

Exploring the Levels and Dimensions of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in English Classrooms: A Study on Vocational High School Students

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Abstract: This study explores the levels and dimensions of foreign language anxiety (FLA) among vocational high school (VHC) students in Gresik, Indonesia, consisting on communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Utilizing a quantitative descriptive survey design, data were collected from 220 students using the FLCAS. The findings indicate a moderate overall level of FLA ($M = 3.08$), with fear of negative evaluation being the most prominent dimension ($M = 3.19$), suggesting that students are particularly concerned about being judged by peers and teachers when using English. Communication apprehension ($M = 3.06$) and test anxiety ($M = 3.03$) also contribute to students' anxiety levels, impacting their engagement and performance in English learning. The study highlights the need for pedagogical strategies that address these anxiety dimensions, such as fostering a supportive classroom environment, implementing collaborative learning, and utilizing alternative assessment methods. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the emotional factors influencing language learning, particularly in vocational education contexts, and call for further research to explore diverse student experiences and employ mixed-methods approaches.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Vocational High School, English Classroom, Student Affective Factors

INTRODUCTION

FLA has long been recognized as a major affective factor in the process of second language acquisition (Horwitz et al., 1986). It appears as a clearly defined combination of learners' perceptions of themselves, beliefs, emotional states, and behavioral tendencies associated with language learning in classroom settings, which frequently leads to inhibited performance and avoidance of participation. (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). In EFL context like Indonesia, where learners often have limited exposure to authentic communicative settings, FLA remains a persistent barrier to effective language learning. Recent studies

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indicates that elevated levels of FLA are negatively associated with learners' oral proficiency, self-efficacy, and overall classroom engagement (Botes et al., 2020; Hermagustiana et al., 2021; Özer & İspınar Akçayoğlu, 2021). Moreover, language anxiety is frequently linked to broader psychological distress among adolescent learners, which further impedes their academic growth (Kovalenko, 2024; Oxford, 2017).

Although considerable research has been conducted on FLA among university students and learners in academic-track high schools, far less attention has been given to students in vocational education, especially within Southeast Asian contexts. VHC students (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan* or SMK) often study English under very different conditions compared to their general education peers. Their learning tends to be more practice-oriented and less academically driven, and their language exposure is typically confined to textbook-based or exam-focused instruction (Islama et al., 2022). Recent Indonesian studies suggest that SMK students may experience even greater anxiety due to their lower language proficiency levels and a perceived lack of relevance of English to their immediate vocational interests (Ayuningtyas et al., 2022; Maylani, 2020). However, these findings are still scattered and under-theorized, and few studies apply standard, validated scales or investigate the multidimensional nature of FLA among vocational learners.

One of the major limitations in the existing literature is the tendency to treat FLA as a single general construct without considering its internal components. The model proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualizes FLA as consisting of three interrelated dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension denotes feelings of fear or unease when speaking or engaging in interaction using the target language. Test anxiety refers to heightened concern and tension related to language examinations or assessments. Fear of negative evaluation involves apprehension about receiving unfavorable judgments from teachers or peers. These dimensions may have different effects depending on the learning context, students' experiences, and classroom practices. Differentiating among them is important since each may require distinct pedagogical responses (Gregersen et al., 2014; Young, 1991).

Numerous scholars emphasize the significance of examining each dimension of FLA rather than relying on a global anxiety score. For example, Balla (2017) and Gatcho and Hajan (2019) found that communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation were more influential than test anxiety in shaping students' overall language anxiety. Similar results have been observed by Horwitz (2016), Liu and Jackson (2008), and Wang (2022), indicating that the dominant dimensions of FLA vary depending on cultural and institutional contexts. Recognizing the dominant sources of anxiety in a specific educational setting can inform more targeted interventions and classroom practices. In addition, understanding how these components manifest in the minds of learners helps educators create more emotionally responsive language learning environments.

In the context of Gresik, East Java, which is a rapidly developing industrial area with a diverse student population, the experience of SMK students in English classrooms has not been adequately explored. Given the increasing demand for English proficiency in both domestic and international job markets (Daqiq, 2024), it is crucial to understand how anxiety may affect students' engagement and achievement in learning English. Without such insight,

efforts to enhance vocational English education may overlook the emotional and psychological factors that significantly influence language learning outcomes.

This study aims to address that gap by exploring the overall level and dominant dimensions of FLA among SMK students in Gresik. Using the FLCAS developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), this study identifies patterns of anxiety based on the three core dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The theoretical foundation supports a structured analysis of students' responses and provides a conceptual basis for interpreting the data. The findings of this study are expected to inform future curriculum design, instructional strategies, and teacher training programs that more effectively address learners' affective needs in vocational EFL contexts. To achieve this objective, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What is the overall level of foreign language anxiety (FLA) experienced by vocational high school students? and (2) What are the dominant dimensions of FLA—namely communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation—among these students?

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to explore the levels and dimensions of FLA experienced by VHC students in Gresik, Indonesia. The descriptive approach was selected to capture the nature and intensity of students' anxiety in English classrooms based on their self-perceptions, without establishing causal relationships or testing specific hypotheses. This design allowed for a focused examination of the learners' affective experiences in a naturalistic educational setting.

The participants were 220 students drawn from several VHC in Gresik, East Java. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. The participants included students from a range of study programs and grade levels, reflecting diversity in academic backgrounds. Recruitment was conducted in collaboration with English teachers at each institution, who assisted in distributing the online questionnaire.

Data were gathered using the FLCAS, originally developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The scale comprises 33 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), measuring three core dimensions of anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The instrument was translated into *Bahasa Indonesia* and reviewed by two experts in language education to ensure linguistic accuracy and content validity. To assess reliability, A pilot study was conducted with a comparable group of 30 students, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.861, indicating strong internal consistency. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded prior to analysis.

The questionnaire was distributed electronically via Google Forms. The link was distributed through internal school communication platforms, and students completed the survey independently, typically within 7 to 10 minutes. Participation was optional, and informed consent was collected through digital means. The collected data were processed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted by calculating mean scores and standard deviations to answer the research questions. The overall level of FLA was determined by averaging responses across all items, while each of the three subscales

was analyzed separately. Anxiety levels were interpreted using the following spread: 1.00–2.49 (low), 2.50–3.49 (moderate), and 3.50–5.00 (high).

RESULTS

The present study aimed to examine the levels and dimensions of FLA among VHC students in Gresik. The descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the students experienced a moderate level of anxiety in learning English. The following table presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the three core dimensions and the overall anxiety level explored in this study.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of FLA and Its Dimensions

Dimension	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Communication Apprehension (CA)	3.06	1.03	1	5
Test Anxiety (TA)	3.03	1.00	1	5
Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE)	3.19	1.03	1	5
Overall Foreign Language Anxiety	3.08	1.02	1	5

As presented in the table, the highest mean score was found in the dimension of Fear of Negative Evaluation ($M = 3.19$), indicating that students were most concerned about being judged negatively by others when using English. This was followed by Communication Apprehension ($M = 3.06$), suggesting that students experienced discomfort or hesitation when engaging in oral communication. Test Anxiety had the lowest mean score ($M = 3.03$), though still above the neutral midpoint, signaling that assessment-related situations also contribute to the overall anxiety levels.

DISCUSSION

Overall Level of Foreign Language Anxiety

The result of this study suggest that FLA remains a significant affective factor influencing the English language learning experience of VHC students in Gresik. With a total mean score of 3.08, the students' FLA can be considered at a moderate level. While this level may not represent severe anxiety, it is nonetheless sufficient to disrupt students' learning processes, particularly in speaking, test performance, and classroom participation. This aligns with recent research highlighting that even moderate levels of anxiety can significantly affect learners' academic outcomes and emotional well-being (Botes et al., 2020; Rani, 2025).

Fear of Negative Evaluation as the Dominant Dimension of FLA

Among the three dimensions explored, *Fear of Negative Evaluation* (FNE) emerged as the most dominant with a mean score of 3.19. This suggests that students are particularly anxious about being judged by teachers and peers when using English. FNE is closely linked to self-

perception and social evaluation, which are particularly pronounced during oral activities and performance-based tasks. Dewaele and Pavelescu (2021) noted that the anticipation of judgment from others often hinders students from expressing themselves freely, particularly in settings where they feel linguistically insecure or socially exposed. In vocational education settings, where language may not be perceived as a core component of future career goals, this insecurity may be exacerbated due to lack of confidence and limited reinforcement of language competence.

Furthermore, the cultural context of Indonesian classrooms may reinforce this dimension of anxiety. Studies have shown that in collectivist societies, including Indonesia, students are more likely to avoid making mistakes publicly due to the fear of losing face (Yashima et al., 2016). In such environments, the classroom becomes a high-stakes social arena, where learners are expected to maintain harmony and avoid embarrassment. This pressure contributes to students' reluctance to participate in oral activities or to respond to teachers' questions, especially in English. As a result, learners with high levels of FNE tend to remain passive and may miss valuable opportunities for language practice and feedback (Teimouri et al., 2019; Yılmaz & De Jong, 2024).

This result aligns with previous research, which also identified FNE as the most prominent dimension of FLA among EFL learners, especially in classroom settings that prioritize oral performance (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021; Teimouri et al., 2019). However, other studies have reported different dominant dimensions, such as Communication Apprehension or Test Anxiety, depending on instructional practices and assessment demands (Marzec-Stawiarska, 2015; Sabilla & Kaniadewi, 2025). These differences suggest that the dominance of specific FLA dimensions is highly context dependent, rather than universal. Overall, the findings suggest that Fear of Negative Evaluation is the most prominent dimension of FLA among the vocational EFL learners examined in this study.

Communication Apprehension

The second most prominent dimension was *Communication Apprehension (CA)*, with a mean of 3.06. CA refers to the anxiety experienced by learners when they are expected to speak or engage in verbal interaction in a second language. For vocational students, communication anxiety may be intensified by a lack of real-world communicative practice, as English lessons are often taught in a teacher-centered manner, focusing more on grammar and textbook-based instruction rather than interactive speaking activities (Efrizah et al., 2024). Learners with limited oral proficiency may worry about pronunciation, vocabulary retrieval, or sentence construction, all of which contribute to a perceived risk of failure during communication (Marzec-Stawiarska, 2015). Such learners may prefer to remain silent rather than risk humiliation or being misunderstood in front of their classmates.

This phenomenon is closely linked to the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC), which suggests that communication anxiety acts as an emotional barrier, diminishing learners' readiness to participate in verbal interactions (MacIntyre et al., 1998). When learners repeatedly avoid speaking tasks due to fear or discomfort, their fluency and self-confidence may deteriorate further, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of anxiety and withdrawal (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Rajendran et al., 2025). Furthermore, the limited

emphasis on communicative language use in many vocational classrooms restricts students' exposure to real-time conversation practice, which is essential for developing confidence and reducing anxiety over time (Shamsiddin, 2025). While Communication Apprehension was not the dominant dimension in the present study, previous research in more interaction focused learning environments has identified it as the primary source of anxiety, indicating that instructional context plays a crucial role in shaping anxiety profiles.

Test Anxiety

Although *Test Anxiety* (TA) recorded the lowest mean score among the three dimensions (3.03), it still reflects a relevant concern for students. TA involves fear and worry related to performance in formal assessments, such as quizzes, oral tests, and final examinations. In the Indonesian context, high-stakes testing is a common feature of the education system, and English tests often emphasize grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension rather than communicative ability. This test format may not only fail to reflect students' actual language skills but also intensify pressure and fear of failure (Sabilla & Kaniadewi, 2025; Suryanto et al., 2025). Test anxiety is known to impair learners' cognitive processing and reduce performance accuracy due to increased tension and distraction (Rani, 2025). This may be particularly damaging for vocational students who might already have lower academic self-efficacy in language learning.

Moreover, repeated exposure to anxiety-inducing assessments may reinforce negative language attitudes and foster avoidance behavior. Learners who consistently perform poorly due to test anxiety may develop learned helplessness, believing that success in English is beyond their reach regardless of effort. This psychological barrier can hinder not only academic achievement but also long-term motivation to engage with the language (Jarar & Kurniawati, 2025). In such cases, students may disengage entirely from classroom tasks, further widening the gap in achievement and linguistic competence. In contrast to contexts characterized by high stakes testing, where Test Anxiety has been found to be the dominant dimension, the present findings suggest that its impact is comparatively less salient among vocational learners.

Interplay of FLA Dimensions and Pedagogical Implications

Taken collectively, these findings confirm that FLA is not a singular or isolated experience but a multifaceted construct with emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions. Each aspect, fear of being judged, anxiety in communication, and fear of failing in tests, interacts with the others and forms a complex psychological environment that shapes students' engagement with English. This supports the argument that interventions to reduce FLA must address classroom practices holistically rather than merely focusing on individual dimensions (Chen, 2025).

Language teachers in vocational schools should therefore reconsider pedagogical approaches that may inadvertently contribute to learners' anxiety. Creating a psychologically safe classroom climate is essential. Strategies such as building rapport, encouraging collaborative learning, providing supportive feedback, and avoiding excessive correction during speech can help reduce students' emotional resistance (Khoudri, 2024). Additionally, shifting assessment methods from summative to formative, integrating self-assessment, and

utilizing peer feedback mechanisms can foster a sense of autonomy and reduce test-related stress (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Introducing communicative tasks such as role plays, simulations, and project-based learning may also enhance students' exposure to real-world English use, thereby gradually lowering communication apprehension.

Furthermore, teacher training should include awareness of affective variables in language learning and the development of strategies to recognize and respond to student anxiety. Teachers who are sensitive to students' emotional needs are more likely to foster inclusive classrooms where students feel confident to speak and take risks without fear of ridicule or judgment (Gregersen et al., 2014). By integrating such affective-aware pedagogies, educators can transform the English classroom into a space where learners are emotionally supported and cognitively challenged in balanced and meaningful ways.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the levels and dimensions of FLA among VHC students in Gresik, specifically addressing communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Results indicated a moderate overall level of anxiety, with fear of negative evaluation identified as the most prominent dimension, suggesting that students are particularly sensitive to others' perceptions when using English. Theoretically, the study advances the FLA literature by reaffirming its multidimensional character and illustrating how the prominence of certain anxiety dimensions is influenced by vocational and sociocultural learning contexts. These findings reinforce the perspective that FLA is a nuanced construct, shaped by instructional objectives and learners' roles within educational environments.

While offering valuable insights, this study is limited by its regional focus and reliance on self-reported quantitative data, suggesting the need for future research that includes more diverse samples and employs qualitative or mixed methods approaches to capture the complexity of students' emotional experiences. The results also carry important pedagogical implications, highlighting the need for teachers to adopt anxiety reducing strategies such as supportive feedback, collaborative learning, and alternative assessment methods to create psychologically safe classrooms that promote student confidence and engagement in English language learning. At a broader level, these findings underscore the importance of integrating affective considerations into vocational EFL curriculum design and policy development, ensuring that language instruction aligns with learners' emotional needs as well as their academic and professional goals.

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