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A Thematic Analysis of Young Learners' Foreign Language Anxiety

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ABSTRACT
Foreign language anxiety has become one of the most widely discussed affective variables in second and foreign language learning. Young learners, particularly those in elementary school settings, frequently experience emotional and psychological barriers while learning English as a foreign language (EFL). These barriers may influence learners' classroom participation, confidence, communication, and academic achievement. This study investigates the themes of foreign language anxiety experienced by young learners through a thematic analysis approach. The research utilized qualitative thematic analysis based on questionnaire data adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The data consisted of thematic categorizations related to students' emotional experiences in learning English. The findings revealed six dominant themes: Foreign Language Learning Experience, Fear of Mistakes, Self-confidence, Language Anxiety, Avoidance Behavior, and Speaking Nervousness. Among these themes, Foreign Language Learning Experience emerged as the dominant category with a percentage of 68.18%, indicating that learners' general classroom experiences strongly shaped their emotional responses to English learning. Fear of Mistakes represented 13.64% of the data, while Self-confidence, Language Anxiety, Avoidance Behavior, and Speaking Nervousness each accounted for 4.55%. The findings demonstrate that young learners experience anxiety not only from linguistic difficulty but also from classroom interaction, peer comparison, fear of evaluation, and communication pressure. The study emphasizes the importance of supportive classroom environments, positive teacher feedback, and anxiety-reducing instructional strategies to improve students' emotional well-being and language learning outcomes.

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1. Introduction

English has become one of the most important international languages in education, communication, technology, and globalization. Consequently, English language instruction has increasingly been introduced at earlier educational levels, including elementary schools. In many countries, including Indonesia, young learners are encouraged to develop English proficiency from an early age to prepare them for future academic and professional demands. However, learning a foreign language is not merely a cognitive process. It also involves emotional, psychological, and social dimensions that significantly influence learners' success. One of the most influential affective factors in language learning is foreign language anxiety.

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Foreign language anxiety refers to the specific feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with learning or using a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986). Unlike general anxiety, foreign language anxiety is directly related to language learning contexts and often appears during speaking, listening, reading, and classroom interaction activities. Horwitz et al. (1986) describe foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning. Since the publication of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), numerous studies have examined how anxiety affects learners' performance, participation, and motivation. Young learners are particularly vulnerable to foreign language anxiety because they are still developing emotionally, socially, and cognitively. Elementary school students may lack confidence, fear making mistakes, or feel embarrassed when speaking English in front of peers. They are also highly sensitive to teacher evaluation and peer judgment. As a result, anxiety may discourage them from participating actively in classroom activities. According to Young (1991), anxiety can create psychological barriers that interfere with language acquisition and classroom communication. Similarly, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) argue that anxiety negatively affects cognitive processing, memory retrieval, and language performance.

In EFL contexts, foreign language anxiety is often associated with speaking activities. Students frequently worry about pronunciation errors, grammatical mistakes, and negative evaluation from classmates and teachers. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) explain that anxious learners tend to focus excessively on their errors and perceive themselves negatively compared to other learners. This situation may lead to reduced participation, silence, avoidance behavior, and decreased motivation. The issue of foreign language anxiety among young learners is particularly important because emotional experiences during childhood may influence future attitudes toward language learning. Positive classroom experiences can increase confidence and motivation, while negative experiences may create long-term fear and resistance toward learning English. Therefore, understanding the emotional experiences of young learners is essential for improving language instruction and creating supportive learning environments.

Previous studies have examined foreign language anxiety in various contexts. Chan and Wu (2004), for example, investigated foreign language anxiety among elementary school students and found that fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension were major anxiety sources. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) also highlighted the relationship between anxiety and enjoyment in language classrooms, emphasizing that emotional experiences shape language learning outcomes. However, many previous studies have focused primarily on quantitative measurement rather than qualitative understanding. Consequently, there is still limited research exploring young learners' anxiety through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis allows researchers to identify recurring themes, emotional patterns, and meanings from learners' experiences. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis is useful for exploring participants' perspectives and interpreting qualitative data systematically. Through thematic analysis, researchers can gain deeper insight into the emotional realities experienced by young learners in language classrooms.

This study aims to analyze the themes of foreign language anxiety experienced by young learners using thematic analysis. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the dominant emotional themes reflected in students' responses and examine how these themes represent learners' classroom experiences. The study is expected to contribute theoretically to foreign language anxiety research and practically to English language teaching for young learners. The research addresses the following questions: 1) What themes of foreign language anxiety

are experienced by young learners? 2) Which themes appear most frequently in learners' responses? And 3) How do these themes reflect young learners' emotional experiences in EFL classrooms? Understanding these themes is important for teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers because emotional factors strongly influence language learning success. By identifying learners' anxiety sources and emotional experiences, educators can create more supportive, engaging, and psychologically safe classroom environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is one of the most extensively studied affective variables in second language acquisition. Horwitz et al. (1986) define foreign language anxiety as a unique form of anxiety specifically related to language learning contexts. The concept includes communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension refers to learners' fear or nervousness when speaking or interacting in the target language. Fear of negative evaluation involves concern about being judged negatively by others, while test anxiety refers to nervousness associated with language examinations and assessments.

Horwitz (2010) emphasizes that foreign language anxiety differs from general anxiety because it emerges specifically in language learning situations. Learners may perform well academically in other subjects yet experience significant anxiety during foreign language activities. The emotional nature of language learning makes learners feel vulnerable because language performance is highly visible and personal. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) explain that anxiety affects cognitive processing during language learning. Anxiety interferes with attention, memory, and information retrieval, making it difficult for learners to process language input effectively. Anxious learners may forget vocabulary, struggle to organize thoughts, or avoid participating in speaking activities. Numerous studies have demonstrated the negative effects of foreign language anxiety on academic achievement. Aida (1994) found that high anxiety levels were associated with lower performance among language learners. Similarly, Liu and Jackson (2008) reported that anxious learners often showed unwillingness to communicate in English classrooms.

2.2 Young Learners and Foreign Language Anxiety

Young learners are children who are typically between five and twelve years old and are still developing cognitively, socially, and emotionally. Teaching English to young learners requires attention not only to linguistic development but also to emotional well-being. Children are highly sensitive to classroom atmosphere, peer interaction, and teacher feedback. Chan and Wu (2004) examined foreign language anxiety among elementary school students and found that young learners often experienced fear during oral activities. Students worried about pronunciation mistakes, peer ridicule, and teacher correction. Such experiences negatively influenced learners' confidence and participation. Young learners may also experience anxiety because of unrealistic expectations. Parents, teachers, or educational systems sometimes expect children to achieve high English proficiency quickly. These expectations may increase pressure and reduce learners' enjoyment. According to Dörnyei (2005), learners' emotions, motivation, and self-perception significantly affect language learning outcomes. Fear of mistakes is particularly common among young learners. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found that anxious learners often become perfectionists who are overly concerned about making errors. This perfectionism may prevent learners from taking risks in communication.

Additionally, young learners frequently compare themselves with classmates. When students perceive others as more competent, they may develop feelings of inferiority and self-doubt. These feelings contribute to reduced self-confidence and increased anxiety.

2.3 Sources of Foreign Language Anxiety

Researchers have identified multiple sources of foreign language anxiety. Young (1991) categorizes anxiety sources into learner-related factors, teacher-related factors, classroom procedures, and testing situations. Learner-related factors include low self-confidence, fear of mistakes, perfectionism, and communication apprehension. Students who lack confidence often avoid speaking activities and remain silent in class. Teacher-related factors involve correction styles, classroom management, and teacher attitudes. Harsh correction or excessive criticism may increase students' fear and embarrassment. Positive encouragement, on the other hand, can reduce anxiety and promote confidence.

Classroom procedures may also contribute to anxiety. Activities such as oral presentations, spontaneous speaking tasks, and public reading can create pressure for learners. Elkhafaifi (2005) found that listening activities may also provoke anxiety when learners struggle to understand spoken language. Peer comparison is another important source of anxiety. Students may feel nervous when they believe classmates are more proficient. Such comparisons often lead to feelings of inadequacy and avoidance behavior.

2.4 Emotional Dimensions of Language Learning

Language learning is deeply connected to emotions. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) argue that learners simultaneously experience both anxiety and enjoyment in foreign language classrooms. Positive emotions such as confidence, enjoyment, and curiosity can facilitate learning, while negative emotions may hinder participation and motivation. Li (2020) highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and positive psychology in EFL learning. Learners with positive emotional experiences are more likely to engage actively and achieve better outcomes. Foreign language anxiety may manifest physically, emotionally, and behaviorally. Learners may experience nervousness, sweating, rapid heartbeat, silence, or avoidance. Bassetti (2023) notes that some learners describe anxiety as affecting their entire body, illustrating the intensity of emotional reactions.

2.5 Thematic Analysis in Educational Research

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within data. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis allows researchers to organize qualitative information into meaningful themes. Thematic analysis involves several stages: familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting findings. This method is particularly useful for exploring emotional experiences and subjective perspectives.

In educational research, thematic analysis helps researchers understand students' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses. Through thematic analysis, researchers can identify recurring patterns related to anxiety, motivation, and classroom interaction. This study adopts thematic analysis because it enables deeper exploration of young learners' emotional experiences in foreign language classrooms. Rather than focusing only on numerical anxiety levels, thematic analysis reveals how learners perceive and experience anxiety.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using thematic analysis. The study aimed to identify and interpret themes related to young learners' foreign language anxiety based on questionnaire data. Qualitative research is appropriate because it focuses on understanding participants' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses. Thematic analysis was selected as the primary analytical approach because it enables systematic identification of recurring emotional patterns within the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is flexible and effective for examining complex emotional experiences.

3.2 Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted in an elementary school where English was taught as a foreign language. The participants were young learners enrolled in English classes. The students represented beginner-level English learners who experienced regular classroom activities such as speaking exercises, reading tasks, listening activities, and classroom interaction. Young learners were selected because they are emotionally sensitive and may experience anxiety differently from older learners. Their emotional experiences provide valuable insight into the psychological dimensions of early language learning.

3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected through questionnaire items adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The questionnaire included statements related to students' emotional reactions, confidence, classroom participation, nervousness, and fear of mistakes. The questionnaire responses were categorized into thematic groups based on recurring emotional patterns. The themes identified from the data included: Foreign Language Learning Experience, Fear of Mistakes, Self-confidence, Language Anxiety, Avoidance Behavior, and Speaking Nervousness. The thematic frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify the dominant emotional experiences.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis procedure. They are as follows:

1. Familiarization with the Data (The researcher carefully reviewed the questionnaire responses and thematic categorizations multiple times to understand the emotional content represented in the data).
2. Generating Initial Codes (Initial codes were generated based on recurring emotional patterns and anxiety-related expressions. Codes included nervousness, fear, avoidance, confidence, embarrassment, and classroom pressure).
3. Searching for Themes (The codes were grouped into broader themes representing major dimensions of foreign language anxiety. Similar emotional patterns were combined into thematic categories).
4. Reviewing Themes (The themes were reviewed to ensure consistency and relevance to the research objectives).
5. Defining and Naming Themes (Each theme was clearly defined according to its emotional and psychological characteristics).
6. Producing the Report (The final stage involved interpreting the findings and connecting them with previous literature).

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3.5 Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher carefully reviewed the coding and thematic categorization process. The themes were compared with established theories of foreign language anxiety to maintain conceptual consistency. The study respected participants' confidentiality and anonymity. The data were used solely for academic purposes, and participants' identities were not disclosed.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings

The findings of this study revealed six major themes related to young learners' foreign language anxiety. The thematic distribution is presented below.

Table 1
Thematic Distribution of Students' Language Learning Anxiety

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Foreign Language Learning Experience	15	68.18%
Fear of Mistakes	3	13.64%
Self-confidence	1	4.55%
Language Anxiety	1	4.55%
Avoidance Behavior	1	4.55%
Speaking Nervousness	1	4.55%

The data indicate that Foreign Language Learning Experience was the dominant theme, accounting for 68.18% of the total responses. This finding suggests that learners' overall classroom experiences strongly influenced their emotional responses toward English learning.

4.1.1 Foreign Language Learning Experience

Foreign Language Learning Experience emerged as the most dominant theme in the study. This theme included learners' general emotional experiences related to classroom interaction, participation, comprehension difficulties, and peer comparison. Many students expressed feelings of uncertainty, nervousness, and pressure during English lessons. Some learners worried that other students spoke English better than they did. Such perceptions contributed to feelings of inferiority and reduced confidence. This finding supports Gregersen and Horwitz's (2002) argument that anxious learners often compare themselves negatively with peers. When learners perceive classmates as more competent, they may feel embarrassed and reluctant to participate.

The dominance of this theme also suggests that anxiety is deeply connected to classroom environment and interaction. Learners' emotional experiences are influenced not only by linguistic difficulty but also by social and psychological classroom dynamics. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) emphasize that classroom emotions significantly influence language learning experiences. Positive environments encourage participation and enjoyment, while negative experiences increase anxiety and silence.

The data also indicate that learners worried about understanding classroom material. Fast classroom pacing created stress for some students who feared falling behind. Such findings align with MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) explanation that anxiety interferes with cognitive processing. Overall, the theme demonstrates that young learners' emotional experiences in language classrooms are multifaceted and strongly shaped by interaction, evaluation, and communication pressure.

4.1.2 Fear of Mistakes

Fear of Mistakes represented 13.64% of the thematic distribution, making it the second most common theme. Students frequently worried about making pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammatical errors during classroom activities. This fear often discouraged learners from speaking English voluntarily. Fear of mistakes is closely related to fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz et al. (1986) explain that learners often fear embarrassment when they believe others may judge their language performance negatively. Young learners are particularly sensitive to criticism because they are still developing emotionally. Teacher correction and peer reactions may significantly affect learners' confidence.

The findings support Young's (1991) claim that classroom correction practices can either increase or reduce anxiety. Excessive correction may intensify students' fear, while supportive feedback encourages risk-taking and participation. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) also note that anxious learners tend to become perfectionists who fear making errors. This perfectionism creates psychological pressure that limits communication. The presence of this theme highlights the importance of creating supportive classroom environments where mistakes are treated as natural parts of learning.

4.1.3 Self-confidence

Self-confidence accounted for 4.55% of the thematic distribution. Although the percentage was relatively small, confidence remained an important emotional factor. Students with higher confidence levels were more willing to participate in classroom activities and communicate in English. Confidence helped learners overcome nervousness and fear. Dörnyei (2005) argues that self-confidence strongly influences language learning motivation and participation. Learners who believe in their abilities are more likely to take communication risks.

However, the relatively low percentage suggests that many young learners lacked strong confidence in their English abilities. This situation may be influenced by limited vocabulary, fear of mistakes, and peer comparison. Teachers play an important role in developing learners' confidence. Positive encouragement, praise, and supportive interaction can strengthen students' belief in their abilities.

4.1.4 Language Anxiety

Language Anxiety represented 4.55% of the data. This theme reflected learners' general feelings of nervousness and tension during English lessons. Students experiencing language anxiety often felt worried even when they prepared for class. Such findings correspond with Horwitz's (2010) explanation that foreign language anxiety may persist regardless of preparation. Language anxiety may appear during speaking, listening, reading, or testing situations. The emotional pressure associated with language performance can create psychological discomfort. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) explain that anxiety affects memory and cognitive processing, making language tasks more difficult for learners. The findings indicate that anxiety is not solely caused by lack of preparation but also by emotional pressure related to language performance.

4.1.5 Avoidance Behavior

Avoidance Behavior accounted for 4.55% of the thematic distribution. Some learners expressed feelings of reluctance toward attending language classes. Anxiety sometimes caused students to avoid participation or withdraw from classroom interaction. Avoidance behavior is a common response to anxiety. When learners associate language classrooms with

fear or embarrassment, they may attempt to avoid stressful situations. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that anxious learners often show unwillingness to communicate. Avoidance behavior may limit opportunities for language practice and development. This finding demonstrates the potentially harmful impact of anxiety on learners' motivation and classroom engagement.

4.1.6 Speaking Nervousness

Speaking Nervousness represented 4.55% of the thematic distribution. Speaking activities are widely recognized as major sources of foreign language anxiety. Students often experience nervousness when speaking English in front of classmates. Learners may fear pronunciation errors, forgetting vocabulary, or receiving negative reactions. Physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat and tension are common during speaking activities. This finding supports Young's (1991) argument that oral communication is one of the most anxiety-provoking aspects of language learning.

Similarly, Bassetti (2023) explains that foreign language anxiety may produce strong physical reactions, illustrating the emotional intensity experienced by learners. The results suggest that speaking activities should be designed carefully to reduce pressure and encourage supportive interaction.

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that young learners experience foreign language anxiety in multiple forms. Anxiety is not limited to linguistic difficulty but is closely connected to emotional, social, and classroom factors. The dominance of the Foreign Language Learning Experience theme indicates that classroom atmosphere plays a crucial role in shaping learners' emotional responses. Positive classroom environments may reduce anxiety and encourage participation, while negative experiences increase fear and silence. Fear of mistakes emerged as another important theme, highlighting learners' sensitivity to evaluation and criticism. Young learners require supportive environments where mistakes are accepted as natural learning processes.

The findings also show that self-confidence remains an important protective factor against anxiety. Learners with stronger confidence are more likely to participate actively and communicate in English. The study supports previous research demonstrating the negative effects of anxiety on language learning. Anxiety may reduce participation, limit communication opportunities, and interfere with cognitive processing. The findings have important pedagogical implications. Teachers should create emotionally supportive classrooms that encourage participation without fear of ridicule or excessive correction. Positive reinforcement, collaborative activities, and communicative teaching methods may help reduce anxiety. Teachers should also recognize that emotional well-being is essential for language learning success. Young learners require encouragement, patience, and psychological safety to develop confidence and communication skills.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the themes of foreign language anxiety experienced by young learners through thematic analysis. The findings revealed six major themes: Foreign Language Learning Experience, Fear of Mistakes, Self-confidence, Language Anxiety, Avoidance Behavior, and Speaking Nervousness. Foreign Language Learning Experience emerged as the dominant theme, indicating that learners' emotional responses were strongly influenced by classroom interaction, peer comparison, communication pressure, and learning experiences. Fear of Mistakes also appeared prominently, reflecting learners' concern about making errors and receiving negative evaluation.

The findings demonstrate that foreign language anxiety among young learners is multidimensional. Anxiety affects learners emotionally, cognitively, socially, and behaviorally. Students may experience nervousness, reduced confidence, avoidance behavior, and communication difficulties. This finding is consistent with Fadillah et al. (2025), who found that fear of making mistakes and fear of negative evaluation contributed to students' nervousness, reduced self-confidence, and lower classroom participation. Their study also highlighted the importance of peer support and teacher involvement in creating an environment that encourages students to participate and view mistakes as a natural part of learning. Similarly, Attia and Algazo (2025) emphasize that foreign language anxiety is an important classroom issue and highlight the need for appropriate teacher strategies to mitigate anxiety in EFL learning environments. The study emphasizes the importance of supportive classroom environments in reducing anxiety and promoting positive emotional experiences. Teachers should encourage participation, provide constructive feedback, and create safe learning atmospheres where mistakes are treated as natural learning opportunities.

This research contributes to the understanding of young learners' foreign language anxiety by providing thematic insight into learners' emotional experiences. Future studies may expand the research by involving larger participant groups, conducting interviews, or exploring classroom observation data.

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