

Foreign Language Anxiety and Its Impact on English Achievement: A Study of Gender Variations in EFL Learners

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Abstract

Anxiety is a prevalent psychological factor that influences the learning process, particularly in language acquisition, where it can shape students' confidence, engagement, and overall performance. In contexts where English is learned as a foreign language, anxiety is often linked to students' ability to navigate language learning challenges, affecting both their success and struggles in mastering the language. Understanding the extent of foreign language anxiety and its specific effects is essential, given its potential impact. This study investigates students' anxiety levels, examines gender differences, and explores the relationship between anxiety and English achievement. A quantitative descriptive survey was conducted with 105 students in Samarinda, Indonesia, using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCA) to measure anxiety and final semester scores to assess achievement. Data analysis using SPSS version 25 revealed that students experienced a high level of foreign language anxiety ($M = 3.4459$), with female students reporting slightly higher anxiety than males. However, the difference was not statistically significant. Correlation analysis showed a weak negative association ($r = -.101$, $p = .306$), suggesting that anxiety had little to no impact on achievement. These findings provide insights into foreign language anxiety in EFL contexts, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to create a more supportive learning environment and enhance language learning experiences.

Keywords: Anxiety, gender, learning achievement, EFL students, English language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is widely recognized as a significant psychological factor that influences the process of learning a new language. It refers to a situation-specific form of anxiety that arises in language learning contexts, typically marked by feelings of nervousness, apprehension, and fear of failure when using a foreign language (Salim et al., 2017; Pan & Zhang, 2021; Wang et al., 2022; Dewaele et al., 2023). Anxiety in language learning stems from a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, it is shaped by learners' self-perception (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2016), cognitive beliefs about their language abilities (Aslan & Thompson, 2018), and the challenges they encounter in mastering the target language (Liu & Wu, 2021). Externally, sociocultural factors also

contribute, such as cultural differences between the learner and the target language community (Yeh & Heng, 2022), disparities in social status between speakers and listeners (Malik et al., 2021), and concerns about losing one's identity when engaging with a new linguistic and cultural environment (Dryden et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the influence of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is particularly pronounced in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where learners have limited exposure to English and few opportunities to practice outside the classroom. Unlike second-language learning environments—where learners are immersed in the language through daily interactions—EFL students often rely solely on formal instruction to develop their English proficiency (Alwasilah, 2013; Rahayu, 2020). This lack of real-world practice can intensify anxiety, as students may feel unprepared or lack confidence in their ability to communicate effectively. In many cases, anxiety creates a self-fulfilling cycle: students avoid speaking for fear of making mistakes, which limits their language development and further reinforces their anxiety (Lou & Noels, 2020; Hidayat et al., 2022; Zulfikar, 2023). Anxious learners often avoid participating in class, second-guess their responses, and struggle to concentrate during listening and reading tasks. This emotional interference can disrupt comprehension and information retention, leading to lower academic performance. Over time, persistent anxiety could also diminish learners' motivation and self-efficacy, further hindering their progress in acquiring English (Wu et al., 2022).

Considering the varied effects of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), it is essential to explore how individual differences—particularly gender—shape learners' emotional responses in language learning contexts. Gender is frequently associated with variations in how anxiety is experienced, expressed, and managed (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Farhane-Medina et al., 2022). These variations are shaped by emotional, social, and cultural dynamics, including societal expectations, emotional expression norms, and classroom interaction patterns (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017; Dewaele et al., 2023; Myhre et al., 2023). For example, female learners are often socialized to be more self-critical and emotionally expressive, which may contribute to their tendency to experience or report higher levels of anxiety in academic settings (Ahmadi-Azad, 2015; Cakici, 2016). In contrast, male learners may be more inclined to suppress or underreport anxiety due to social norms that discourage emotional vulnerability (Jebreil et al., 2015; Rasool et al., 2023). These gendered patterns influence how students respond to the demands of using a foreign language, particularly in high-pressure situations such as speaking tasks and examinations, where the fear of negative evaluation is heightened (Denies et al., 2022).

Research on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has grown substantially, with increasing attention given to its emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions in foreign language learning contexts. FLA is widely acknowledged as a significant affective factor influencing learners' performance, motivation, and classroom participation. However, studies reveal that the relationship between FLA and language outcomes is often complex, shaped by multiple variables, including emotional states, learner beliefs, learning environments, and individual differences such as gender. Dewaele et al. (2023) found that FLA had the most substantial negative impact on English performance compared to enjoyment and boredom, emphasizing the need to prioritize anxiety reduction in EFL classrooms. Similarly, Pan and Zhang (2021) reported that FLA remains stable over time and is influenced by motivation and personality traits, particularly among less confident

learners. [Aguila and Harjanto \(2016\)](#) showed that FLA is inversely related to speaking performance, although in some cases, it can enhance motivation when managed well. [Hidayat et al. \(2022\)](#) found that students felt less anxious using synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), suggesting that digital tools can help reduce speaking anxiety. [Lou and Noels \(2020\)](#) highlighted that learners with fixed language mindsets experienced more anxiety and avoidance, while growth mindsets encouraged resilience and communication. Lastly, [Cakici \(2016\)](#) confirmed a negative correlation between FLA and language achievement and found that female students reported higher anxiety levels, showing that gender can be a contributing factor in FLA.

While foreign language anxiety has been widely recognized as a crucial factor influencing language learning, its manifestation and impact can vary across different learner groups and educational contexts. Despite growing attention to emotional variables in language acquisition, there remains limited research examining how FLCA interacts with gender and academic performance in underrepresented EFL contexts. Additionally, many existing studies focus on broader emotional constructs or single-skill areas, leaving a gap in understanding how general classroom anxiety correlates with overall English achievement. Addressing these gaps, the present study aims to investigate the level of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety among EFL students, examine gender-based differences in anxiety levels, and explore the relationship between anxiety and students' English achievement. By doing so, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of learner affective factors and offers context-specific insights that may inform more targeted pedagogical strategies in EFL classrooms.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between foreign language anxiety and English language achievement among junior high school students. A correlational approach was deemed appropriate, allowing researchers to systematically measure and analyze the strength and direction of relationships between variables without manipulating them ([Hodge, 2020](#)). The study involved 105 students from Junior High School in Samarinda, Indonesia, aged 13 to 15 years, comprising 49 males and 56 females. A convenience sampling technique was employed, with participants selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study at the time of data collection ([Etikan et al., 2016](#)). All students provided informed consent before participation, ensuring that ethical principles such as voluntary participation and respect for participant rights were upheld throughout the research process ([Arellano et al., 2023](#)).

Data were collected using two instruments. The first instrument was students' academic achievement reports, which included their final English scores obtained from school-standardized assessments administered throughout the semester. These assessments evaluated all four language skills and consisted of regular classroom tests, a midterm exam, and a final semester exam. The second instrument was the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a 33-item questionnaire developed initially by [Horwitz et al. \(1986\)](#). A certified translator officially translated the scale into Bahasa Indonesia and subsequently reviewed it by two university professors to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence.

Table 1. The Criteria of Students' Anxiety Levels (Horwitz et al.,1986)

Mean Score Range	Interpretation
1.00 – 1.79	No anxiety or very little anxiety
1.80 – 2.59	Little anxiety
2.60 – 3.39	Moderate anxiety
3.40 – 4.19	High Anxiety
4.20 – 5.00	Very high anxiety

To verify the reliability of the adapted instrument, a pilot test was conducted with 30 students. The analysis produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.90, indicating high internal consistency and supporting the instrument's suitability for the main study (Taber, 2017). Furthermore, Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. To validate the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) construct, factor analysis was performed using maximum likelihood extraction with direct noblemen rotation, which is suitable when underlying factors are assumed to be correlated.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Students' foreign language classroom anxiety level

This study examines whether students' foreign language anxiety is related to their English achievement across different genders. The descriptive analysis results revealed that the mean anxiety score of the 105 respondents was 3.4459, with scores ranging from 3.41 to 4.20 (see Table 3). Based on the predetermined classification scale, this range indicates that the students generally experienced a high level of foreign language anxiety.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the students' anxiety level

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev	Variance
Learning Anxiety	105	3.42	1.58	5.00	3.4459	.68139	.464

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 indicate that the mean score of students' foreign language anxiety was 3.4459, which falls within the high anxiety category based on the classification provided in Table 1. The scores ranged from 1.58 to 5.00, reflecting considerable variation in anxiety levels among the 105 participants. A standard deviation of 0.681 and a variance of 0.464 suggest a moderate spread around the mean, indicating that while most students experienced high levels of anxiety, individual responses varied. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted across various educational levels. Bhattarachaiyakorn and Phettakua (2023) reported high anxiety levels among university students, often associated with language learning beliefs, test-related stress, and concerns about grammar. Similar trends have been observed among secondary school students. Studies by Sinaga et al. (2020), Madzlan et al. (2020), and Archbell and Coplan (2022) highlighted that students frequently experience anxiety when speaking in front of others or being evaluated by teachers. Many avoid using English due to its perceived complexity and differences from their native language. Likewise, Syahbani and Apoko (2023) and Zulfikar (2023) found that the fear of making mistakes and being judged contributes to students'

ongoing reliance on their mother tongue, reinforcing anxiety in English learning environments.

The difference between male and female students' foreign language anxiety

Table 3 presents the results of the independent t-test, which revealed no significant difference in foreign language anxiety between female students ($M = 50.84$, $SD = 10.04$) and male students ($M = 49.04$, $SD = 9.98$); $t(103) = -0.921$, $p = .359$. This result indicates that gender is not a significant factor influencing students' levels of anxiety in learning a foreign language.

Table 3. The result of the independent t-test for foreign language anxiety across gender

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	T	p
Anxiety	Males	49	49.04	10.04	103	-.921	.359
Test	Females	56	50.84	9.98			

A considerable amount of research has explored the relationship between gender and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA). Several studies support the findings of the present research, such as those by Bakhtyari and Kassim (2022), Katemba (2013), Nurhaeni (2019), and Tan and Xie (2020), which suggest that although female students often report slightly higher levels of FLCA, the difference is not statistically significant. The absence of a substantial gender difference in this study may be attributed to several preexisting factors. One possible explanation is the method of instruction used by the language teacher, which may have created a balanced learning environment for both male and female students. Additionally, both genders may have been exposed to similar learning experiences and strategies, leading to comparable perceptions and levels of anxiety, as noted by Nurhaeni (2019). Wahyuddin et al. (2022) further emphasized that learners' beliefs about language learning can also be a source of anxiety. When students perceive language learning as inherently difficult, such beliefs may contribute to heightened anxiety regardless of gender.

The relationship between students' FLA and English achievement

The final objective of this study was to examine whether a significant correlation exists between students' foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and their English achievement. This relationship was analyzed using a bivariate Pearson correlation, as shown in Table 4. The results revealed a negative correlation ($r = -0.101$), indicating a very weak inverse relationship between anxiety and achievement. In other words, higher anxiety levels were slightly associated with lower English scores. However, the correlation was not statistically significant at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level, as evidenced by the p-value of 0.306, which exceeds the threshold for significance. These findings suggest that while anxiety may have some influence, it does not exert a meaningful impact on students' English achievement in this context.

Table 4. Correlation between anxiety and achievement

		FLCA	English Achievement
FLCA	Pearson Correlation	1	-.101
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.306
	N	105	105

English Achievement	Pearson Correlation	-.101	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.306	
	N	105	105

The absence of a significant correlation between students' foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) and their English achievement indicates that anxiety does not play an essential role in determining academic outcomes for this group of learners. Other factors, such as motivation, instructional methods, and task types, impact language achievement significantly. This finding confirms that although anxiety influences language learning to some extent, its overall effect in this context is limited. Similar patterns have been observed in other areas of language performance, including speaking achievement (Putra et al., 2023) and willingness to communicate (Zhou et al., 2020; Bai, 2023), where anxiety shows minimal influence. However, contrasting evidence from other studies reports a strong negative correlation between FLCA and English achievement. For instance, Tan and Xie (2020) found that higher anxiety levels significantly corresponded with lower academic performance among college students. Likewise, Cakici (2016) and Hu et al. (2021) reported statistically significant inverse relationships between anxiety and English achievement. In contrast, Katemba (2013) found no meaningful correlation, supporting the results of the current study. These discrepancies show that the relationship between anxiety and achievement is not universal and depends on several influencing variables. Individual learner differences—such as motivation, interest, self-confidence, and personality traits—directly affect performance, regardless of anxiety levels (Stankov et al., 2012; Bensalem & Thompson, 2021). Furthermore, instructional factors, including teacher support and classroom environment, help reduce the negative impact of anxiety on learning (Li et al., 2020; Tian, 2022; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021). Cultural factors also shape how learners perceive and respond to anxiety, influencing its role in language learning success (Almesaar, 2022; Dryden et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study explored Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) among 8th-grade students and its relationship with gender and English achievement. The findings revealed that students experienced high levels of FLCA, indicating notable anxiety when learning English as a foreign language. Although gender was included as a key variable, there was no statistically significant difference in anxiety levels between male and female students. However, female students reported slightly higher anxiety than their male counterparts. Regarding academic performance, a weak negative correlation was found between FLCA and English achievement, suggesting that while higher anxiety may slightly hinder performance, it is not a strong predictor of students' academic outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of addressing anxiety in language classrooms to reduce its impact and create a more supportive learning environment. While a gender-specific approach may not be necessary, educators should remain attentive to individual learner differences, particularly among students who report higher anxiety levels. Implementing classroom strategies to alleviate anxiety could improve learning experiences and potentially enhance students' English achievement.

Furthermore, this study focused solely on FLCA and English achievement without accounting for other psychological or cognitive variables that may also influence academic outcomes. Given the weak correlation observed, anxiety alone is unlikely to predict achievement strongly. Therefore, future research should examine the interactions between FLCA and other factors, such as motivation, instructional methods, cultural background, and classroom environment. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods could offer more profound insight into students' personal experiences with anxiety, enriching our understanding of how it influences language learning.

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