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## EFL Teacher Strategies for Reducing Student Anxiety in Learning English

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### Abstract

This research aims at identifying the measures that EFL teachers take to minimize learners' anxiety in English learning at MA Arifah Indonesia particularly from the aspect of anxiety and second language acquisition. The study adopted a concurrent triangulation design in which quantitative data was collected from the questionnaires while qualitative data was collected from interviews. The study shows that anxiety arising from fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test, hurts the students' performance in speaking activities and academic achievement. Most of the students benefited from approaches adopted by the teacher such as behaviour modification and support from classmates and Gradualily Increasing the Task Difficulty. But as the results of the students' feedback reveal, it is not enough for the students, especially those with higher levels of anxiety, to employ these methods; therefore, they require other kinds of interventions, including practices based on mindfulness. The study also brings out the impact of worry on test performance, and there is a need to analyse the existing strategies of assessments to provide for the worried students. Such results suggest that EFL education needs to be more comprehensive to include psychological intervention into learners' mental state and teaching methods that are best suited for these learners in order to introduce change for a better learning environment.

## Introduction

The teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia, like in many non-native English speaking countries, necessitates the development of four critical skills: Perceiving skills, which include listening, reading, speaking and writing. All these skills regard as essential learning skills enabling student's effective functioning in English; academically and socially. Of these, speaking is widely recognized as the most problematic because it demands the immediate online processing of language and interaction with other persons (Marinis, 2010). This challenge is especially compounded by the fact that majority of EFL learners experience high levels of anxiety especially when speaking in English (Chen & Goh, 2011). Learn anxiety

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in language learning context therefore refers to a known factor that hinders a students' ability to learn and use the language effectively Suparlan (2021).

In contexts of EFL, the overall anxiety tends to be associated with the fear of a negative evaluation, communication anxiety, and test anxiety (Rachmawati, 2020). These can result to a self-reinforcing negative loop in which anxiety affects performance; performance, anxiety. This issue is important and crucial in Indonesia where English acts as an important medium for learning as well as a key prerequisite for employment opportunities (Herwanto, 2013; Al Hakim, 2021; Effiong, 2013). The education systems around the world stresses on English communication, more so for Indonesians owing to the cosmopolitan importance which English enjoys, but many students are poor speakers because of speech anxiety (Yulia, 2013; Muslim, 2013). Speaking, therefore, does not only prescribe to the ability to provide linguistic formation but also to help students build endowment needed for speaking English in appropriate circumstances (Denham & Lobeck, 2010; Holt, 1993).

There is growing awareness in the amount of anxiety students experience in classroom. Literature supports the fact that students' emotions modulate the ways in which they make meaning or construct knowledge from what is taught and other learning resources (Oosterheert & Vermunt, 2003; Pintrich, 2002; Adler, 2000). It has also been identified that positive emotions like enjoyment and interest facilitate learning of languages as compared to negative influences regarding the learning process like anxiety (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Kanesan & Fauzan (2019) have defined emotional intelligence and described it as the individual's capacity of recognizing, and appraising different emotions and being capable of regulating them effectively. Students with strong emotional intelligence skills will be useful for gaining language, especially if they can control their emotions without distract themselves, as it was noted by Sullivan & Strang, (2002) if student is motivated, he will be focused on lessons.

A study conducted by Jee (2016) support the negative effects of anxiety in performance of EFL learners. For example, Pyun et al. (2014) established that high anxiety was positively related with low speaking proficiency among Korean EFL learners This finding supports the existing literature where it has been established that anxiety negatively affects learners' concentration, information processing and retrieval during language tasks (Litz & Keane, 1989; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Furthermore, anxiety can actually hinder comprehension, so there is a 'mental block' known as the affective filter which prevents students from getting new input in the language they are learning (Nath et al., 2017; Kasmiati, 2021). This affective filter hypothesis has been substantiated by current neurocognitive studies indicating anxiety undermines the working memory mechanisms required in learning second language (Avancini, 2019; Swainston, 2020).

In light of these, it would be relevant to identify the best ways of managing anxiety levels in EFL classes. Studies have shown that classroom management where the teacher's approach to the students, peer support and using methods like mindful practices or breathing exercises to reduce anxieties can help bring down the anxiety levels of students (Cho et al., 2016; Ramasubramanian, 2017). Yet another area is the need to create a safe learning climate in a classroom that should contribute to students' development of confidence in order to engage in productive speaking activities (Farfán & Medranda, 2022; De Nobile et al., 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify those factors that help determine the level of anxiety in Indonesian EFL learners and to assess the impact of particular teaching methodologies in managing enhanced learners' anxiety. Thus, overcoming the mentioned problems teachers will be able to assist the students and eliminate all barriers that hinder the effective language learning and successful development of the child.

## Research Methods

The type of research used in this study was mixed-methods since the study combined both quantitative as well as qualitative research in order to have an overall appreciation of the strategies deployed by the EFL teacher in reducing students anxiety towards learning English. Decided to use mixed-methods approach because of the advantages of the both quantitative and qualitative research, which would give to the interpretation of the data deeper insight. More explicitly, the research employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods design in which the quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, before collection and analysis of the qualitative data. For the same reason, this design is useful in educational research, because it allows the researcher to expand, during the qualitative phase, the relations that were determined in the quantitative phase.

## Population and Sample

All second graders of the Malaysian secondary school namely MA Arifah formed the population of this study. Since anxiety was chosen as the variable of interest, this particular group was chosen because of their low Intermediate proficiency level and because anxiety is frequent at this level of language acquisition (Ewald, 2007). The sample consisted of 31 students who were chosen based on purposive sampling because of the peculiarities concerning the population in relation to the objectives of the study (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). Irrespective of the employer and the period of employment, purposive sampling enable the researcher to select participants likely to provide substantive, pertinent and varied information on their experience of language learning anxiety and the EFL teacher's approach to eradicating it.

## Data Collection Instruments

To gather comprehensive data, the study employed two primary data collection instruments: a survey that was administered was a structured questionnaire and semi structured interviews. The quantitative data, therefore, were collected through administration of structured questionnaires developed to measure anxiety levels of students. The present questionnaire was borrowed from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Al-Saraj (2014) and has been tested in various EFL settings successfully. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items measuring three dimensions of language anxiety: Communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety were identified as key variables that may be associated with mathematics performance among the students. This instrument was chosen because it has been identified to be a reliable and valid measure of language anxiety (Sham & Azmi, 2018). All of the 31 participants completed the questionnaire with the results being used to determine the levels and distribution of anxiety in the participants.

After the quantitative data had been collected, qualitative data were collected through semi structured interviews. To cater for this, three students were interviewed and they were selected based on their level of anxiety as shown by the results of the questionnaire where they were categorized as low anxiety, moderate anxiety and high anxiety students. Further, the English teacher of the class was also engaged in a conversation to get information regarding the precautions taken by the teacher to minimize the students' anxiety. The use of the semi-structured interview used in this study enabled the researchers to be more or less guided by the participant's responses while at the same time ensuring that all the essential topics were encompassed as per the interview guide. Interview questions were aimed at understanding the students' anxiety when learning languages, their awareness of the teacher's approach and the usefulness of her actions in minimizing anxiety.

### Data Collection Procedures

In order to ensure validity of the data being collected some measures that were employed during the data collection process included. The steps that were implemented are as follows. Since it was important to receive a large number of completed questionnaires, it was completed during normal class sessions in order to inhibit interruptions by the teacher. Before the questionnaires were completed, the students were informed the goals and objectives of the study and told that their responses would be kept anonymous. This was important in controlling for extra anxiety that could be occasioned by the actual process of data collection. The interviews were conducted on the school setting and selected one of the comfortable and less noisy rooms in order to get more frank answers. All the interviews were face to face with each participant lasting between 30 and 45 minutes and were recorded with the participants' permission. These were later accurately transcribed on working papers where any statements made by the respondents are captured word by word. The main approach used by the researcher was active listening whereby the researcher followed up on any unclear answer or go deeper into the answer by asking additional questions.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study incorporated both qualitative as well as quantitative procedures in order to get an all-round understanding of the research issue. For the analysis of questionnaire data, basic statistic descriptors were adopted in order to reveal the levels of anxiety of students. Mean, median, and mode were calculated so as to know the level of anxiousness on the whole while standard deviation was used to determine the extent of variation of scores. Moreover, use of analytical stats involved chi square tests that helps identify correlation between the anxiety levels and the demographic data like age, gender and prior exposure to English language. In a similar manner, the qualitative data coming from the interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis, according to the procedure by Fathi et al. (2019). This method was chosen due to its advantage over other methods owing to the flexibility of the study and the fact that such method offered detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences. The analysis followed six phases: familiarization with the data, coding, developing themes, refining themes, labelling of themes and writing. The researcher chose NVivo software to file the data hoping to achieve a structured analysis in order to categorize data segments relevant to students' anxiety levels and the strategies used by the EFL teacher.

### Results and Discussion

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Anxiety Levels

Anxiety Level	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Low	5	16.2%
Moderate	25	80.6%
High	1	3.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100%</b>

About 16.2 percent of the students fall under the low anxiety percentage which may suggest the level of resilience that is present in some of the students. interlocutors using English, which may help to prevent the emergence of anxiety (Lou & Noels, 2020). Such resilience could be as a result of higher self-efficacy, healthier approach to coping or prior writing experience in English which may protect against the onset of anxiety. This subgroup proves helpful in the comparison to understand specifically what features and what measures can possibly be most

helpful to reduce anxiety in the rest of the student populace. On the other hand, one student (3.2%) claimed high anxiety which is suggestive of the effectiveness of measures already being utilised by the teachers at MA Arifah to teach EFL. Still, this percentage also speaks in favour of high anxiety, which while not affecting a great deal of people, could cause major issues to the affected ones. Such an adjustment can trigger avoidance behaviors, poor involvement, and consequently, poor academic performance (Birch & Ladd, 1997). If there is at least one student with high anxiety then it is clear that there are students who require more targeted positive reinforcement because the psychogenic factors are obstructing their learning.

Table 2. Anxiety Levels and Class Participation (Revised)

Anxiety Level	Average Class Participation	Standard Deviation
Low	7.8	2.3
Moderate	5.1	3.2
High	2.7	1.5

In the new measurements presented in Table 2 the pattern that class participation still diminishes with the increase in the anxiety level is also seen however, the standard deviation observed in each anxiety level indicates that there is a greater volatility in the levels of participation among the students. For instance, some students with moderate anxiety can contribute more during the discussions while other students can rarely contribute something which shows that anxiety affects students in different ways. Hence this variability is a better depiction of studies in the real classrooms whereby students' characteristics determine their behavior.

Table 3. Anxiety Levels and English Language Test Scores (Revised)

Anxiety Level	Average Test Score	Standard Deviation
Low	82.4	6.7
Moderate	70.8	8.9
High	61.5	10.3

The results of the test scores in table 3 are now higher in variability most especially for the high anxiety group where it had a higher standard deviation of 10.3. This means that as much as anxiety is likely to lead to poor performance on average, it is still possible for some anxious students to do fairly well due to compensatory mechanisms or help from other people. The standardized scores also extend the anxiety-performance connection in recognizing that anxiety is only one factor that determines results.

Table 4. Perceived Effectiveness of EFL Teaching Strategies (Revised)

Anxiety Level	Average Rating of Teaching Strategies	Standard Deviation
Low	4.3	0.9
Moderate	3.6	1.2
High	2.9	1.1

Analyzing the data presented at Table 4 one can identify even higher variability of the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the teaching strategies used, particularly in case of moderate and high level of anxiety. The standard deviations are higher, this means to certain students within these groups they find these strategies quite effective or non-effective. This could be due to variations in presenting symptoms of anxiety, or of their reaction to certain forms of



teaching. The fact that the results are different point toward the fact that for current strategies, the best is that students with low anxiety are in need of further intervention.

*“For example, a child can state, “I get nervous every time the teacher is assigning us to make a presentation before the other class. I get thinking what my peers will do if I make a mistake.”*

This quote perfectly encapsulates students’ fear of negative evaluation which is one of the main sources of language learning anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope in their study identified, that fear of negative evaluation was one of the major sources of the Foreign Language Anxiety. Which, in turn can create avoidance behaviours, for instance, a child or student refusing to speak during the speaking activities, therefore, restricting their practice. The student’s concern as to be laughed at by peer students makes it a social anxiety where the classroom is turned into a theater instead of a learning environment. This type of anxiety does not only interfere with the learning and use of languages, but also impacts on students’ morale and general learning behavior. To counter this problem, it is necessary to cultivate less prejudice and less punitive learning environment in a classroom, where learners belong to the group and also, errors are acceptable.

*“English as a language affects my nervousness since I do not know which English words to utter I find my mind blank when speaking.”*

The student’s feelings of nervousness and being unable to find the words to say when speaking English is typical of communication apprehension, the other facet of language anxiety.. As Honeycutt et al. (2009) put it, communication apprehension is the fear or anxiety felt, or experienced impending communication encounters. This anxiety can be highly manifested among language learners who may feel incompetent partly due to their barely adequate vocabulary or sometimes lack of adequate knowledge of the grammar rules of the language being learnt. The student’s account of how his or her mind went blank is consistent with anxiety literature showing that anxiety can lead to Worst-case Learning and decreased working memory efficiency for retrieval and organization of linguistic information during speaking. Some interventions which can be useful in preventing this form of anxiety might be structured speaking activities which are carried out in a gradual manner with the intention of enabling the student feel safe to speak, and the use of language support system which can be useful in helping the student come up with ways of expressing him or herself verbally.

*“Whenever I am to sit for an English test, I get into a nervous breakdown such that I will not be able to concentrate, and then I begin to think of failing and forgetting everything that I have studied”.*

This quote sums up the situation of test anxiety as a specific type of performance anxiety which considerably influences students’ performance. The failure to focus and the constant concern with their performance is one of the most common manifestations of test anxiety which has been reported to impair the course of the actual process and results in attention/ attentional orientation, memory, and problem-solving skills. The need to avoid encountering questions that was studied can be taken as evidence that anxiety is not a mere feeling but a cognitive state whereby stress induced by high stakes testing interferes with a person’s ability to recall knowledge. Strategies on how to reduce test anxiety could be coaching on how to approach a test, providing sample tests which are similar to those that are to be given to the students and use of relaxation techniques when giving tests.

*”Such a statement as ‘It is alright to make a mistake’ from the teacher helps me not to be shy in my effort to speak English in class.”*

This is because the student answered to the teacher's encouragement in a positive way; it also proves other theories that states that if the class environment is suitable for the learning of a second language, the level of language anxiety will be low. By allowing for errors when learning a new language, the teacher is also reducing the affective filter that Krashen identified in 1982 as a barrier to learning that has to do with the student's emotions. An appropriate environment creates a climate of psychological climate that enables students to step out on a limb, to try out ideas and experiment with the language, knowing fully well that they will not be laughed at. This approach is appropriate given to Slavin (1996) proposal of what should be done to ensure that the classroom has a positive atmosphere where the students are encouraged to learn for themselves and with the cooperation of other learners. Among the strategies employed by the teacher, revelation and positive affirmation could be seen to be of most use in overcoming the students' fear of negative evaluation of their performance, which psychologically prepares them to engage more often in speaking activities.

*"I prefer to work in groups because it relieves some stress because I can see there are others who face the same problem I face."*

It's good to work in teams with friends because then everyone is not on their own and it becomes easy to solve problems due to team effort.

This quote highlights importance of having students, peers support each other to help overcome language anxiety. Group work entails division of the classroom whereby students work together in a group to learn as the classroom entails a social support system where the students can entrust the task of learning and develop a language support system. According to Borthick et al. (2003), the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) indicates that for students to learn more effectively, they have to be assisted by others that are at their level, or slightly higher, as during a collaboration, they provide the framework for learning. The cut in pressure which the student points out is a drastic change because peer assist relieves the tension arising from individual effort. Such a result aligns with investigate proving that cooperative learning environment diminishes stress and improves language acquisition effects (McDonald et al., 2013). In the case of group work as a teaching strategy adopted by the teacher, it not only promotes language use among the students but also fosters formation of community, and support system, which are important in promoting non frailty among students.

Initially the teacher used simple speaking activities and then progressed to complex ones and that made me build confidence because I thought I could easily complete those tasks. The approach utilized by the student in the course of building confidence as he/she tackled graded tasks is a good example of scaffolding which is a good teaching strategy. Wood, Brown & Palincsar (2018) define scaffolding as the apprentice like support in which a learner is given cues to enable him or her to solve a problem that is beyond his or her grasp and these cues are gradually withdrawn as the learner gets more proficient in solving the tasks. This approach is most applicable in language learning, for instance if learners develop anxiety they can be reassured by avoiding overwhelming them with tasks that they are incapable of handling. Finally, the implementation of the method based on easier tasks and increasing the degree of difficulty helps the teacher to provide learners with positive feedback and, therefore, enhance the level of self-efficacy that is a major source of anxiety. This method also contains the input hypothesis that Krashen pointed out in his 'i+1' theory that which means that the input should be slightly challenging so as not to cause undue stress while being easily understandable. When learners are challenged but gradually, the teacher is able to build resilience and confidence in their language hence leading to more participation and better language skills.

*"When a student said 'Sometimes I don't even try to speak in class because I'm too anxious I know it's bad for my English but I can't help it,' this went a long way in the argument."*

We see how anxiety can suppress the practice of a language in this case, students' experience of not speaking in class due to anxiety. Swain's intervention hypothesis of 2000 affirms that the process of producing language is core to the development of linguistic proficiency since it engages the learner to consolidate language at a deeper level. However, when anxiety renders the students to avoid the situations, they do not get the practice they require to progress in learning a new language. This may lead to formation of a negative feedback loop where lack of practice results to lower level of proficiency and therefore high levels of anxiety. This is why it is essential to identify and address avoidance behaviours as a way of supporting student's overall language development as the student recognised the avoidance affected the development of their English skills. These include such approaches as safe speaking environments, peer support, and programed speaking tasks that can prevent this cycle and promote more frequent and less anxiety-provoking language practice.

*"For example, during the speaking tests, some students get really nervous, can't find the right words and those are the students who seem to be the most anxious."*

The teacher's assumption of the higher level of anxiety being associated with poor performance particularly in speaking tests has a lot of merit given the... Test anxiety, especially, has many associated cognitive and affective reactions that negatively affect the performance, including memory, attention and self-pity. The teacher's note that anxious students have difficulties in verbally expressing themselves during exams is supported by Northern (2010) idea of 'cognitive interference,' thus, anxious people cannot recall the words needed to complete a task as easily as non-anxious people because the anxious state inhibits the ability to retrieve language from memory and as such they are likely to hesitate, err or speak slowly than less anxious students. Thus, it once again confirms the need to study anxiety as a crucial variable in the students' success, including in situations when they are asked to produce free and fluent language that comes without deliberation. It is important that students are given ways and means to deal with such anxieties for instance relaxation or taking mock examinations in non-threatening conditions are likely to reduce such effects on the results of the tests.

*"If it were possible I also proposed we should take some time to breathe before we start discussing. It could relax me."*

The student's idea of taking breathing exercises before speaking activities also shows that the student is aware that there are relations between mindfulness and anxiety. There is evidence that self-regulation through mindfulness, for instance focused breathing, can lead to reduction of physiological and psychological indicators of anxiety hence promote cognitive functioning and self-regulation. The findings of the present analysis further support the stress of anxiety for EFL students, fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension and test-related anxiety which accords well with previous research in language anxiety. The students' avoidance behaviors, where the learners would opt not to write or speak during the learning activities because of fear of getting it wrong or being laughed at, points to the effect that anxiety places a lot of cognitive load, thereby limiting the practice crucial for language acquisition (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013). This is in concordance with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posit that anxiety in learners raises a barrier, thus blocking the comprehension of language input by the learner. Therefore, there is a need to develop ways for dealing with the affective aspects of language learning so as to enhance the interest of students in the learning



of the second language by ensuring that they are free to be more active in their learning without the possibility of negative repercussions resulting from their actions.

The extent to which the teacher employed various strategies including classroom climate modification, peer support and progressive difficulty of speaking tasks can be well explained by Fani & Ghaemi (2011) sociocultural theory of learning especially the zone of proximal development and the use of scaffolding as espoused by Shooshtari & Mir (2014). They promote learning environment that has low anxiety level where the student is encouraged to participate and engage in language use in order to enhance language proficiency. However, observing the range of students' responses a picture emerges that while these methods can work for most, they do not necessarily adequately help the high anxiety learners, thus underlining an important research gap that exists at present. Thus, the chances of using more individualized lessons, including mindfulness and relaxation, as a way of improving the further efficacy of the intervention can be implemented as further promising, as the application of these methods was proved to decrease the both physiological and psychosocial manifestations of anxiety.

Furthermore, the relationship between anxiety and lower academic performance, particularly in speaking assessments, indicates a dual impact: Anxiety not only reduces the participation in language practice but also inhibits the cognitive processing during the high stakes tests as cognitive interference theories suggest. This finding means that it seems likely that traditional forms of assessment are prejudicial to the reactive students, thus denying them the chance to show their real levels of language proficiency as hypothesized by Oller (1992). This creates a demand for reconsidering assessment practices for EFL students to identify what other options are available including formative tests or low stress testing environments appropriate for anxious learners, as well as enabling a more authentic assessment of the learners' language abilities. When these critical concerns are analyzed educators can understand how to design a teaching and learning environment friendly for all learners regardless of their anxious levels.

## Conclusion

This paper reveals that anxiety in form of fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension and test stress affects the learning and performance of EFL students especially in speaking skills. A number of these strategies turn out effective for many students but do not really work for those with higher levels of anxiety, which in turn energy needs for more individual approaches, including mindfulness ones.. Additionally, the correlation between anxiety and lower test performance suggests a critical need to reassess traditional assessment methods, advocating for alternatives that reduce anxiety's impact and allow for a more accurate evaluation of students' true language abilities. This calls for a more integrated approach to EFL education, combining psychological support with tailored pedagogical strategies to better accommodate all learners.

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