

**LEARNING ANXIETY AND RELUCTANCE IN ENGLISH CLASS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of learning anxiety and reluctance among junior high school students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research involved 12 seventh-grade students at MTs Al Kautsar. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that students experience various forms of anxiety, primarily communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, which manifest as classroom participation reluctance. Key contributing factors include a lack of prior English learning experience, limited vocabulary mastery, and negative perceptions of English as a difficult subject. These emotional challenges significantly impact students' motivation, self-confidence, and classroom participation, with higher anxiety levels correlating with lower engagement. Despite these challenges, students employ coping strategies such as independent vocabulary study and seeking help from peers. The study underscores the critical need for supportive learning environments and pedagogical strategies that address the affective dimensions of language learning to foster greater student engagement and reduce anxiety.

Keywords: Learning anxiety, reluctance, EFL students, phenomenology, junior high school, motivation, self-confidence

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup terkait kecemasan dan keengganan belajar di kalangan siswa SMP di kelas Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi kualitatif, penelitian ini melibatkan 12 siswa kelas tujuh di MTs Al Kautsar. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa siswa mengalami berbagai bentuk kecemasan, terutama kecemasan komunikasi dan ketakutan akan evaluasi negatif, yang bermanifestasi sebagai keengganan berpartisipasi di kelas. Faktor-faktor utama yang berkontribusi meliputi kurangnya pengalaman belajar bahasa Inggris sebelumnya, penguasaan kosakata yang terbatas, dan persepsi negatif tentang bahasa Inggris sebagai mata pelajaran yang sulit. Tantangan emosional ini secara signifikan memengaruhi motivasi, kepercayaan diri, dan partisipasi siswa di kelas, dengan tingkat kecemasan yang lebih tinggi berkorelasi dengan keterlibatan yang lebih rendah.

Terlepas dari tantangan ini, siswa menggunakan strategi mengatasi masalah seperti belajar kosakata secara mandiri dan mencari bantuan dari teman sebaya. Studi ini menggarisbawahi kebutuhan kritis akan lingkungan belajar yang mendukung dan strategi pedagogis yang membahas dimensi afektif pembelajaran bahasa untuk mendorong keterlibatan siswa yang lebih besar dan mengurangi kecemasan.

Kata kunci: kecemasan belajar, keengganan, siswa EFL, fenomenologi, sekolah menengah pertama, motivasi, kepercayaan diri

A. Introduction

English, as a global lingua franca, plays a pivotal role in international communication, education, and technology. In Indonesia, it is taught from elementary to university levels to prepare students for global competition (Crystal, 2003). At the junior high school level, English learning aims to develop foundational communicative competence, enabling students to confidently communicate and prepare for further language learning at higher levels (Harmer, 2007). However, this process is often hindered by students' affective states, particularly learning anxiety and reluctance, which can significantly impede their progress and engagement.

Language learning anxiety, defined as the feeling of tension, fear, and worry specifically associated with foreign language learning, has been recognized as a significant barrier in second language acquisition

(Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

This anxiety is distinct from general anxiety, arising from the unique demands of using a language that learners have not yet mastered. It can negatively influence cognitive processes such as information processing and communication skills, ultimately affecting learning outcomes (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). In the Indonesian context, studies have shown that English language anxiety levels among junior high school students remain relatively high and directly impact their performance, particularly in speaking activities where they feel nervous about performing in front of the class or being negatively evaluated by teachers and peers (Hidayati, 2018).

This anxiety often leads to reluctance, a condition where students are unwilling to participate in learning activities (Babu & Rao, 2012). When students experience high levels of anxiety, they tend to

avoid using English, both in speaking activities and classroom interactions, creating an ongoing reluctance to learn (MacIntyre, 2017). This reluctance is particularly prevalent among junior high school students who are in the adolescent development phase, where sensitivity to social judgment and fear of making mistakes are still very high. These students may feel that their abilities are far behind their peers, carry negative experiences from previous education, or hold strong beliefs that English is a very difficult subject to study.

Several factors contribute to this phenomenon. A lack of prior English learning experience can leave students feeling mentally and academically unprepared to receive new material when they enter junior high school (Rittiau et al., 2025). Limited vocabulary mastery makes it difficult for students to understand teacher instructions, express their ideas, or answer questions confidently. Furthermore, many students hold negative perceptions of English as a difficult subject, which makes them feel anxious even before the learning process begins and automatically reduces their interest

and effort in learning English (Kulsum et al., 2025). Additionally, some students have not yet realized the importance of using English in their daily lives, viewing it solely as a school subject rather than a skill with practical benefits outside the classroom, which leads to indifference and reluctance to learn (Noyan et al., 2025).

While previous research has often focused on measuring anxiety levels or examining specific skills like speaking or writing (Rois & Gumelar, 2025; Putra et al., 2024), there is a need for a deeper, more holistic understanding of how students subjectively experience anxiety and reluctance in the classroom. This is particularly true for junior high school students, who are in a sensitive developmental phase and may have diverse educational backgrounds. This study, therefore, aims to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students regarding learning anxiety and reluctance in English classes. It seeks to answer four key questions: what types of learning anxiety and reluctance are experienced by junior high school students in English classes; what factors contribute to students' feelings

of anxiety and reluctance; how these feelings influence students' motivation, confidence, and classroom participation; and how students perceive and cope with their learning anxiety and reluctance in the English learning process. By employing a phenomenological approach, this study aims to uncover the essence of these experiences, providing insights that can inform more empathetic and effective teaching practices.

B. Literature Review

2.1. The Nature of English Learning and Adolescent Learners

English learning in junior high school is not merely about mastering linguistic structures but also about developing basic communicative competence and fostering positive attitudes toward language use. According to Harmer (2007), effective English learning requires students to actively engage in language use through meaningful communicative activities, placing participation, speaking skills, and interaction as essential components of the language learning process at the secondary school level. Brown (2007)

emphasized that foreign language learning involves the integration of cognitive, social, and affective aspects, requiring an emotionally safe learning environment where students can experiment with the language without fear of negative evaluation.

The developmental traits of adolescent learners significantly influence this process. Brown (2007) notes that junior high school students are categorized as adolescents who are undergoing significant cognitive, emotional, and social development. They possess growing intellectual capacity that enables them to understand grammatical rules and language patterns more systematically, yet their emotional instability and sensitivity to peer evaluation often lead to anxiety and reluctance in classroom participation. Harmer (2007) explains that adolescent learners demonstrate high learning potential but require engaging, meaningful, and socially relevant learning experiences. Their strong desire for peer acceptance and identity formation makes classroom atmosphere a crucial factor affecting participation and risk-taking in language use.

2.2. Language Learning Anxiety

Language learning anxiety is a distinct and complex form of anxiety experienced specifically in foreign language learning contexts, characterized by feelings of tension, apprehension, and fear that are directly associated with language learning situations (Horwitz, 2001). This anxiety is situation-specific, meaning it only occurs in language learning situations and is distinct from general anxiety. It arises from communication demands, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety about being judged by teachers and peers.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualized Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as comprising three main components. Communication apprehension refers to the anxiety or fear experienced by students when having to communicate in the target language, both verbally and in classroom interactions. This anxiety arises from limited vocabulary, inadequate grammar mastery, and concerns about pronunciation errors, causing students to avoid speaking, become reluctant to answer questions, and choose to be passive

in class discussions. Fear of negative evaluation relates to students' fear of negative judgment from teachers and peers, where students worry about being criticized, laughed at, or deemed incompetent when making language errors. This fear arises not only during formal evaluations but also in everyday classroom activities such as presentations, reading aloud, or answering questions. Test anxiety is the anxiety that arises when students face academic evaluations, whether written or oral, which can disrupt concentration, lower self-confidence, and negatively impact learning outcomes. Recent research has expanded this concept by adding the dimension of English classroom anxiety, a general anxiety inherent in the overall English classroom situation resulting from previous negative experiences, perceptions of English language difficulties, and social pressures within the classroom environment.

2.3. Learning Reluctance

Learning reluctance is the condition or feeling of students who are reluctant to speak English because of psychological construction, other factors in the

individual in the class, and the quality of the student's reluctance or inactivity (Babu & Rao, 2012). The construct of unwillingness to communicate focuses precisely on the individual's reluctance to communicate with others. Despite the fact that they may have some language ability, students often exhibit reluctance due to fear of being judged, a sense of being evaluated, or the dread of making mistakes. When students attempt to speak with their partners, they inadvertently make errors, which reinforces their reluctance to use language freely for oral activities.

Learning reluctance is closely related to the concept of the affective filter, an emotional state that hinders or inhibits the process of language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Reluctance arises when students experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, pressure, or lack of confidence, causing their affective filter to become high, making them reluctant to participate, reluctant to try, or refuse to use the target language. When this filter is active, students tend to avoid tasks, refuse to speak, and have difficulty receiving optimal language input. MacIntyre

and Gardner (1991) categorize learning reluctance into several main types. Learning reluctance due to psychological factors is primarily related to language learning anxiety and low self-confidence, where students who fear making mistakes, being negatively evaluated, and feeling incapable of using English tend to remain silent and avoid active participation. Learning reluctance due to low motivation and negative perceptions arises when students lack a strong internal drive to learn English and view English as a difficult, boring, or irrelevant subject. Learning reluctance due to learning experiences and the classroom environment can be influenced by previous negative learning experiences, monotonous teaching methods, excessive focus on errors, or an unsupportive classroom atmosphere.

2.4. Relevant Previous Studies

Previous research has explored various facets of language learning anxiety and reluctance. Perkasa and Savitri (2022) conducted a study on anxiety-related silence in speaking among Indonesian EFL junior high school students, focusing on the

phenomenon of silence when students are asked to speak due to anxiety, lack of confidence, and lack of preparation. Their results showed that anxiety negatively impacts speaking and reading abilities. Santosa and Mali (2024) highlighted the various forms of anxiety experienced by students during online English learning, finding that anxiety arises primarily when students feel they do not understand the material, are afraid of making mistakes when speaking, feel pressured to perform, or encounter technical difficulties.

Several studies have focused on specific language skills. Putra, Padmadewi, and Ratminingsih (2024) examined seventh-grade students' writing anxiety, finding that linguistic challenges and time constraints significantly contribute to writing anxiety. Rois and Gumelar (2025) researched senior high school students' speaking anxiety in EFL contexts, focusing specifically on speaking anxiety. Regarding learning reluctance, Giantari, Kurniawan, and Suherdi (2023) conducted a quantitative study identifying lack of motivation and psychological problems as the main causes of

students' reluctance to speak in class. Triani (2025) examined students' reluctance in speaking English during English zone, finding that non-linguistic and linguistic factors inhibit students from speaking in terms of psychology.

While these studies have contributed valuable knowledge, most have focused on measuring anxiety levels or identifying contributing factors, often using quantitative approaches. Few have explored the internal processes and subjective experiences students undergo when anxiety arises in daily learning activities, particularly in junior high school contexts where students are in a highly sensitive period of psychological and social transition. This study addresses this gap by employing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students, capturing their authentic voices and understanding how anxiety and reluctance are experienced, interpreted, and perceived within the context of their learning lives.

C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a method for understanding human experience from a first-person perspective, emphasizing how individuals perceive and give meaning to the world around them (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2007). This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective, lived experiences of students facing anxiety and reluctance in English classes, focusing on the meanings individuals give to those experiences.

The research was conducted at MTs Al Kautsar during the 2025/2026 academic year. This school was chosen because it represents a typical learning environment where English is taught as a compulsory subject in a rural setting, and students frequently experience emotional and psychological challenges in language learning. The participants were 12 seventh-grade students selected using purposive sampling based on classroom observations and teacher recommendations, aiming to capture a range of experiences related to anxiety and reluctance in English learning.

Data were collected through three main techniques. In-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection, conducted individually with each participant to create a comfortable and confidential atmosphere. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was guided by an interview protocol containing open-ended questions, allowing participants to share their personal feelings, experiences, and perceptions regarding learning anxiety and reluctance. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis with participants' consent. Classroom observations were conducted during English class activities to identify students' behaviors and reactions that indicated anxiety or reluctance, such as hesitation to speak, avoidance of participation, or signs of nervousness. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer, taking detailed field notes about classroom interactions, teacher-student communications, and the learning environment. Document analysis involved collecting and examining syllabuses, lesson plans, students' reflective journals, and teacher notes

to provide contextual information and triangulate the data.

To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation was employed as a strategy for minimizing researcher bias and strengthening data credibility (Denzin, 1971). Method triangulation was achieved by combining data from interviews, observations, and documents. Data source triangulation was achieved by comparing information from students, the English teacher, and the homeroom teacher, cross-checking to verify the consistency of findings.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of three stages. Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and organizing the raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents, coding to identify meaningful categories and recurring patterns. Data display involved presenting the selected and categorized data in an organized form, using descriptive narratives accompanied by direct quotes from interviews to allow easy interpretation and to see patterns and relationships between themes. Conclusion drawing and verification involved interpreting

the meaning of the data, constructing findings based on patterns and themes, and verifying them through data rechecking and triangulation to ensure credibility and accuracy.

D. FINDINGS

4.1. Types of Learning Anxiety and Reluctance

The study revealed three interconnected forms of anxiety and reluctance experienced by students: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and classroom participation reluctance. Communication apprehension was a dominant form, referring to the fear and nervousness felt when having to communicate in a foreign language. Based on classroom observations, students appeared to avoid opportunities to speak in English, tending to lower their heads and avoid eye contact when the teacher posed questions to the class. Students rarely raised their hands to answer questions, even though the teacher had given all students the opportunity to participate. Interview results indicated that students lacked confidence when speaking in English because they perceived their language skills to be very limited. One

student explained that although they wanted to try to answer, they were afraid of being wrong, did not really understand the question, and found it difficult to answer because their English vocabulary was only a little. Another student stated that they did not dare to answer because they were afraid of being wrong and felt they could not speak English. These statements indicate that students experience communication anxiety caused by limited language skills, aligning with MacIntyre's (2017) assertion that anxiety in foreign language learning often causes students to avoid using the target language in communication.

The distribution of communication apprehension levels among the 12 students showed significant variation. The majority of students fell into the moderate anxiety category, demonstrated by a tendency to avoid speaking in class, while several students fell into the low anxiety category characterized by hesitant behavior when speaking. There were also students who fell into the high anxiety category, demonstrated by a refusal to speak, and a few students fell into the no anxiety category, demonstrated by a

high level of confidence in communicating.

Table 1. Communication Apprehension Levels Among Students

Anxiety Level	Number of Students	Percentage
No Anxiety	2	17%
Low Anxiety	3	25%
Moderate Anxiety	5	42%
High Anxiety	2	17%
Total	12	100%

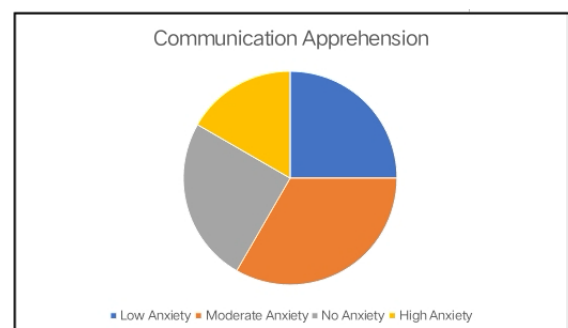


Figure 1. Communication Apprehension Levels Among Students

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of communication apprehension levels among the 12 student participants. The data shows that moderate anxiety is the most prevalent category, comprising 42% of students,

followed by low anxiety at 25%. Both no anxiety and high anxiety categories each account for 17% of the students. This distribution indicates that while the majority of students experience some level of communication apprehension, the intensity varies significantly across individuals.

Fear of negative evaluation emerged as another significant source of anxiety, relating to students' fear of negative judgment from teachers and peers. Students felt anxious about making mistakes when speaking English, especially errors in pronunciation and grammar. One student expressed concern about speaking or reading incorrectly in front of the teacher and friends, worrying that the teacher would correct them in front of many people, causing embarrassment. Another student admitted they were not capable and not brave, afraid of mispronouncing and being laughed at by classmates. As a result of this fear, students became more cautious and tended to hesitate when participating in learning activities

that involved direct use of English. They often chose to remain silent or wait for others to answer first because they felt unsure of their own answers. This condition indicates that fear of negative evaluation can affect students' confidence in using English in class and hinder their engagement in the learning process.

The distribution of fear of negative evaluation levels showed that most students fell into the low to moderate anxiety categories. Five students were in the low anxiety category, three students in the moderate anxiety category, and two students each in the no anxiety and high anxiety categories. The dominance of the low anxiety category indicates that most students were concerned about the possibility of negative evaluation, but this concern remained within manageable limits.

Table 2. Fear of Negative Evaluation Levels Among Students

Anxiety Level	Number of Students	Percentage
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No Anxiety	2	17%
Low Anxiety	5	42%
Moderate Anxiety	3	25%
High Anxiety	2	17%
Total	12	100%

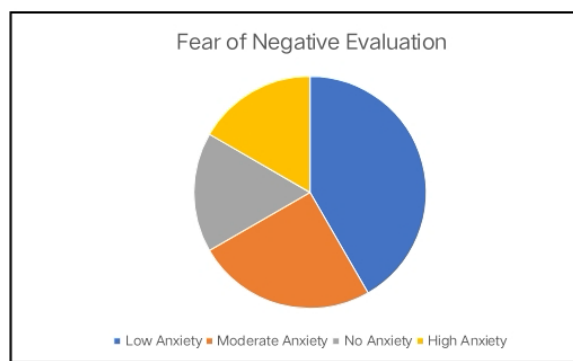


Figure 2. Fear of Negative Evaluation Levels Among Students

Figure 2 presents the distribution of fear of negative evaluation levels among the 12 student participants. The data reveals that low anxiety is the most common category, accounting for 42% of students, followed by moderate anxiety at 25%. Both no anxiety and high anxiety categories each represent 17% of the students. This distribution suggests that while most students experience some degree of concern about being negatively evaluated, the majority maintain this concern at a level that

does not severely impede their participation.

Classroom participation reluctance was the observable behavior stemming from the underlying anxiety. Students exhibited a strong tendency to be passive during the learning process, rarely raising their hands to answer questions and often waiting for other students to respond first. On several occasions, students were seen avoiding eye contact with the teacher when questions were asked, indicating an attempt to avoid directly engaging in question and answer sessions. One student admitted they very rarely raised their hand when the teacher gave questions, trying to avoid answering as much as possible because they were afraid their answer would be wrong. Another student stated they preferred to be silent during English lessons because they did not know how to answer the teacher's questions due to not understanding the language. This reluctance was not just about a lack of skill but a deliberate strategy to avoid the discomfort of using English, demonstrating a tendency to withdraw

from activities that require the use of the target language.

The distribution of classroom participation reluctance levels showed that six students were in the no anxiety category, three students in the low anxiety category, one student in the moderate anxiety category, and two students in the high anxiety category. The dominance of the no anxiety category indicates that most students showed no reluctance to participate in classroom learning activities, actively answering questions, engaging in discussions, and not hesitating to try using English.

Table 3. Classroom Participation Reluctance Levels Among Students

Anxiety Level	Number of Students	Percentage
No Reluctance	6	50%
Low Reluctance	3	25%
Moderate Reluctance	1	8%
High Reluctance	2	17%
Total	12	100%

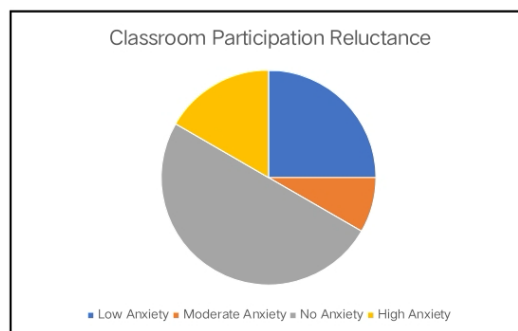


Figure 3. Classroom Participation Reluctance Levels Among Students

Figure 3 displays the distribution of classroom participation reluctance levels among the 12 student participants. The data shows that half of the students (50%) exhibit no reluctance to participate, while 25% show low reluctance. Only 8% fall into the moderate reluctance category, and 17% demonstrate high reluctance. This distribution indicates that while a majority of students are willing to participate, a notable minority still experiences significant reluctance that may require pedagogical attention.

4.2. Factors Contributing to Anxiety and Reluctance

Three main factors emerged as key contributors to students' anxiety and reluctance. Lack of previous English learning experience was identified as a primary factor. The

students revealed that they had never received formal English instruction in elementary school, resulting in significant difficulty when they entered junior high school. One student explained that they had never had English lessons in elementary school, so they felt far behind their other friends. This lack of foundation left them feeling unprepared, confused, and anxious from the start. When students entered junior high school, they began to face English subjects that required understanding of various aspects of the language such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, making them feel left behind compared to peers who may have had previous English learning experience. Another student noted that English lessons were something they were only now receiving, and while their friends had already mastered the basics, they had no knowledge at all, forcing them to learn from the very beginning.

Limited vocabulary mastery was identified as a second significant factor influencing students' anxiety. Vocabulary mastery is a fundamental aspect of learning a foreign language, as it is key to understanding the

meaning of sentences, teacher instructions, and the material presented in class. When students have limited vocabulary, they have difficulty grasping the meaning of the teacher's explanation. One student explained that although the teacher always explained the material before giving assignments, they did not understand what the teacher was saying because they did not master English vocabulary. They only relied on understanding when the teacher repeated the material using Indonesian. This situation created a lack of confidence during the learning process. Students hesitated to ask questions, feared giving incorrect answers, and felt anxious when asked to read, translate, or speak in English in front of the class. Another student noted that it was not that they did not want to do the assignments given by the teacher, but they simply did not understand the meaning of the instructions or the questions.

Negative perception toward English was identified as a third factor contributing to students' anxiety and reluctance. The perception or belief that English is a difficult subject often formed early, even before students

actually studied English in-depth in the classroom. Students already believed that English was a complex subject full of confusing grammar rules with a large vocabulary that was difficult to remember and understand. One student stated that English was a difficult subject according to both themselves and their friends from other schools, and even upperclassmen said the same. Another student elaborated that English was difficult because the language was very different from Indonesian, noting that when translating Indonesian to English, the word order had to be reversed and that vocabulary usage changed depending on context, making it confusing and difficult. This perception that English is a difficult subject made students less motivated to study harder, feeling that their efforts would not yield satisfactory results, leading to feelings of hopelessness and reluctance to actively participate in learning activities.

4.3. Influence on Motivation, Confidence, and Classroom Participation

The anxiety experienced by students during the learning process

had a significant impact on their learning behavior in the classroom, particularly on learning motivation, self-confidence, and classroom participation. Regarding learning motivation, students who experienced anxiety during the learning process tended to exhibit lower levels of learning motivation compared to students who did not experience anxiety. Feelings of anxiety during English lessons affected students' enthusiasm and desire to actively participate in classroom learning activities. One student explained that they lacked enthusiasm in attending English class, feeling somewhat pressured every time there was English class. They avoided eye contact with the teacher to avoid being chosen when there was a question, not wanting to be seen during the lesson, fearing that if they made a mistake, they would be laughed at by classmates. This feeling of inability to understand the material gave rise to pessimism about their own abilities, leading them to believe that even if they tried to learn, the results might not be much different, causing their motivation to pay attention, complete assignments, and participate in learning activities to decrease.

Self-confidence was also significantly impacted by anxiety. Students often doubted their own abilities, feeling that their English skills were still very limited and far behind those of their peers who were perceived as more capable of understanding the material. One student admitted they did not understand the meaning of English words and very often refused if the teacher pointed at them to answer, feeling not confident that their answer might be wrong and fearing their friends would tease them. Another student stated they were not confident every time they were chosen by the teacher to come forward, unsure about their answer. Low vocabulary mastery reinforced this lack of confidence, as students did not understand the meaning of words or sentences presented by the teacher, making it difficult to follow the lesson and causing worry that if they tried to speak or answer questions, their answers would be incorrect. This low self-confidence ultimately impacted students' participation in classroom activities, leading them to avoid activities that required them to appear in front of the class.

The most visible impact of anxiety was on classroom participation. Students became less willing to actively participate in the learning process, especially in activities that required direct use of English. Observations during the learning process showed that students tended to be passive and not very involved in various classroom activities. Students rarely answered questions posed by the teacher, even though they sometimes understood some of the material being studied. Due to fear of making mistakes or worrying about incorrect answers, students preferred to remain silent rather than attempt to answer. Students also appeared inactive in class discussions, tending to simply listen without contributing directly when the teacher gave opportunities to express opinions or discuss with peers. Furthermore, students tended to avoid presentations or other activities that required them to speak in front of the class. When assignments required students to present their work or explain something in English, students appeared hesitant and lacked confidence, sometimes trying to avoid these situations by not volunteering or hoping not to be chosen by the

teacher. This indicated that the anxiety experienced by students made them uncomfortable when having to use English openly in front of others.

4.4. Students' Perceptions and Coping Strategies

Despite experiencing anxiety during English lessons, students remained aware that English was an important subject to learn. They understood that English language skills had many benefits, both for academic success and for future needs. This awareness prevented them from giving up completely in the face of difficulties, instead motivating them to strive to participate as best they could. To cope with the anxiety that arose during the learning process, students tried several ways to help themselves understand the material better.

One way was to study vocabulary independently. Students recognized that limited vocabulary was a major factor in their difficulty understanding teacher explanations, so they tried to expand their vocabulary by independently learning the meanings of new words, such as by reviewing lesson notes or looking up unfamiliar

words. One student explained that because they had never had English lessons in elementary school and wanted to be able to understand it, they bought a dictionary to memorize a lot of vocabulary. This effort helped them more easily understand the material presented in subsequent lessons.

In addition to studying independently, students also tried to overcome their difficulties by asking friends who they believed had a better understanding of the material. When students felt they did not understand the teacher's explanation in class, they sometimes asked friends to help them re-explain the material, hoping to gain a better understanding through simpler, more easily understood language. One student shared that they often asked friends who were quite good at English in class, expressing that they wanted to be able to speak English but if they studied alone they did not understand, so they asked friends for help. Students also strived to listen more attentively to the teacher's explanations during the learning process. Although they sometimes found it difficult to follow the explanations, they still paid

attention to the material being presented to avoid falling further behind their peers, hoping to grasp the essence of the material being taught.

Table 4. Coping Strategies Used by Students

Coping Strategy	Number of Students	Percentage
Using Dictionary	7	58%
Asking Friends	2	17%
Asking Teacher	3	25%
Total	12	100%

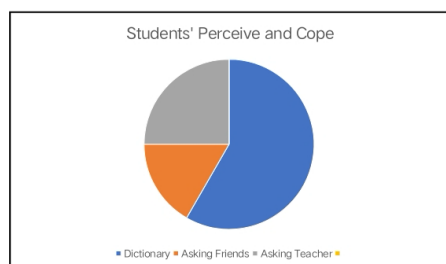


Figure 4. Coping Strategies Used by Students

Figure 4 presents the coping strategies employed by the 12 student participants to deal with learning anxiety and reluctance. The data reveals that using a dictionary is the most common strategy, utilized by 58% of students, followed by asking the teacher at 25%, and asking friends at 17%. This distribution indicates that

students predominantly prefer individual coping strategies over social ones, with the majority relying on independent vocabulary study to overcome their learning difficulties. The lower percentage of students who ask friends or teachers suggests that social anxiety or lack of confidence may still be barriers to seeking help from others.

These various strategies demonstrated that despite experiencing anxiety in learning English, students remained willing to learn and strive to overcome the difficulties they encountered, showing awareness and motivation to improve their understanding of the material.

E. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with and extend the existing literature on language learning anxiety and reluctance. The types of anxiety identified, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, directly correspond to the components of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety theory proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). In this study, communication apprehension was evident in students'

nervousness and reluctance to speak English in front of the class or answer teacher questions, while fear of negative evaluation was observed in students' worries about being judged negatively by teachers and peers when making errors. The behavioral outcome of these anxieties, classroom participation reluctance, is a clear manifestation of MacIntyre's (2017) assertion that high anxiety leads to avoidance of using the target language.

The distribution of anxiety levels shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3 provides a nuanced understanding of how these different forms of anxiety manifest among students. The data in Figure 1 shows that communication apprehension is most prevalent at moderate levels, affecting 42% of students, suggesting that while many students experience some difficulty with oral communication, only a small percentage (17%) are completely unable to participate. Figure 2 reveals that fear of negative evaluation is predominantly at low levels (42%), indicating that students are concerned about judgment but can still function in the classroom. Interestingly, Figure 3 shows that classroom participation

reluctance is absent in half of the students (50%), suggesting that despite experiencing internal anxiety, many students still manage to participate in learning activities to some degree.

The study's findings regarding contributing factors resonate with previous research while providing additional insights. Giantari, Kurniawan, and Suherdi (2023) highlighted low motivation and psychological problems as causes of reluctance, while Triani (2025) identified non-linguistic and linguistic factors inhibiting students from speaking. This study builds on these findings by showing that cognitive factors, specifically a lack of prior learning experience and limited vocabulary mastery, are foundational in creating these psychological problems. The students in this study were not just unmotivated or psychologically hindered; they were cognitively underprepared, which logically led to low self-confidence and anxiety as described by Brown (2007). This finding emphasizes the crucial need for bridging programs for students entering junior high school without an English foundation.

The negative perception of English as a difficult subject acts as a powerful affective filter, as described in Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. Even before learning begins, this perception primes students for anxiety, making them less receptive to language input. When students hold such perceptions, their affective filter becomes high, blocking the processing of comprehensible input and hindering language acquisition. This aligns with findings by Noyan et al. (2025), who noted that a lack of perceived relevance can lead to reluctance. The difference in this study is that the difficulty perception is often based on linguistic differences between Indonesian and English rather than just relevance, highlighting a unique challenge in the Indonesian context.

The impact of anxiety on motivation, self-confidence, and participation is a central finding consistent with Dörnyei's (2001) motivation theory and Brown's (2007) emphasis on affective factors in language learning. Dörnyei emphasizes that language learning motivation is influenced by students' psychological and emotional factors,

while Brown stresses that self-confidence and self-esteem play crucial roles in successful language learning. The study clearly demonstrates a gradient where as anxiety levels rise, motivation, confidence, and participation correspondingly decrease. This reciprocal relationship creates a negative cycle where anxious students are reluctant to participate, leading to fewer practice opportunities, reinforcing their feelings of inadequacy, and further increasing anxiety.

The coping strategies employed by students, as shown in Figure 4, reveal a mix of cognitive and social approaches. The use of dictionaries by most students (58%) can be categorized as a cognitive strategy, involving direct efforts to understand word meanings and improve vocabulary mastery (Oxford, 1990). This strategy indicates that students are independently attempting to overcome linguistic limitations that are a major cause of their anxiety. The strategy of asking peers (17%) and asking teachers (25%) can be categorized as social strategies, involving interaction with others to

gain better understanding. While these strategies show initiative, the heavy reliance on individual strategies such as dictionary use may also indicate a level of social anxiety. Students who rely solely on dictionaries tend to have low risk-taking behavior, avoiding the possibility of errors in communication, while those who ask teachers demonstrate higher levels of risk-taking, willing to face correction and evaluation directly (Brown, 2007). Encouraging more collaborative strategies and creating a classroom environment where asking the teacher is normalized and safe could help students manage their anxiety more effectively.

F. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, AND RECOMMENDATION

This phenomenological study reveals that junior high school EFL students experience communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, manifesting as reluctance to participate in class, with these emotional challenges driven by lack of prior English learning experience, limited vocabulary mastery, and negative perceptions of English as a difficult subject.

Consequently, anxiety undermines motivation, erodes self-confidence, and leads to passive classroom behavior, though students cope primarily through independent vocabulary study using dictionaries. The study concludes that anxiety and reluctance are deeply intertwined with students' educational backgrounds, cognitive preparedness, and classroom environment. Pedagogically, teachers must address cognitive deficits through systematic vocabulary building and scaffolding while creating supportive, low-anxiety classrooms with minimal judgmental corrections and gradual collaborative activities, supported by differentiated instruction and bridging programs at the curriculum level. It is recommended that teachers implement collaborative learning strategies that reduce performance pressure and counter negative perceptions of English, while schools establish vocabulary enrichment programs and after-school tutoring for students lacking prior English education, alongside fostering a culture that celebrates effort over perfection. Future researchers should conduct intervention-based

studies testing collaborative or game-based learning strategies for reducing anxiety, and explore the role of teacher-student relationships and school climate across different curricula and contexts.

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