

STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MEDAN

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Abstract

This study investigates the emotional challenges experienced by vocational school students in Medan while learning English. Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) involves not only cognitive processes but also emotional experiences that significantly influence students' language achievement. Emotional challenges such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of self-confidence frequently hinder learners' participation in language learning activities. The study adopts qualitative thematic analysis design involving 40 students from a vocational school. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed six major themes: Foreign Language Learning Experience (37.5%), Speaking Nervousness (20%), Fear of Mistakes (15%), Self-confidence (12.5%), Language Anxiety (10%), and Avoidance Behavior (5%). The most dominant theme was students' foreign language learning experience, indicating that previous learning encounters strongly influenced learners' emotions toward English. Speaking nervousness and fear of mistakes were also significant factors affecting classroom participation. The findings highlight the importance of creating supportive learning environments, promoting positive feedback, and implementing anxiety-reducing instructional strategies. The study contributes to the growing body of research on affective factors in EFL learning and provides practical implications for English teachers in vocational education contexts.

Keywords: emotional challenges; English as a Foreign Language; language anxiety; vocational school students; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

English has become an essential international language used in education, business, science, and global communication. Consequently, English language proficiency has become an important skill for students worldwide, including those in Indonesia. Despite its importance, many Indonesian students encounter considerable difficulties when learning English as a foreign language (EFL). These difficulties are not limited to linguistic competence but also involve emotional and psychological challenges that affect learning outcomes. Research has shown that emotions play a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA). According to Stephen Krashen (1982), emotional variables such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety influence learners' ability to acquire language through what he termed the Affective

Filter Hypothesis. When learners experience high levels of anxiety or fear, language input becomes less accessible, reducing learning effectiveness.

One of the most frequently studied emotional factors in EFL learning is foreign language anxiety. Foreign language anxiety refers to the feelings of tension, nervousness, and apprehension associated with language learning situations (Horwitz et al., 1986). Students who experience anxiety often avoid speaking, fear making mistakes, and participate less actively in classroom activities. Such emotional barriers can significantly hinder language development and communicative competence.

Vocational school students face unique challenges in language learning because they are often expected to acquire practical English skills relevant to their future careers while simultaneously dealing with academic requirements. Understanding their emotional experiences can help educators design more supportive learning environments and effective pedagogical interventions. Therefore, this study aims to explore the emotional challenges experienced by vocational school students in Medan while learning English. Specifically, it seeks to identify the dominant themes emerging from students' responses and discuss their implications for EFL teaching and learning.

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the importance of affective factors in language learning, particularly in EFL contexts where opportunities for authentic communication are often limited. Learners' emotional states can significantly influence their willingness to participate in classroom activities, take linguistic risks, and engage in meaningful communication. Positive emotions such as enjoyment, interest, and confidence have been associated with greater language achievement, while negative emotions such as anxiety, embarrassment, and frustration may impede language development (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Consequently, investigating students' emotional experiences can provide valuable insights into the challenges they encounter and the support they need to become successful language learners.

In the Indonesian educational context, English is generally taught as a foreign language, meaning that students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. This situation may intensify emotional challenges, particularly among vocational school students who are expected to develop communicative English skills relevant to future employment opportunities. Despite the growing recognition of emotions in language learning, research focusing specifically on the emotional challenges of vocational school students remains relatively limited. Therefore, examining the emotional dimensions of English learning among vocational students in Medan can contribute to a deeper understanding of learners' experiences and provide practical recommendations for improving English language instruction in similar educational settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotions in Second Language Learning

Emotions are integral components of language learning because they influence learners' motivation, engagement, and achievement. According to MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012), positive emotions facilitate language learning by increasing willingness to communicate, whereas negative emotions may inhibit language production and participation. The field of positive psychology has recently emphasized the role of emotional well-being in language education. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) argue that positive emotions such as enjoyment can coexist with anxiety and significantly affect language learning outcomes.

2.2 Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is among the most widely researched affective factors in SLA. Horwitz et al. (1986) define foreign language anxiety as a specific form of anxiety related to language learning contexts. It consists of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Studies have consistently shown that anxious learners participate less frequently in classroom interactions and exhibit lower levels of language achievement (Young, 1991; Liu & Jackson, 2008). In EFL classrooms, speaking activities often trigger the highest levels of anxiety because students fear making mistakes and being judged by peers or teachers.

2.3 Self-Confidence and Language Learning

Self-confidence refers to learners' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform language-related tasks. According to Clément (1980), self-confidence contributes positively to language achievement and communication willingness. Students with higher confidence tend to take risks, initiate conversations, and actively engage in language learning activities. Conversely, low self-confidence can lead to avoidance behavior and reduced participation. Building learners' confidence through supportive feedback and meaningful communication opportunities is therefore essential for successful language learning.

2.4 Fear of Mistakes and Avoidance Behavior

Fear of making mistakes is closely associated with language anxiety. Learners often worry that grammatical or pronunciation errors will result in embarrassment or criticism. Such fears may cause students to avoid speaking opportunities altogether (Tsui, 1996). Avoidance behavior manifests when learners deliberately withdraw from classroom participation, avoid volunteering answers, or remain silent during discussions. While avoidance may temporarily reduce anxiety, it limits opportunities for language practice and improvement.

2.5 Speaking Nervousness in EFL Classrooms

Speaking is commonly regarded as the most anxiety-provoking language skill. According to Woodrow (2006), students often experience nervousness when speaking in front of others because oral communication requires immediate language production. Speaking nervousness can reduce fluency, increase hesitation, and negatively affect communicative performance.

Understanding students' speaking-related concerns is therefore crucial for designing instructional practices that encourage oral participation and language development.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was selected because it allows researchers to identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The participants consisted of 40 students from a vocational school in Medan, Indonesia. The students were selected because they were actively engaged in learning English as a foreign language and could provide insights into their emotional experiences during language learning.

Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires. Students were asked to describe their feelings, experiences, and challenges when learning English. The questionnaire enabled participants to express their thoughts freely and provide detailed responses regarding their emotional experiences.

The collected responses were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

The analysis resulted in six major themes representing students' emotional challenges in learning English.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings

The thematic analysis identified six major themes. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of the themes.

Table 1 Themes Identified from Students' Responses

Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Foreign Language Learning Experience	15	37.5%
Fear of Mistakes	6	15%
Self-confidence	5	12.5%
Language Anxiety	4	10%
Avoidance Behavior	2	5%
Speaking Nervousness	8	20%
Total	40	100%

Foreign Language Learning Experience (37.5%)

The most dominant theme was foreign language learning experience, representing 37.5% of participants. Students frequently described previous experiences that shaped their attitudes and emotions toward English learning. Positive learning experiences increased motivation and confidence, while negative experiences often led to anxiety and reluctance. This finding supports Krashen's (1982) assertion that emotional experiences influence language acquisition through affective mechanisms. The results also align with Mercer and Dörnyei (2020), who argue that learners' emotional histories significantly shape future engagement in language learning.

Speaking Nervousness (20%)

Speaking nervousness emerged as the second most frequent theme. Many students reported feeling nervous when speaking English in front of classmates or teachers. They feared forgetting vocabulary, mispronouncing words, or being unable to express their ideas clearly.

This finding is consistent with Woodrow (2006), who identified public speaking situations as major sources of anxiety among EFL learners. The immediate nature of oral communication often intensifies learners' emotional responses.

Fear of Mistakes (15%)

Fear of making mistakes was another prominent challenge. Students worried about grammatical errors, pronunciation mistakes, and peer evaluation. Such fears reduced their willingness to participate in classroom discussions. The finding supports Tsui (1996), who observed that fear of negative evaluation often discourages language learners from engaging in communicative activities. Teachers therefore play a critical role in creating non-threatening classroom environments.

Self-Confidence (12.5%)

Self-confidence was identified as an important emotional factor affecting language learning. Students with higher confidence levels reported greater willingness to communicate and participate in classroom activities. This finding is consistent with Clément (1980), who emphasized the positive relationship between self-confidence and language performance. Enhancing learners' confidence can increase engagement and facilitate language development.

Language Anxiety (10%)

Several students explicitly described experiencing anxiety when learning English. Their anxiety was associated with examinations, classroom participation, and communication tasks. The findings correspond with Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation as core dimensions of foreign language anxiety. Persistent anxiety may negatively affect both academic achievement and learner well-being.

Avoidance Behavior (5%)

Although the least frequent theme, avoidance behavior remains significant because it directly limits language practice opportunities. Some students reported avoiding speaking activities or choosing not to participate in classroom interactions. This finding reflects previous research showing that anxiety can lead learners to withdraw from communicative situations (Young, 1991). Such behavior may hinder language development despite students' cognitive capabilities.

4.2 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that emotional challenges are pervasive among vocational school students learning English. While language anxiety remains important, the predominance of foreign language learning experiences suggests that emotional responses are deeply rooted in students' prior interactions with English. The interrelationship among speaking nervousness, fear of mistakes, self-confidence, and anxiety reflects the complex affective nature of language learning. Students who fear making mistakes often experience nervousness when speaking, which can reduce confidence and increase avoidance behavior.

The results also support contemporary perspectives in positive psychology, which emphasize the importance of fostering positive emotional experiences alongside linguistic competence. Teachers should implement supportive instructional practices such as collaborative learning, constructive feedback, and low-anxiety speaking activities to enhance students' emotional well-being and language achievement.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on foreign language anxiety and emotional factors in EFL learning. For instance, Horwitz et al. (1986) found that

anxiety is one of the most significant barriers to successful language acquisition, particularly in speaking-related activities. Similarly, Liu and Jackson (2008) reported that students with high levels of language anxiety tended to be less willing to communicate in English and often avoided classroom interaction. The prominence of speaking nervousness and fear of mistakes in the present study supports these findings, suggesting that oral communication remains a major source of emotional challenge for EFL learners across different educational contexts.

The results also corroborate studies emphasizing the role of self-confidence in language learning. Clément (1980) argued that learners with stronger linguistic self-confidence are more likely to engage in communication and demonstrate higher language achievement. Likewise, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) found that positive emotions, including confidence and enjoyment, contribute significantly to learners' willingness to communicate in a foreign language. In the current study, students who reported higher self-confidence appeared more willing to participate in classroom activities despite experiencing occasional anxiety. This finding indicates that confidence can function as a protective factor that mitigates the negative effects of emotional challenges during language learning.

Furthermore, the dominance of the Foreign Language Learning Experience theme extends previous research by highlighting the long-term influence of learners' educational histories on their emotional responses. While many studies focus primarily on anxiety as an isolated construct, the present findings suggest that students' emotions are shaped by accumulated learning experiences, both positive and negative. This observation aligns with Mercer and Dörnyei's (2020) view that language learning is a dynamic process in which emotions develop through continuous interactions with teachers, peers, and learning environments. Therefore, improving students' emotional experiences requires not only addressing immediate anxiety-provoking situations but also creating sustained positive learning environments that foster motivation, confidence, and a sense of achievement over time.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the emotional challenges experienced by vocational school students in Medan while learning English as a foreign language. The thematic analysis identified six major themes: Foreign Language Learning Experience, Speaking Nervousness, Fear of Mistakes, Self-confidence, Language Anxiety, and Avoidance Behavior. The findings revealed that foreign language learning experience was the most dominant theme, followed by speaking nervousness and fear of mistakes. These results indicate that students' emotional experiences significantly influence their engagement and participation in language learning activities.

The study suggests that EFL teachers should prioritize emotional support alongside linguistic instruction. Creating a positive classroom atmosphere, encouraging risk-taking, and providing constructive feedback can help reduce anxiety and improve students' confidence. Future research may involve larger participant groups and incorporate interviews or classroom observations to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of learners' emotional experiences.

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