cycle, where students' fear of failure reduces their willingness to participate, which in turn negatively impacts their performance and confidence, reinforcing their anxiety.

At Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo, these issues are compounded by a lack of emotional and psychological support structures for students. Teachers, though highly dedicated, are often not equipped with specific strategies to address the anxiety levels among their students. As a result, students continue to struggle with their language learning process, which negatively affects their academic performance. Therefore,

understanding the specific types and forms of anxiety that students experience is crucial for developing effective educational strategies and interventions that can help reduce anxiety and improve language learning outcomes.

This research aims to address the anxiety issues faced by 10th-grade students at Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo by identifying the types and forms of anxiety they experience while learning English. The study will use a descriptive quantitative approach to gather data from students through questionnaires. By identifying the key sources and manifestations of anxiety, the research seeks to propose targeted strategies that can reduce anxiety and improve the students' learning experience. These strategies may include adjusting teaching methods, incorporating anxiety-reducing interventions, and creating a more supportive classroom environment.

The significance of this study is twofold. First, it will contribute to the understanding of anxiety in language learning by providing insights into the specific challenges faced by students at Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo. Second, it will offer practical recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers to help create a more supportive and effective English language learning environment. Reducing anxiety and boosting students' confidence in using English is essential for improving their language acquisition and overall academic performance.

Furthermore, this study adds to the broader body of research on language learning anxiety, which has primarily focused on high school and university students in urban settings. The specific context of rural schools, such as Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo, presents unique challenges and opportunities for understanding how anxiety manifests in different educational settings. This research will fill the gap in existing literature by examining anxiety among students in a non-urban school, providing a more comprehensive view of the issue.

The importance of addressing anxiety in language learning cannot be overstated, as it has significant implications for both the academic success and emotional well-being of students. By tackling this issue head-on, educators and institutions can help students develop not only their language skills but also the confidence and motivation necessary to succeed in a globalized world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Anxiety in Language Learning

Anxiety in language learning is a psychological state characterized by feelings of tension, nervousness, or fear that disrupt an individual's ability to engage effectively in language-related tasks. It is a complex emotional response that manifests cognitively, behaviorally, and physiologically, often impacting students' focus, participation, and overall performance. Spielberger (2013) defines anxiety as a general sense of unease, frequently without a clear or immediate source, which can significantly impair concentration and productivity in learning environments.

In the context of language learning, anxiety emerges as one of the most significant psychological barriers, directly affecting learners' willingness to communicate and their ability to process and retain new information. Horwitz et al. (1986) described language learning anxiety as a distinct construct stemming from the

uniqueness of language classrooms, where students are frequently exposed to evaluation, peer judgment, and the pressure to perform in a non-native language. This anxiety not only hampers learners' cognitive functioning but also undermines their self-confidence, creating a cycle of avoidance and reduced proficiency (Mahmoud, 2024; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Types of Anxiety in Language Learning

Anxiety in language learning is multifaceted and can be categorized into various types, each affecting different aspects of the learning process. These types of anxiety are interconnected, with one form often exacerbating the others.

1. **Communication Anxiety**

   Communication anxiety arises from the fear of speaking in a foreign language. This anxiety is often linked to concerns about making mistakes, embarrassment, or the possibility of being misunderstood. Learners with high communication anxiety may avoid speaking altogether, limiting their opportunities for practice and improvement (Aghajani & Amanzadeh, 2017). According to Young (1991), communication anxiety is exacerbated when learners are required to speak in front of an audience, participate in group discussions, or engage in spontaneous conversation. This type of anxiety is particularly detrimental because it hinders the development of communicative competence, a critical goal in language learning.

2. **Performance Anxiety**

   Performance anxiety is related to the pressure to perform well in language-related tasks, such as assignments, presentations, and exams. It stems from high expectations, either self-imposed or external, which create stress and fear of failure. According to Vachon Laflamme et al., (2021), performance anxiety is common in students who are perfectionists or who feel the need to meet high standards set by teachers or peers. This anxiety often results in hesitation, reduced participation, and compromised performance, even in tasks the learners are well-prepared for.

3. **Test Anxiety**

   Test anxiety is a specific form of performance anxiety that occurs before or during assessments. It is characterized by apprehension, difficulty concentrating, and fear of poor performance. Salehi and Marefat (2014) noted that test anxiety is a significant factor in academic underachievement, particularly in language learning, where tests often require students to demonstrate proficiency under timed and high-pressure conditions. Test anxiety can also lead to physiological symptoms, such as sweating, rapid heartbeat, or nausea, further impairing students' ability to perform well.

4. **Assessment Anxiety**

Assessment anxiety is related to the fear of being evaluated by teachers, peers, or native speakers. This type of anxiety is rooted in the concern that others will judge the learner's language ability negatively, leading to feelings of inadequacy and shame (Tzoannopoulou, 2016; Young, 1991). Assessment anxiety is particularly prevalent in classroom settings where performance is closely monitored and graded. Alnuzaili and Uddin (2020) argue that assessment anxiety can discourage students from participating in activities that require them to demonstrate their skills, thereby limiting their exposure to valuable learning opportunities.

5. **Comprehension Anxiety**

Comprehension anxiety arises when learners struggle to understand spoken or written language. This difficulty may stem from limited vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, or the fast pace of native speech. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), comprehension anxiety is particularly common among beginners, who may feel overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of new information. Such anxiety can lead to frustration, withdrawal, and a reluctance to engage with challenging materials, further hindering language acquisition.

Relevance to Language Learning

The interplay of these types of anxiety creates significant obstacles for language learners, affecting their cognitive, emotional, and social engagement in the classroom. Research by Horwitz et al. (1986) and subsequent studies have consistently shown that anxiety negatively correlates with language proficiency. Students who experience high levels of anxiety often struggle to develop fluency, accuracy, and confidence in using the target language. Addressing these anxieties is therefore essential for creating effective teaching strategies that support learners' emotional well-being and academic success.

3. METHODS

The research employed a descriptive quantitative approach to examine and classify the types and forms of anxiety experienced by students. A questionnaire served as the primary instrument for data collection. The study involved 28 10th-grade students from Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo Jombang, selected based on their active participation in English classes and willingness to provide honest responses.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements divided into five categories of anxiety: communication, performance, test, assessment, and comprehension. Each category included four statements rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Data collection was conducted during English classes, with clear instructions to ensure accurate responses. Both paper-based and online formats were provided to accommodate student preferences. The collected responses were analyzed to identify patterns and trends in anxiety types, and the findings were compared with prior research to draw meaningful insights and conclusions.

4.   RESULTS

The findings of the study reveal significant levels of anxiety among 10th-grade students at Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo across various categories. In terms of **communication anxiety**, 85.7% of students reported feeling nervous when speaking English, often fearing judgment or ridicule. Furthermore, all students (100%) expressed a fear of being misunderstood, which highlights a lack of confidence in their communication skills. Additionally, 64.3% of students worried about making mistakes, indicating that fear of error plays a crucial role in their reluctance to engage in English conversations.

For **performance anxiety**, the pressure to meet expectations in English tasks was a notable source of stress for 78% of students. Many felt overwhelmed during assignments and presentations, with 64% reporting significant stress in these scenarios. This suggests that the high stakes often associated with academic performance in language learning contribute to students' anxiety levels.

Regarding **test anxiety**, 69% of students admitted to struggling with concentration during exams, pointing to the mental toll that anxiety takes on their focus and cognitive functioning. Moreover, 78% worried about their performance in English exams, reflecting the impact of performance-related pressures on their confidence and preparedness.

Assessment anxiety was also prevalent, with 75% of students fearing negative judgment from native speakers or their peers. This fear of evaluation likely affects their willingness to participate in class or practice their language skills publicly.

Lastly, **comprehension anxiety** was evident, as 69% of students faced challenges understanding fast speech and complex grammar. These difficulties underscore the cognitive barriers that anxiety creates, particularly in processing and comprehending the language in real-time.

Overall, these findings highlight that students often avoid participating in speaking tasks, even when prompted by the teacher, due to fear of making mistakes or being judged by their peers. During group discussions, some students tend to remain silent, leaving the responsibility to others, or they avoid eye contact when teachers ask questions, even when they understand the material. These behaviors underline the pervasive impact of anxiety on students' engagement and confidence in learning English.

5.   DISCUSSION

The findings of this study corroborate previous research that highlights anxiety as a critical barrier to effective language learning. Communication anxiety, identified

as the most prominent issue in this study, aligns with Daymiel et al. (2022), who emphasized that fear of speaking and worry about negative evaluation are among the primary factors of language learning anxiety. The fact that 100% of students in this study reported a fear of being misunderstood echoes findings by Tzoannopoulou (2016), who noted that such fears often stem from a lack of self-confidence and perceived linguistic inadequacy. Similarly, the significant presence of test anxiety, reported by 78% of students, supports the work of Salehi & Marefat (2014), which identified test-related stress as a major component of foreign language anxiety, often linked to the high stakes associated with academic evaluations.

Performance and comprehension anxiety, though slightly less dominant, also play crucial roles. The pressure to meet expectations reported by 78% of students aligns with Aida's (1994) findings that students often experience heightened stress in performance-driven educational settings. Additionally, comprehension anxiety, characterized by difficulties in understanding fast speech and complex grammar, mirrors observations by Alnuzaili and Uddin (2020), who found that such challenges are particularly pronounced in students with limited exposure to native speakers and authentic language use. These comparisons indicate that the experiences of students at Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo are consistent with broader trends in foreign language learning anxiety.

The implications of these findings for English language teaching are significant. First, addressing **communication anxiety** requires creating a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment where students feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment. Teachers can achieve this by encouraging collaborative learning activities, providing positive reinforcement, and gradually exposing students to speaking tasks. Incorporating peer support and scaffolding techniques can also reduce anxiety and foster confidence in communication.

To mitigate **test anxiety**, schools should consider adopting more flexible assessment methods, such as oral presentations, group projects, or portfolio assessments, which can reduce the high-stakes nature of traditional exams. Test preparation workshops focusing on relaxation techniques and effective study habits could further help students manage stress.

Performance anxiety can be addressed by emphasizing progress and effort over perfection. Teachers should set realistic expectations and offer constructive feedback that focuses on individual growth rather than comparison with peers. Integrating role-playing activities and simulations of real-life scenarios can also build students' confidence in using English.

Finally, addressing **comprehension anxiety** involves enhancing students' exposure to authentic language input through multimedia resources, interactive tools, and conversations with native speakers via online platforms. Providing targeted instruction in listening strategies, such as note-taking and summarizing, can help students better process and understand spoken English. Simplifying grammatical explanations and offering contextualized examples can also reduce the cognitive burden of learning complex structures.

The findings emphasize the need for educators to adopt anxiety-reducing strategies tailored to the specific challenges faced by students. By doing so, teachers

can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, enabling students to overcome anxiety and achieve greater success in English language acquisition.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its small sample size of 28 students, which restricts the generalizability of its findings. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data through questionnaires may not fully capture the nuances of students' experiences with anxiety in real classroom settings. Future research could address these limitations by employing qualitative methods, such as interviews or observations, and by involving larger, more diverse samples to provide deeper insights into the complex dynamics of language learning anxiety.

6. CONCLUSION

The study highlights the significant impact of anxiety on students' ability to learn English at Madrasah Aliyah Balongrejo. Among the five types of anxiety examined, **communication anxiety** and **test anxiety** emerged as the most prevalent, with a majority of students reporting nervousness when speaking English and struggling to concentrate during exams. Additionally, **performance anxiety** and **assessment anxiety** were found to hinder students' confidence and participation, while **comprehension anxiety** posed challenges in understanding fast speech and complex grammar.

These findings align with previous research, which emphasizes the detrimental effects of anxiety on language learning, including reduced participation, impaired focus, and lower academic performance. Anxiety limits learners' ability to engage effectively in classroom activities and hinders their progress in developing communicative competence.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted strategies to create a supportive learning environment. These include fostering a non-judgmental atmosphere, incorporating flexible and less stressful assessment methods, and providing psychological support to help students manage stress. Additionally, integrating technology and offering skill-building programs can help students practice English in low-pressure settings, boosting their confidence and proficiency.

Ultimately, understanding and mitigating anxiety in language learning is crucial for improving students' outcomes and fostering a positive educational experience. By implementing anxiety-reducing interventions, educators can enable students to overcome their fears, build confidence, and achieve greater success in mastering the English language.

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