

## **Investigating Students' Foreign Language Anxiety**

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### Abstract

This paper investigates Indonesian students' foreign language anxiety. It seeks to find out the types of anxiety experienced by FL learners and the strategies they use to cope with their anxiety. Questionnaires with a Likert scale ranging from disagree to agree were used to collect data. The findings revealed that the majority of students, despite their gender and level differences, experienced some kinds of FL anxiety and many of them also applied particular strategies to overcome their FL anxiety.

## Introduction

Foreign language learning situations are prone to anxiety arousal. More than half of foreign language learners experience some kinds of anxiety in their learning (Worde, 1998). It is also argued that language anxiety may pose potential problems for language learners (Kondo & Ling, 2004). Learners who feel anxious in their foreign language learning may find their study less enjoyable (Gregersen, 2005). Some studies have indicated that foreign language anxiety can negatively impact on learners' performance (see, for example, Chen & Chang, 2004; Pappamihel, 2002). Learners who feel anxious in their learning, Pappamihel (2002) argues, tend not to engage in situations which can make them feel anxious. In fact, in the context of foreign language learning, learners' active involvement is essential for them to be successful. Thus, it is obvious that FL anxiety is a serious matter that needs study. Much work has been conducted overseas to investigate the issue of FL anxiety (Horwitz, 1991; Worde, 1998; Kondo & Ling, 2004). However, there has been little information as to how FL anxiety is experienced by foreign language learners from Indonesia. Therefore, this study investigates this from the perspectives of Indonesian learners studying a foreign language (English).

## Research Questions

1. What are the factors that learners believe contribute to their foreign language anxiety in learning a foreign language?
2. Are there any differences in factors contributing to FL anxiety between male and female students and also between lower intermediate and upper intermediate students?
3. What strategies do learners use to cope with their foreign language anxiety?
4. Are there any differences in strategies used to cope with FL anxiety between male and female students and also between lower intermediate and upper intermediate students?

## Review of Literature

### *Defining Anxiety*

Generally, anxiety can be associated with "threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening" (Pappamihel, 2002, p.331) or an uneasy feeling due to something threatening (Koba et al, 2000). Meanwhile, language anxiety, according to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) is the feeling of tension and apprehension experienced by learners in the foreign language classroom. More specifically, Horwitz et al (1986) maintain that language anxiety is "a distinctive complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process"(p.128).

### ***Types Of Anxiety***

Pappamihel (2002) divides anxiety into two types: state anxiety and trait anxiety. State anxiety is a type of anxiety which occurs because learners are exposed to particular conditions or situations. For example, there are learners who feel anxious if they are requested to speak in front of the class or if they do not understand many of the teachers' words during the class. Meanwhile, trait anxiety is a person's tendency to feel anxious regardless of the situations they are exposed to. In regard to this, Worde (1998) argues that trait anxiety is a part of a person's character and is a permanent disorder.

### ***Impact Of Foreign Language Anxiety On Learners***

Many educators claim that foreign language anxiety can have an impact on learners. Onwuegbuzie et al (1999) state that FL anxiety is a complex matter within the context of English language teaching (ELT). They argue that its existence can affect the fluency of learners' speech and learning in general. Similarly, Kondo and Ling (2004) maintain that FL anxiety can impact negatively on learners' performance. When feeling anxious, learners may have problems such as reduced word production and difficulty in understanding spoken instructions (Horwitz 1991; Chen & Chang, 2004; Casado and Dereshiswsky, 2004). Moreover, Gregersen (2005) argues that anxious learners often find it difficult to respond to their own errors effectively.

### ***Possible Factors Contributing To Learners' Anxiety***

In the context of foreign language learning, learners may feel anxious due to problems related to communication apprehension (e.g., difficulty in understanding the teacher's instruction) negative evaluation (e.g., fear of correction and fear of making mistakes) and a general feeling of anxiety (e.g., fear of failing the class) (Horwitz et al., 1986; Pappamihel, 2002; Casado and Dereshiwsky, 2004). Students who have low oral and writing ability in their native language have a higher possibility of experiencing FL anxiety than those who are more competent in their native language use (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999)

In addition to the above factors, teachers' inappropriate ways of teaching and their reluctance to develop rapport with their students can also contribute to learners' anxiety in their foreign language learning (Worde, 1998). In regard to this, Onwuegbuzie et al., (1999) suggest that teachers should be aware that adult learners can easily become anxious in their FL learning. Therefore, they should minimize their contribution to causing students' anxiety. Onwuegbuzie et al further add that teachers need to show their positive reinforcement, empathy and encouragement to their students. To be able to do this, they need to always reflect and upgrade their teaching skills.

### ***Learners' Strategies To Cope With Foreign Language Anxiety***

Most studies on language anxiety concentrate on understanding the mechanism of anxiety in the process of language learning either in foreign language or second language settings (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994) and many also focus on looking at the approaches used to help students reduce their language anxiety (Kondo & Ling, 2004). However, there are very few which are directed at identifying the strategies used by language learners to cope with their language anxiety in their FL or SL classes. This issue is one of the concerns to be investigated in this survey.

A study conducted by Kondo and Ling (2004) investigating the strategies used by foreign language learners in coping with their language anxiety is the main theoretical basis for this survey. Kondo and Ling (2004) collected information from 209 (93 female and 116 male) learners studying English at two universities in central Japan. All the respondents were requested to answer an open-ended questionnaire and asked to write down the specific strategies they used to deal with their foreign language anxiety. The study initially identified 373 specific strategies but reduced this to 70 due to “the elimination of duplicate ones (defined as nearly identical in wording)” (p.261). The specific strategies mentioned by the students were grouped under five categories of general strategies, namely: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation. The first category, preparation, is students' efforts to overcome their feeling of anxiety or threat by improving their learning and study strategies. The second, relaxation, deals with ways to minimize the symptoms of anxiety. The third, positive thinking, refers to the efforts to “divert attention from stressful situation to positive and pleasant cues and bring relief to the anxious students” (p.262). The fourth, peer seeking, is the attempt to find other students who also feel anxious in their language class. The fifth, resignation, refers to the unwillingness of students to alleviate their language anxiety.

Pappamihel (2002) conducted a study investigating the language anxiety experienced by students undertaking ESL programmes in America. He gathered data from 178 Mexican immigrant students. One of the key issues investigated was the strategies used by students in coping with their language anxiety in their ESL classrooms. The study reported that avoidance is the most common strategy used by the students to alleviate their language anxiety. The act of avoidance, which was frequently mentioned by the students under the study, is being totally passive in the class. In other words, they did not speak during the class. Regarding this strategy, Bailey et al (1999) mention that such a strategy (avoidance) is often used by teenage or adult foreign language learners. Another strategy used by students as reported by Pappamihel (2002) is making close friends with other students whose English is better and who are less anxious than they are. This helps them ease their language anxiety because they can ask their partners whenever they have problems related to foreign language learning in the class. If requested to speak in the foreign language class, some students mentioned that they pretend that they are the only

person in the class. They believe that this is useful for them to reduce their anxiety while they remain active in the class.

## **The Study**

### ***Participants***

The study involved a number of university students of lower and upper intermediate levels. In this university, students' TOEFL (Test of English as A Foreign Language) score was used to determine their English level prior to their joining the English class. Those who obtained a score of 475 or less in TOEFL were put in lower intermediate classes. Meanwhile, those with a score of 475 or higher were placed in upper intermediate classes. Both levels (lower intermediate and upper intermediate) were investigated in this study.

Initially, flyers containing information about the study were distributed to potential students and as a result 100 participants were recruited. Of all the participants taking part in this survey, only 76 (40 lower intermediate students and 36 upper intermediate students) returned the completed questionnaires in time. Among all the participants, half (38) were female students and the other half (38) were male students. In short, the response rate was 76%.

### ***Methodology***

A survey design was used to direct this study. According to Creswell (2005, p.52), survey design is one of the research procedures used to "describe trends in a population of individuals". In the context of this study, the trends described are those related to learners' FL anxiety. In line with the study design, a questionnaire measuring factors causing FL anxiety and anxiety coping strategies was employed to collect data. The data were quantitatively analyzed (using SPSS) by calculating the means of participants' responses.

### ***Item Reliability***

An analysis of item reliability was computed using SPSS (scale analysis). The results showed that the questionnaire demonstrated internal reliability, achieving an alpha coefficient of 0.862 for items measuring anxiety factors and 0.905 for the items measuring anxiety coping strategies. George and Mallery (2003) maintain that items can be claimed to have a high degree of reliability if they achieve a score of 0.8 or higher in the reliability statistics (analysis). Details of the item reliability statistics can be viewed in table 1 below:

Table 1: Item Reliability Statistics

Questionnaire (Items)	Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha on standardized items	Number of Items
Anxiety factors	0.862	0.864	21
Anxiety coping strategies	0.905	0.909	15

### ***Data Analysis***

The central tendency of all the measures was described using descriptive statistics (means) and bar charts were used to display the data. Before the data were analyzed, the items in the questionnaire were first grouped according to the factors and strategies they intended to measure. The grouping was conducted through hierarchical cluster analysis (dendrogram) and as a result, five groups of factors and strategies were identified. After considering the content of items, the following names or labels were assigned to each factor and strategy:

- **Items measuring anxiety factors:**

- lack of confidence : items A1,A3,A8,A11,A13,A14
- lack of preparation : items A6,A10,A18
- fear of failing the class : items A7,A15,A21
- fear of making mistakes : items A2,A5,A9,A12,A17,A20
- difficulty in understanding  
teachers' instructions : items A4, A16,A19.

- **Items measuring anxiety coping strategies:**

- preparation : items C1,C6,C12
- relaxation : items C2,C7,C13
- positive thinking : items C3,C8
- peer seeking : items C4,C9,C11,C14
- resignation : items C5,C10,C15

Numerical values (disagree = 1, uncertain = 2, and agree = 3) were assigned to the three categories of student responses in the questionnaire. This was to facilitate the researcher in the process of data analysis using SPSS.

## Results

The student data were collected and analyzed quantitatively to answer the research questions posed in this study. The results are presented briefly below:

### *Factors Contributing To Foreign Language Anxiety*

Analysis of the anxiety factors, as shown in figure 1, suggests that there are three factors which learners believe have contributed to their FL anxiety, namely lack of preparation, lack of confidence and fear of failing the class. Of these three factors, most participants agreed that lack of preparation was the main cause of their anxiety followed by lack of confidence. Only a few participants claimed fear of failing as a factor of anxiety while the majority were uncertain about this.

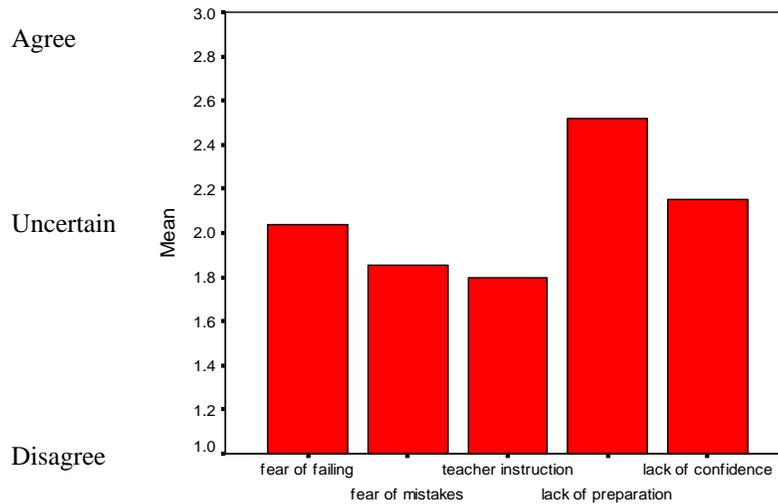


Figure 1: Anxiety Factors (All Participants)

### *Gender Differences And Anxiety Factors*

The comparison of factors which contribute to FL anxiety between male and female students, as shown in figure 2, indicates that both male and female students consider that lack of preparation was the major contributor of their FL anxiety. Only female students claimed that lack of confidence was a factor of FL anxiety while their male counterparts did not have a problem with this. In other words, male students were more confident than female students in their FL learning. Male students were more afraid of failing their English class than female students were. Therefore, they included this as a cause of their

FL anxiety along with lack of preparation. Meanwhile, the female students did not see it (fear of failing) as a source of their anxiety.

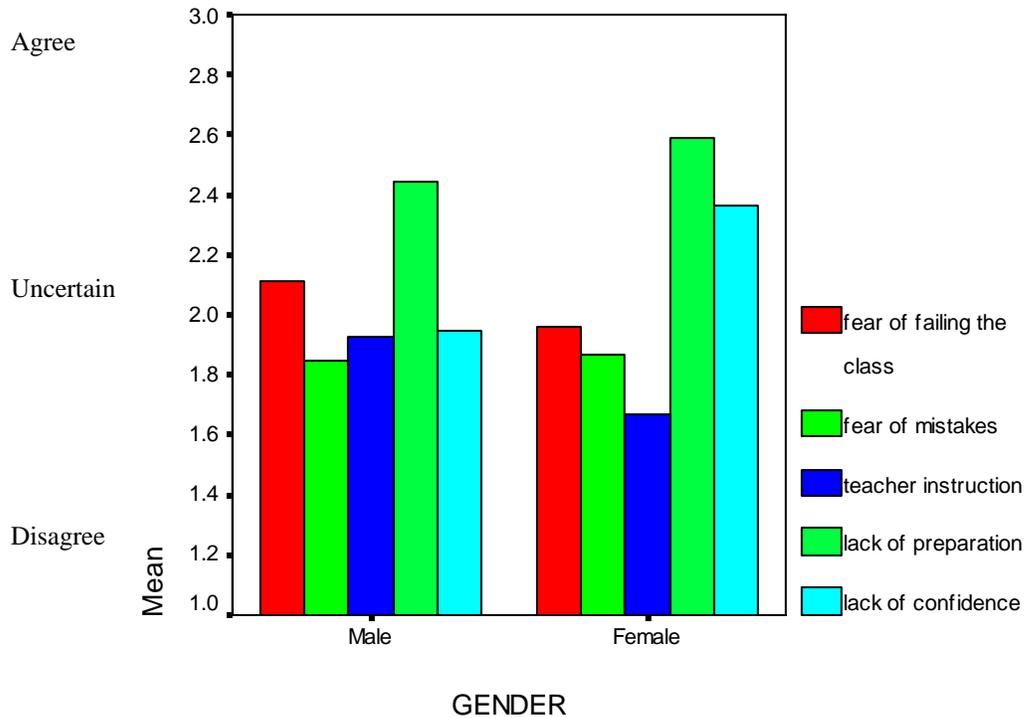


Figure 2: Anxiety Factors (According To Gender)

### ***Level Differences And Anxiety Factors***

The analysis of anxiety factors according to learners' English levels, as indicated in figure 3, shows that both lower and upper intermediate learners consider that lack of preparation was the major contributor of their FL anxiety. The data also indicate that lower intermediate learners were less confident in their FL learning than upper intermediate learners were. They consider that lack of confidence contributed to their anxiety while the upper intermediate learners did not consider it a problem in their FL learning. The upper intermediate learners, despite their confidence in their learning, were more afraid of failing their class than the lower intermediate students were. Thus, they also considered it one of the factors that made them feel anxious in their FL class.

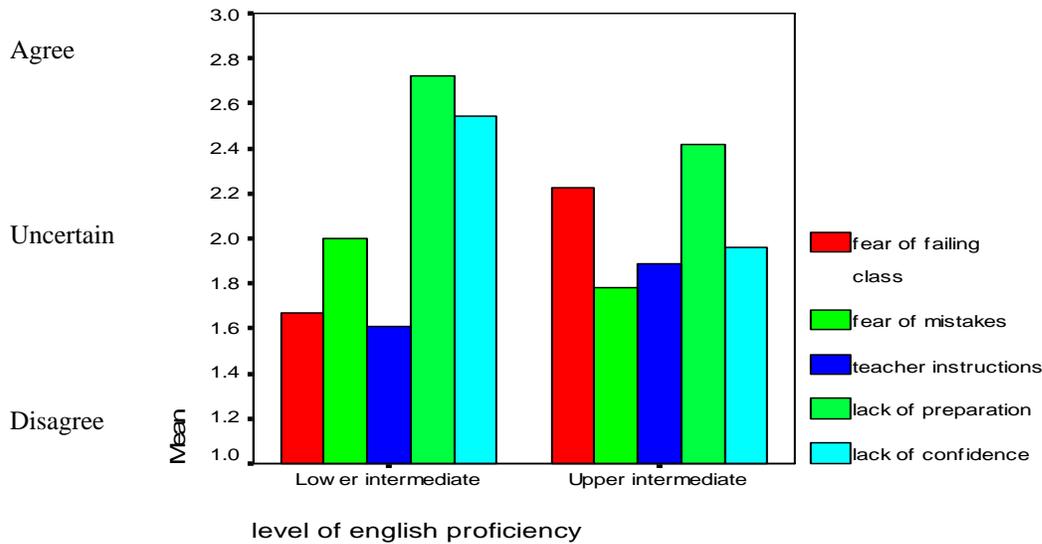


Figure 3: Anxiety Factors (According To Level Of English Proficiency)

### *Learners' Strategies For Coping With FL Anxiety*

The analysis of anxiety coping strategies, as described in figure 4, suggests that there are four strategies that learners often use in coping with their anxiety, namely preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking. Of these four strategies peer seeking and relaxation were used by the majority of learners in their attempt to reduce their FL anxiety followed by the two other strategies, preparation and positive thinking.

They, however, did not consider resignation (e.g., not taking part in class activities such as voluntarily answering questions) as a strategy they use to cope with their anxiety. So, of all the five strategies measured, only resignation was not employed by learners in their FL learning.

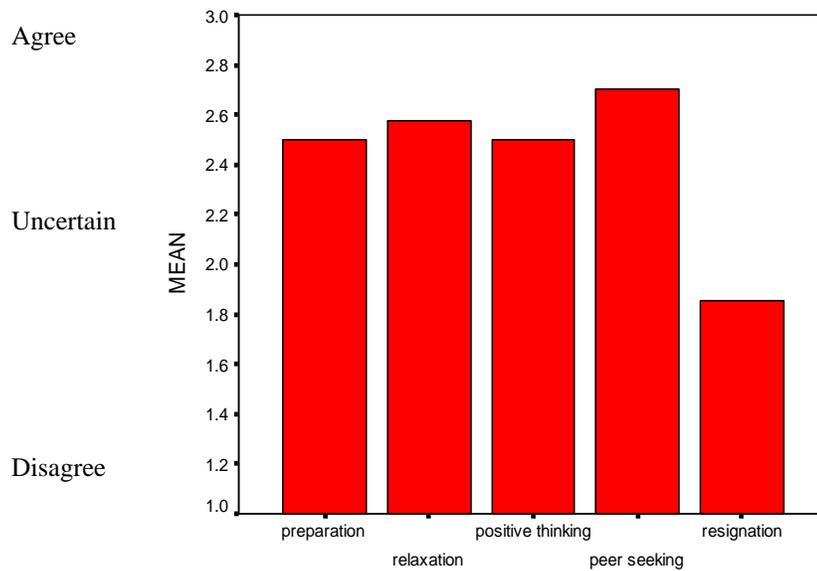


Figure 4: Anxiety Coping Strategies

### *Gender Differences And Anxiety Coping Strategies*

The comparison of anxiety coping strategies used by male and female students, as shown in figure 5, indicates that the number of female learners who employ strategies such as preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking was greater than the number of male learners. Of the four strategies, peer seeking and relaxation were more dominantly used among female learners followed by preparation and positive thinking. Meanwhile, among the male students, peer seeking and positive thinking were more popular than the two other strategies.

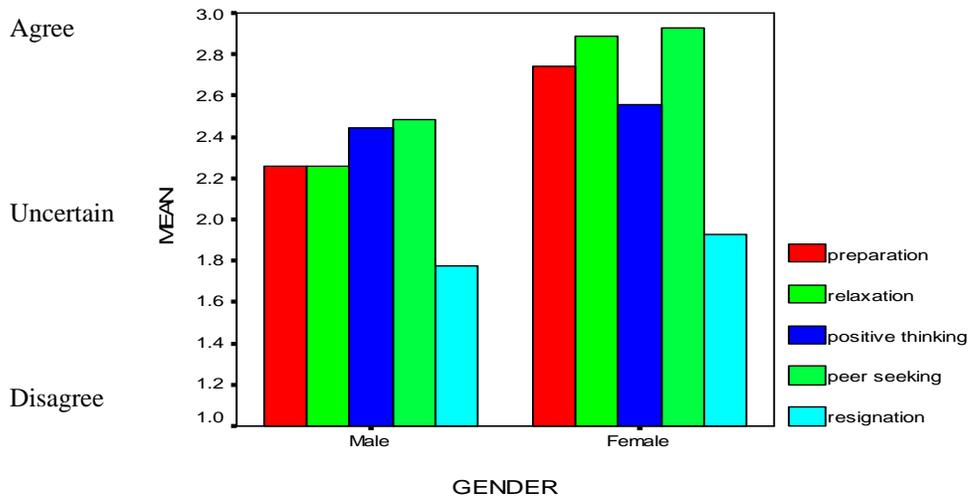


Figure 5: Anxiety Coping Strategies (According To Gender)

**Level Differences And Anxiety Coping Strategies**

The analysis of anxiety coping strategies according to learners' level of English proficiency, as shown in figure 6, suggests that preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking were used more by lower intermediate students than the upper intermediate ones. Of the four strategies, peer seeking was the most popular strategy used by lower intermediate learners followed by relaxation, preparation and positive thinking. Similarly, peer seeking was also the most frequent strategy employed by upper intermediate learners, followed by positive thinking, relaxation and preparation.

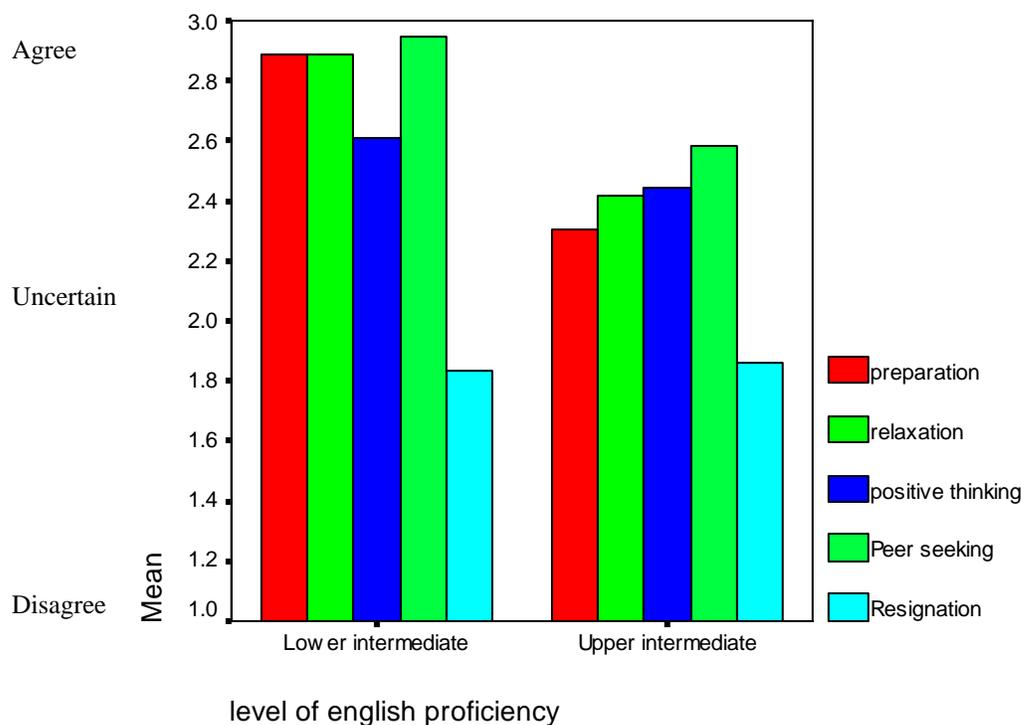


Figure 6: Anxiety Coping Strategies (According To Level Of English Proficiency)

## Discussion

### *Factors Contributing To FL Anxiety*

The findings show that most learners experienced a certain degree of anxiety in their FL learning. Factors like lack of confidence, lack of preparation and fear of failing the class were the primary causes of their anxiety. The survey, however, surprisingly reveals that no participants mentioned experiencing difficulties in understanding teachers' instructions and also none reported fear of making mistakes in their learning. This is, to a certain extent, contradictory to the findings reported in Pappamihiel's study which mentioned that these two factors (teacher instruction and fear of making mistakes) were among the common factors frequently reported by learners as the causes of their FL anxiety (Pappamihiel, 2002). This could possibly happen because the learners participating in this survey had been in contact with English regularly either in or outside their classrooms. It is important to note that in the context of this survey, the participants studied English as a second language, meanwhile in several other similar studies such as those conducted by Aida (1994); Worde (1998); Gregersen (2005); Chen and Chan (2004), the context was English as a foreign language. Second language refers to contexts where "the language being learnt is the one relevant to the surrounding environment",

such as the study of English in Australia and America (Worde, 1998, p.24). Meanwhile, foreign language is the study of language spoken outside the student's country (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). The difference between ESL and EFL is obvious. For example, students in an ESL context are exposed to the target language frequently while those in EFL settings have very limited opportunities to engage in a real English context. Also, teachers in the ESL context apply the direct method or only use the target language in teaching so students get used to communicating in English. Meanwhile, in the case of EFL, English is often taught using the indirect method where teachers may use the local language as the medium of instruction. So, these distinctions are likely to cause the differences of factors contributing to students' FL anxiety.

The survey also observed the differences of factors between male and female students as well as between lower intermediate and upper intermediate students. It is evident that lack of preparation was the major cause of FL anxiety mentioned by both male and female students. The findings also suggest that female learners are less confident in their FL learning than their male counterparts. They agreed to statements such as *'I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in my class and it embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class'*.

Concerning the learners' English levels, it appears that both lower intermediate and upper intermediate students found that lack of preparation was the major cause of their anxiety. In other words, lack of preparation was the issue seen by all learners, despite their level proficiency, that caused them to feel anxious in their FL learning. In addition to this factor, lower intermediate students also had a problem with their self-confidence. They revealed that they easily get anxious due to this factor. This was not reported by the upper intermediate learners. They were, in fact, more confident in their FL learning than their lower intermediate counterparts. The problem of self-confidence (lack of confidence) experienced by the lower intermediate learners is likely caused by their limitation in foreign language mastery. This claim is also supported by Pappamihel (2002) who argues that learners' limited competence in foreign language use, such as lack of vocabulary, can contribute to their FL anxiety.

### ***Strategies Used To Cope With FL Anxiety***

The findings suggest that there are four strategies which learners usually use in coping with their FL anxiety. They are preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking. Kondo and Ling (2004) maintain that all these strategies are very useful for learners to help them reduce their FL anxiety. They further point out that learners need to know the causes of their FL anxiety and apply appropriate strategies to deal with them. Of the five strategies being measured only one strategy (the resignation strategy) was not used by learners in coping with their anxiety. The students disagreed to statements such as *'I don't want to participate in my English class and I avoid getting involved in a situation which can make me feel anxious'*. In other words, the resignation strategy was not popular among the learners taking part in this survey. This is, in fact, contrary to

Bailey et al (1999) and Pappamihel (2002) who maintain that resignation or avoidance is one of the common strategies used by foreign language learners when they feel anxious.

Learners' not employing the resignation strategy in coping with their FL anxiety is, in fact, good for the improvement of their foreign language learning. As argued earlier, learning a foreign language requires learners' active engagement with the language being learnt (Pappamihel, 2002). The majority of learners in the study were aware that avoiding taking part in class activities would only slow down their language acquisition process.

The findings also show differences in strategies applied by male and female learners and also by lower intermediate and upper intermediate learners. It is evident that the female learners' responses were more positive than those of the male learners. In other words, there were more female learners using strategies such as preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking than male learners. This could be due to the fact that female learners are more anxious in FL learning than male learners (as shown in figure 2).

In regard to level differences, it can be argued that the lower intermediate learners' responses were more positive than the upper intermediate learners. It can be seen that nearly all lower intermediate participants admitted using strategies such as preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking to cope with their anxiety. Meanwhile, although similar strategies were also employed by the upper intermediate students, the percentage was lower than that of the lower intermediate students. This difference probably occurred because lower intermediate students are more anxious than upper intermediate ones. As argued, foreign language anxiety can impact negatively on students' FL learning performance (Chen & Chang , 2004; Casado and Dereshiswsky , 2004). Thus, anxious students should consider using strategies that will help them reduce their anxiety (Kondo & Ling, 2004).

As reported in the findings, students could also feel anxious due to teachers' approaches to teaching. Thus, teachers could also play their part to help reduce students' FL anxiety. Several ways that can be considered by teachers include developing rapport with students, helping students develop their sense of involvement, and treating them equally in the class (Koba et al., 2000). In addition, teachers are also advised not to use "complicated instructions or competitive classroom procedures" and they should recognize students as individuals (Goshi, 2005, p.65).

## **Implications**

There are a number of implications which arise as the result of this study. Above all else, the study provides information to learners that FL anxiety is a common problem within the context of foreign language learning. This feeling (FL anxiety), therefore, should not discourage them from taking part in all types of foreign language learning activities in the class. Moreover, it should not stop them from their foreign language learning.

Despite its common nature, this study, however, highlights the importance of understanding the factors or the causes of learners' foreign language anxiety. This kind of understanding is useful for learners to identify the strategies that can be employed to overcome their anxiety problem.

It is also recommended that learners, in selecting anxiety coping strategies, think of the strategies and employ the ones which will not stop them from being actively involved in class activities. In other words, they should be encouraged to use strategies which are not only useful for reducing their anxiety but are also beneficial for the improvement of their foreign language learning.

The identification of factors causing FL anxiety, including differences in factors across gender and levels of English, can also be used by teachers to apply better teaching approaches which can help minimize students' anxiety during their foreign language learning in the class.

### **Recommendations For Future Research**

This study WAS conducted to identify the factors contributing to learners' foreign language anxiety and the strategies learners use to cope with their anxiety. The sample was only a limited number of Indonesian students undertaking degree courses and English programmes at a public university in Indonesia. Due to the limitations of the study, further investigations are needed to explore the issues of anxiety in foreign language learning.

Obviously, future similar studies but conducted with a larger population or different groups of students (for example, school students) will be useful to give a better understanding of the issue of anxiety in foreign language learning. Special emphasis may need to be directed towards looking at the impact of FL anxiety (also the strategies used to overcome anxiety) on students' learning performance.

Teachers' approaches to teaching are also a critical component in making learners become anxious or not in their FL learning (Worde, 1998). This issue, however, is not specifically addressed in the current research. Therefore, investigations of how teachers' teaching can contribute or help reduce anxiety are needed.

Finally, although this study was carried out with a small number of participants and within a short period of time, the findings provide some useful information that can be used by both learners and teachers to improve the quality of their learning and teaching. In short, this study suggests that despite its common nature, foreign language anxiety is an issue that needs to be handled seriously because its existence may impact negatively on students' foreign language learning.

**Limitations**

The study has a number of limitations. First, it involved only a small number of lower and upper intermediate students studying in a public university in Indonesia. So, the results do not necessarily reflect the context of ELT at other universities or other educational settings such as schools. However, there may be some parts of the findings which can be used as reference to deal with students' FL anxiety in ELT. Second, the questionnaire contained predetermined factors causing FL anxiety and strategies learners use to cope with their anxiety. The nature of such a questionnaire limits learners' freedom to mention other factors or strategies that may not be covered in the questionnaire. Therefore, it opens up the possibility for the conduct of further study carried out in the form of qualitative research to elaborate the issue more deeply. Finally, this study was limited only to describing FL anxiety factors and anxiety coping strategies experienced by learners. It did not address the issues of the impact of FL anxiety and anxiety coping strategies on learners' performance. Thus, further investigation is necessary to provide better understanding within the issues surrounding FL anxiety.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire Items

#### Measuring Anxiety Factors

The items are rated on a three point Likert scale of disagree (1), uncertain (2), agree (3). The items with (\*) symbol are reverse scored.

- A1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class
- A2. I don't worry about making mistakes in my English class \*
- A3. I tremble when I know that I am going to be called on in my English class
- A4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English class
- A5. I am glad if the teacher corrects my English when I am speaking \*
- A6. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in my English class
- A7. I worry about the consequences of failing my English class \*
- A8. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class
- A9. I don't get upset when I am corrected by the teacher while I am speaking \*
- A10. Even if I am well prepared for my English class, I feel anxious about it
- A11. I feel confident when I speak in my English class \*
- A12. I am afraid that my English teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make
- A13. I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on in my English class
- A14. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students
- A15. I am not afraid of getting a fail mark in my English class \*
- A16. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the English teacher says
- A17. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I make mistakes
- A18. I get nervous when I come to the my English class with little preparation
- A19. I don't have any problems in understanding the teacher's words when speaking in English \*
- A20. I feel embarrassed when I don't say English words correctly
- A21. I feel very bad if I fail my English class

Adapted and modified from Horwitz et al., (1986)

#### Measuring Anxiety Coping Strategies

- C1. I try to make a habit of studying English everyday
- C2. I try to relax when I am in my English class
- C3. I imagine myself giving a great performance
- C4. I tell myself that others must also be anxious
- C5. I stop paying attention when I am feeling nervous in the class \*
- C6. I never care to prepare for my English class \*
- C7. I don't think trying to feel relaxed helps me overcome my anxiety

- C8. I tell myself that I am ok when I feel anxious in my English class
- C9. I never tell myself that difficult problems for me are also difficult for others \*
- C10. I don't want to participate in the class \*
- C11. I ask students around me if they understand the class
- C12. I study hard the day before I have my English class
- C13. I take a deep breath when I feel anxious in my English class
- C14. I try not to think of people around me
- C15. I avoid getting involved in a situation which can make me feel anxious \*

Adapted and modified from Kondo and Ling (2004)