

Foreign Language Anxiety in the Era of Educational Reform: A Mixed-Method Study of English Learning in Indonesian Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study investigates the levels and contributing factors of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) among eighth-grade junior high school students within the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Employing a mixed-methods explanatory design, it combines quantitative data from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) administered to 30 students and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with six participants representing different anxiety levels. The findings reveal that most students experience moderate anxiety shaped by communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test-related concerns, and classroom dynamics, which are further influenced by social pressure, teacher and peer evaluation, and low self-confidence. Coping strategies vary across students, ranging from independent preparation and consistent practice to relaxation, informal exposure, and positive self-talk. While the *Kurikulum Merdeka* promotes flexibility and participatory learning, students still encounter pressure to perform linguistically in front of peers when using English. This study advances the understanding of FLA in secondary education by highlighting its manifestations in the context of a national curriculum reform and offering practical guidance for educators and policymakers to design adaptive, inclusive, and empowering English language learning environments.

Keywords: *Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA); Kurikulum Merdeka; English language learning*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, mastery of English as a foreign language has become a crucial skill for students at all educational levels. Yet, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) continues to act as a psychological barrier that negatively influences performance, self-confidence, and classroom engagement (Horwitz et al., 1986; Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). Studies consistently confirm its prevalence. For instance, Rama et al. (2024) found that 70% of students experience moderate to high anxiety, largely due to low self-confidence and classroom interactions. Yu (2024) and Su & Cu (2024) similarly reported that heightened anxiety correlates with reduced speaking ability and avoidance of classroom participation, ultimately lowering achievement. Widiati et al. (2024) observed that while moderate anxiety can sometimes enhance performance, it more often hinders motivation and skill development. Likewise, Park et al. (2021) underscored its detrimental effects on participation and peer interaction. Other studies reveal further nuances. Margaretta et al. (2024) showed that Generation Z students, despite high levels of digital literacy, still experience FLA, suggesting that technological competence does not automatically translate into communicative confidence. Al-Hakim and Syam (2019) highlighted three principal sources of anxiety: limited communication ability, fear of negative responses, and exam-related pressure, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of FLA. These

findings remain largely descriptive, leaving unresolved questions about how curriculum reform interacts with anxiety levels, particularly in junior high schools.

In Indonesia, the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* represents a major pedagogical shift, emphasizing student-centered learning, flexibility, and differentiated instruction (Kemendikbud, 2022; Nugrohadhi et al., 2022; Amirudin et al., 2023; Karim et al., 2025). This curriculum is intended to reduce academic burden, cultivate holistic character, and foster authentic communicative competence. Recent studies (e.g., Lestari, 2023; Halawa, 2024) show that implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* presents several challenges. Lestari (2023) emphasized the difficulty of accommodating diverse student learning styles, while Halawa (2024) stressed the need for teacher capacity building and collaboration to optimize the curriculum's benefits. Saad (2023) also highlighted that classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions remain decisive for language proficiency, suggesting that reform alone may not suffice to mitigate anxiety. This tension between curricular ideals and classroom realities remains underexplored.

Although several studies have addressed FLA in Indonesia, most focus on senior high schools or higher education, with limited attention to junior high schools, where language foundations are still forming. For example, Hidayati et al. (2022) showed that Indonesian junior high school students face significant speaking anxiety, but the study did not situate this within the framework of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Furthermore, many studies emphasize either the psychological or pedagogical aspects of FLA without systematically integrating the two, and few employ validated instruments such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in combination with qualitative exploration.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates FLA among eighth-grade junior high school students within the *Kurikulum Merdeka* using a mixed-methods explanatory design. By situating FLA within the context of Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka*, this study offers two contributions to the literature. First, it extends global FLA research by showing how systemic educational reforms reshape the manifestation of FLA, thereby expanding existing theoretical models that have largely been developed in stable or traditional educational settings. Second, it provides context-specific evidence from Indonesia, where junior high school contexts are often overlooked despite the curriculum's nationwide implementation. In doing so, this study contributes not only to the refinement of FLA theory in reform-oriented educational environments but also to the development of inclusive, adaptive, and supportive pedagogical strategies for English language learning.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design (Creswell, 2014), beginning with a quantitative phase to measure students' foreign language anxiety (FLA), followed by qualitative interviews to deepen the interpretation of findings. This approach enabled the integration of measurable patterns and lived experiences within the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Participants were 30 eighth-grade students (14 male, 16 female) enrolled in an English as a Second Language program under *Kurikulum Merdeka*. FLA was assessed using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), a 33-item instrument administered in English. The scale demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .937$) and validity, with all items exceeding the product-moment correlation threshold ($df = 28$ and $r\text{-table} = 0.3061$). The study analyzed quantitative data using SPSS Statistics 27 through descriptive statistics to classify students into low-anxiety, moderate-anxiety, and high-anxiety levels.

Based on these results, six students were selected through purposive sampling (two from each anxiety category) for semi-structured interviews. Questions were guided by the four FLA components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and classroom anxiety, while allowing flexibility for in-depth exploration. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically through coding, categorization, and theme development (Tisdell & Merriam, 2020, pp. 187–192). Integration of both strands occurred during interpretation, linking statistical patterns with student narratives to generate a holistic understanding of FLA in reform-oriented education. Furthermore, ethical protocols were followed throughout: participation was voluntary, pseudonyms ensured confidentiality, and data were used exclusively for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Anxiety Levels

To gain an initial understanding of students' foreign language anxiety, the overall levels of anxiety were assessed using the FLCAS questionnaire. This provides a foundation for examining the underlying factors contributing to anxiety in the context of English learning under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Table I presents the distribution of students' anxiety levels.

Table I. Students' Anxiety Levels

Levels of anxiety	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low Anxiety	3	10%
Moderate Anxiety	16	53.3%
High Anxiety	11	36.7%
Total	30	100%

Based on the FLCAS questionnaire administered to 30 eighth-grade students at a junior high school implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, students' levels of foreign language anxiety were classified into three categories: low anxiety, moderate anxiety, and high anxiety (Table I). Most students had moderate anxiety 53.3%, 36.7% had high anxiety, and only 10% had low anxiety, indicating that English learning under the Independent Curriculum generally elicits moderate levels of anxiety. This finding aligns with previous research: Hidayati et al. (2022) reported that Indonesian junior high school students frequently experience speaking anxiety due to fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and classroom pressure, while teachers observed students' insecurity during oral assessments. Similarly, Zhao and Lian (2024) demonstrated that a competitive and evaluative classroom climate heightens anxiety, emphasizing the role of control-value appraisals, whereby students with limited perceived control and high dependence on grades exhibit greater anxiety.

Students' Factors of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Table 2 summarizes the mean scores and standard deviations for the four factors of FLA. All factors were in the moderate range, with Fear of Negative Evaluation emerging as the highest source of anxiety, followed by English Classroom Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, and Test Anxiety.

Table 2. Students' FLA Factors (N=30)

Factor	Mean	Interpretation
Communication Apprehension	2.92	Moderate
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.21	Moderate
Test Anxiety	3.04	Moderate
English Classroom Anxiety	2.99	Moderate

Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension refers to students' anxiety, embarrassment, or lack of confidence when speaking English, particularly in formal classroom contexts. The total mean score of 2.92 indicates a moderate level of anxiety, with the highest discomfort occurring during unprepared or spontaneous speaking tasks. Low scores reflected limited self-confidence even in relatively safe situations. Interview excerpts illustrate these challenges:

"When I'm suddenly asked to speak, I tend to panic. I'm afraid my grammar mistakes or pronunciation will make my friends laugh." (Student I, high-anxiety)

"I understand the material, but when I'm told to speak directly, it's like I suddenly go blank. Even though I've been practicing at home." (Student III, moderate-anxiety)

These findings align with Darmawangsa et al. (2020) and Uztosun & K  k (2024), highlighting that limited speaking experience and fear of errors are primary triggers. In the *Kurikulum Merdeka* context, fostering gradual speaking opportunities, safe environments, and normalization of mistakes is essential to reduce communication apprehension.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

All factors fell within the moderate range (2.34–3.66). Among them, Fear of Negative Evaluation had the highest mean score ($M = 3.21$), indicating it was the most salient contributor to FLA relative to the other dimensions, though still at a moderate level overall. Students reported feeling linguistically inferior or hesitant to participate spontaneously. Supporting interview quotes:

"I'm afraid my friends will laugh at me if I say something wrong, so I prefer to stay quiet even if I know the answer." (Student IV, moderate-anxiety)

"My other friends seem to speak English more fluently. I often feel like I'm not good enough, which is why I get nervous when I'm asked to answer questions." (Student II, high-anxiety)

These findings corroborate Rahmat et al. (2022) and Zabidin et al. (2023), indicating that social comparison and prior negative experiences intensify FNE. To address this in *Kurikulum Merdeka*, teachers should implement inclusive and supportive classroom strategies, such as small-group discussions, role-plays, and reflective exercises.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety refers to tension during evaluations such as exams or corrective feedback. The mean score of 3.04 indicates a moderate level of anxiety that reflects students'

worries about mistakes and performance, particularly when exams or corrections are involved. Interview excerpts reveal key triggers:

“I studied the night before, but on the exam, I blanked. It made me even more stressed because I am afraid if I get a bad grade.” (Student III, moderate-anxiety)

“Sometimes when the teacher corrects all my mistakes one by one, I become afraid to speak again, afraid of making mistakes again.” (Student I, high-anxiety)

These results support Aydin et al. (2020) and Khoshhal (2021), showing that test anxiety arises from both content pressure and social-evaluative dynamics. In the *Kurikulum Merdeka* framework, formative, reflective assessments and supportive feedback can help reduce stress and enhance students’ confidence.

English Classroom Anxiety

English classroom anxiety encompasses general emotional responses to the learning environment, including listening, comprehension, and participation. The mean score of 2.99 indicates moderate anxiety, with the highest stress linked to grammar complexity, class performance, and emotional atmosphere. Interview evidence illustrates the influence of classroom climate:

“I had studied before class, but when I entered the class and everyone was focused, I became tense and had difficulty focusing on the material.” (Student I, high-anxiety)

“I’m not too afraid of English class because the teacher is relaxed and we can ask questions if we don’t understand, so I feel more comfortable in English class.” (Student V, low-anxiety and Student VI, low-anxiety)

These findings align with Shang & Ma (2024) and Huang (2022), demonstrating that teacher approach, classroom climate, and students’ self-efficacy are critical in shaping anxiety levels. Creating a supportive, interactive, and non-threatening environment is essential in *Kurikulum Merdeka* to foster engagement and motivation.

Students’ Strategies in Coping with FLA

To gain a clearer understanding of how students cope with Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), this study examined the strategies employed by students across different anxiety levels. The strategies varied depending on students’ anxiety levels, perceptions of their abilities, and the classroom environment. Table 3 presents a summary of the strategies, their specific practices, and their effects on reducing anxiety in English learning.

Table 3. Students’ Strategies in Coping with FLA

Levels of Anxiety	Students’ Strategies	Description	Effect on FLA
Mildly Anxious	Preparation, peer support	Taking notes, independent practice, small group practice, and asking friends	Increase self-confidence, reduce panic and anxiety in learning English
Anxious	Relaxation, self-practice	Deep breathing techniques, voice recording for evaluation	Relieves negative emotions, makes it easier to focus

Relaxed	Positive self-talk, informal exposure	Watching movies with subtitles, trying to have dialogues using English, and self-affirmation	Maintaining self-confidence and comfort in communicating using English
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Interviews with six students categorized as mildly anxious, anxious, and relaxed revealed that coping strategies aligned with students' anxiety levels. Mildly anxious students primarily relied on preparation and peer support, including note-taking, independent practice, and small group exercises, which increased self-confidence and reduced anxiety during class participation (Sari, 2023; Abdurahman & Rizqi, 2021). Anxious students employed emotion-focused strategies such as deep breathing, self-calming techniques, and voice recordings for self-evaluation, which helped manage physiological and emotional responses to anxiety (Tee et al., 2020; Shang, 2021). Relaxed students demonstrated intrinsically motivated strategies, including positive self-talk, informal exposure to English through films or dialogues, and self-affirmation, which maintained comfort and strengthened self-efficacy (Adelian et al., 2024; Pabro-Maquidato, 2021; Zhuman, 2025). These findings suggest that effective coping involves individual, social, and emotional approaches, and teachers play a critical role in supporting students by fostering a safe, flexible, and student-centered learning environment, as promoted by the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Zarei et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) remains a significant challenge in junior high school English learning, even within the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes active and flexible learning. Most students experienced moderate levels of anxiety, primarily influenced by communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and classroom anxiety. These factors reflect not only linguistic difficulties but also social pressures, evaluative practices, and low self-confidence, with spontaneous speaking, fear of ridicule, and exam situations emerging as the most critical triggers. The study highlights that supportive teacher approaches and emotionally safe classroom environments can effectively mitigate anxiety, whereas rigid corrective practices may exacerbate it. Students' coping strategies, including preparation, self-practice, relaxation, and positive self-talk, demonstrate the importance of adaptive learning support tailored to students' emotional and cognitive needs. Beyond practical implications for Indonesian classrooms, this research contributes to the broader theoretical understanding of FLA by showing how social, cognitive, and emotional dimensions interact in secondary education contexts. It underscores the relevance of emotionally responsive pedagogy, diversified assessment strategies, and inclusive classroom practices for reducing anxiety and enhancing students' engagement with English learning. These findings provide a foundation for future comparative studies in other cultural and curricular settings, thereby extending insights into FLA mechanisms and interventions internationally.

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APPENDICES

Students' Anxiety Levels

No.	Student	Gender	Total	Interpretation
1.	Student 1	Male	95	Moderate Anxiety
2.	Student 2	Female	100	Moderate Anxiety
3.	Student 3	Male	110	Moderate Anxiety
4.	Student 4	Female	104	Moderate Anxiety
5.	Student 5	Female	106	Moderate Anxiety
6.	Student 6	Female	91	Moderate Anxiety
7.	Student 7	Female	102	Moderate Anxiety
8.	Student 8	Female	89	Moderate Anxiety
9.	Student 9	Female	113	High Anxiety
10.	Student 10	Female	88	Moderate Anxiety
11.	Student 11	Female	91	Moderate Anxiety
12.	Student 12	Female	87	Moderate Anxiety
13.	Student 13	Female	86	Moderate Anxiety
14.	Student 14	Male	112	High Anxiety
15.	Student 15	Male	116	High Anxiety
16.	Student 16	Male	114	High Anxiety
17.	Student 17	Male	115	High Anxiety
18.	Student 18	Male	112	High Anxiety
19.	Student 19	Male	114	High Anxiety
20.	Student 20	Male	85	Low Anxiety
21.	Student 21	Male	104	Moderate Anxiety
22.	Student 22	Male	88	Moderate Anxiety

23.	Student 23	Male	109	High Anxiety
24.	Student 24	Male	109	High Anxiety
25.	Student 25	Female	87	Moderate Anxiety
26.	Student 26	Female	108	High Anxiety
27.	Student 27	Female	85	Low Anxiety
28.	Student 28	Female	115	High Anxiety
29.	Student 29	Female	101	Moderate Anxiety
30.	Student 30	Male	77	Low Anxiety

Students' Factors of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) Communication Apprehension

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking English in class.	30	2.87	.730
I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in English class.	30	3.10	.845
I would not be nervous speaking English with my teacher and classmates.	30	3.23	.626
I feel confident when I speak in English class.	30	2.67	.711
I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students.	30	3.07	.844
I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	30	3.07	.785
I get anxious when I do not understand words spoken by the English teacher.	30	2.70	.535
I would probably feel comfortable around my English teacher.	30	2.70	.535
Valid N (listwise)	30		

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in English class.	30	2.90	.712
I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.	30	3.60	.498
It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	30	2.83	.705
I get upset when I do not understand what my teacher corrects.	30	2.80	.484
I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in English class.	30	2.80	.664
I always feel that the other students speak English better than I do.	30	3.63	.507
English class moves so quickly, I am worried about getting left behind.	30	3.07	.450
I am afraid that other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	30	3.77	.588
I feel nervous when the English teacher asks me questions that I have not prepared for in advance.	30	3.63	.571
Valid N (listwise)	30		

Test Anxiety

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I do not worry about making mistakes in English class.	30	3.03	.320
I am usually anxious during tests in my English class.	30	2.67	.606
I worry about the consequences of failing my English class.	30	3.00	.455
I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	30	3.13	.571
The more I study for an English test, the more confused I get.	30	3.37	.803
Valid N (listwise)	30		

English Classroom Anxiety

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in English.	30	3.00	.283
It would not bother me at all to take more English classes.	30	2.87	.414
During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	30	3.00	.789
I do not understand why some people get so upset over English class.	30	2.93	.365
In English class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	30	3.03	.785
Fear if I am well prepared for English class, I feel anxious about it.	30	2.87	.434
I often feel like not going to my English class.	30	2.87	.629
I do not feel pressure to prepare very well for English class.	30	2.73	.521
I feel more tense and nervous in my English class than in my other classes.	30	3.30	.750
When I am on my way to English class, I feel very sure and relaxed.	30	2.70	.535
I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak English.	0		
Valid N (listwise)	0		