



Students' Anxiety in Learning German: Types, Levels, Effects and Strategies

Hartanti Woro Susianti*

Tourism Destination Program, Bali Tourism Polytechnic
Jl. Darmawangsa, Kampial, Kuta Selatan, Bali, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: worosusianti@ppb.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Foreign language anxiety is a psychological factor that significantly influences the process of acquiring a foreign language. This anxiety often manifests as feelings of incompetence, triggered by concerns about being monitored, judged, or compared to others. This study on the anxiety experienced by students learning German at Bali Tourism Polytechnic employs a qualitative approach using case study and phenomenological methods. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory classroom observations, and related documents. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis methods. The research findings indicate that students experience various types of anxiety such as state anxiety, situation-specific anxiety, anxiety in testing situations, facilitating anxiety, and debilitating anxiety. The levels of anxiety experienced by the students were mostly low to moderate. Foreign language anxiety has negative impacts, such as decreased performance, avoidance of language-use situations, and reduced motivation. However, anxiety can also have positive effects when managed well, such as serving as motivation to study harder. To minimize anxiety, instructors can provide positive feedback, prepare adequate materials and exercises, use collaborative and supportive teaching methods, and encourage students to focus on the learning process and their personal development.

Keywords: *foreign language learning, German, students anxiety*

Article history: Submitted March 2024 | Revised May 2024 | Accepted May 2024

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is a challenging experience for many people. Besides facing differences in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, learners often experience high levels of anxiety. Anxiety in learning a foreign language, often referred to as "language anxiety," is a significant psychological factor affecting the process of mastering a foreign language. This anxiety can manifest in various forms, such as the fear of making mistakes, the embarrassment of speaking and participating in language activities, or the worry about being judged by others.

Anxiety is a multidimensional experience that can impair academic performance. It can disrupt the thinking process, reduce academic performance by

diminishing information processing skills, and trigger avoidance, inattention, and negative thoughts (Onwuegbuzie & Wilson, 2003).

Anxious learners often worry about the impressions others form of them. When faced with uncomfortable classroom learning situations, they might choose to withdraw from these activities. Some learners believe that they cannot perform well in the foreign language, which leads to negative expectations. Consequently, this results in reduced effort and avoidance of opportunities to enhance their communication skills.

According to Cheng (2001), anxiety, particularly speaking anxiety, is a type of tension formed in the mind that can have both negative and positive impacts, potentially motivating and facilitating learning. Meanwhile, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) define language anxiety as a specific fear and worry related to foreign language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning. Anxiety has been found to interfere with many types of learning, but it becomes more significant when associated with foreign language learning. Foreign language anxiety is defined as the feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and worry experienced by native speakers when learning and/or using a second or foreign language.

Research on the topic of foreign language anxiety has been conducted by several researchers such as Horwitz, et al (1986) entitled *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety*. This study was one of the first to identify and conceptualize anxiety in learning a foreign language as a specific psychological construct. Then Shao & Ji (2013) in their research entitled *An exploration of Chinese EFL students' emotional intelligence and foreign language anxiety*, investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and anxiety in learning a foreign language in Chinese students. While Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) explored the relationship between anxiety and enjoyment in learning foreign languages in the classroom, in their study entitled *Anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom*.

Research conducted by Price (Koba, Ogawa, & Wilkinson, 2000) revealed that speaking a foreign language in front of other students generates the greatest anxiety for most learners. Price then highlighted the role of the instructor, stating that instructors who consistently criticize learners' pronunciation may contribute to their anxiety. Based on the above explanation, anxiety is an affective factor associated with feelings of discomfort in specific situations that demand a person to perform tasks they feel incapable of, including situations where they have to perform using a foreign language.

In the context of learning German, this anxiety can become a significant barrier. German is known for its complex grammar, including the use of cases, word types, and sentence structures that differ from the native languages of most learners. This can cause learners to feel frustrated and worried about their ability to master the language. Factors such as the learning environment, teaching methods, and learners' perceptions of German can also influence anxiety levels. Learners who feel uncomfortable or lack confidence in certain learning situations, or who hold negative views about German, tend to experience higher levels of anxiety.

Anxiety in learning a foreign language, including German, can negatively impact learners' performance and motivation. Excessive anxiety can hinder learners' ability to concentrate, remember material, and use the language effectively. This can slow down the learning process and make it less efficient.

Therefore, it is important for educators and learners to recognize and address anxiety in foreign language learning, especially in German. Strategies such as creating a positive and supportive learning environment, using interactive and enjoyable teaching methods, and helping learners develop confidence and anxiety-coping strategies can help reduce the negative effects of anxiety and improve success in learning German.

The objectives of this paper are to determine (1) the types of anxiety experienced by students learning German at Bali Tourism Polytechnic, (2) the levels of anxiety in students learning German, (3) the impact of this anxiety on learning German, and (4) ways or strategies to minimize students' anxiety.

2. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach using case study and phenomenological methods. The participants in this study are students from Bali Tourism Polytechnic who are learning German and experiencing anxiety in their learning process. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where data collection continues until no new information is obtained.

Data were collected using in-depth interview techniques to explore their experiences, feelings, and perceptions about anxiety in learning German. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with open-ended questions, allowing participants to freely share their experiences. Additionally, participatory observation techniques were utilized in German language classes to observe behaviors, interactions, and dynamics occurring during the learning process. These observations help the researchers understand the context and situations that might trigger or influence students' anxiety in learning German. Additional data were gathered from related documents, such as written assignments or learning materials used in German classes.

The data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process includes: (1) transcribing interview data and recording field observations verbatim, (2) reading and thoroughly studying the data to gain a general understanding, (3) coding the data by assigning labels or codes to relevant data segments, (4) identifying themes that emerge from these codes, (5) grouping themes into broader categories or patterns, and (6) interpreting and explaining the research findings in relation to the research questions and relevant theories.

To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation techniques were used, combining various data sources (interviews, observations, and documentation) and involving participants in the verification process of the findings. Additionally, member checking was conducted by returning the research findings to the participants to ensure that the researchers' interpretations aligned with their experiences.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Types of Anxiety

Anxiety as an affective state is defined as an uncomfortable emotional condition where a person feels danger, helplessness, and tension when facing perceived threats (Blau in Aydin, 2008). According to him, anxiety can be

categorized into General Anxiety and Academic Anxiety. General Anxiety relates to "worry and emotionality," referring to cognitive aspects such as negative expectations and cognitive concerns about oneself, situations, possible consequences, and emotionality. Meanwhile, Academic Anxiety pertains to anxiety issues in academic settings, including state anxiety, trait anxiety, situation-specific anxiety, facilitating anxiety, debilitating anxiety, and anxiety in testing situations.

State anxiety occurs in various situations and can change over time. In contrast, trait anxiety is more closely related to stable and permanent individual differences in personality (Cheng, 2001). At the beginning of their studies, German language students at Bali Tourism Polytechnic feel unconfident about learning German, as they have never studied it before. German is perceived as very foreign since it is used by a particular community they rarely encounter. Unlike English, which they can encounter in many media such as movies, songs, books, etc., German is new to them. However, as they progress in their studies and begin to familiarize themselves with the language, their confidence starts to build. This phenomenon is categorized as state anxiety.

Oh in (Ratnawati, Rusdiah, & Kone, 2014) categorizes the foreign language anxiety experienced by learners in class as situation-specific anxiety, which is characterized by self-centered thoughts, feelings of inadequacy, fear of failure, and emotional reactions in the language class. This also occurred in the German language classes at Bali Tourism Polytechnic. Students often felt incapable of mastering German, especially if they saw their classmates progressing faster than themselves. Students who felt less capable compared to their peers tended to be inactive, more quiet, and even did not participate in learning activities. This case was more evident in speaking activities. These students would only speak when asked/appointed by their lecturer. Their lack of self-confidence was apparent in the way they answered, where they always apologized, both before and after answering, whether their answer was correct or incorrect. The fear of making mistakes was also evident in the way they always asked for confirmation about the accuracy of their sentences. They were afraid of making mistakes and then being judged or mocked. Situation-specific anxiety also occurred in classes with a larger number of students. A sense of embarrassment often arose when they had to speak in front of many friends. They felt that every word they uttered in German would be observed and judged by the lecturer or classmates, which made them nervous and unable to think.

Meanwhile, anxiety in testing situations is seen as anxiety that focuses on investigation. Test anxiety is a type of anxiety related to one's experience in tests and is closely related to foreign language anxiety during academic evaluations (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Almost all students learning German experienced this kind of anxiety. The main anxiety was due to lack of or no preparation for the test. Some students considered the German language course to be less important compared to other courses, because it was not a core course, so they allocated more time to study other courses. Anxiety in testing situations also occurred in the form of fear of failing to achieve goals or standards set by themselves, the lecturer, or the education system, as well as pressure to get good grades. The time limit in the test also triggered anxiety in some students. With a time limit, anxious students tended to be nervous and make more mistakes. This is in line with what was stated by (Wilson, 2006), who found that without a time limit on a math test, highly anxious

students solved problems as quickly and accurately as their calmer peers. However, when a time limit was imposed, highly anxious learners made three times as many mistakes and took about twice as long to complete each question.

Facilitating Anxiety has a positive effect that helps improve performance and makes a learner more alert in performing tasks. Some students learning German at Bali Tourism Polytechnic were able to process their anxiety or fear into something positive, by making it a motivation to learn. A reasonable anxiety to get good grades in the German language course motivated them to study and practice harder. There was also a form of student anxiety about pronunciation and accent in speaking German, because they had to frequently communicate with German guests at their workplace, which motivated them to pay more attention to pronunciation and intonation. This kind of facilitating anxiety can help students stay motivated, focused, and enthusiastic in learning German.

On the other hand, Debilitating Anxiety is negative, where a learner becomes too anxious and may not be able to perform tasks optimally. Bali Tourism Polytechnic students who lacked confidence in their German language abilities tended to avoid practicing and interacting with the language in class. Likewise, students who were too perfectionist, who felt frustrated when making mistakes, were reluctant to try and practice speaking German.

3.2. Level of Anxiety

According to Townsend in Asnur (2013) there are four levels of anxiety namely low anxiety, moderate anxiety, high anxiety and panic. Low anxiety is related to stressful situations that occur in daily life and cause someone to become aware and increase their perception. This can also motivate learning as well as provide improvement and creativity. Manifestations that appear at this level are fatigue, being easily offended, increased perception, high awareness, ability to learn, increased motivation, and situational attitudes. In the process of learning German at Bali Tourism Polytechnic, this low level of anxiety occurred the most. Students did not feel pressured or burdened by the demand to master German, so they could learn casually and enjoy the process. They did not feel anxious or overly worried when making mistakes in German, because they considered mistakes a natural part of the learning process.

Meanwhile, moderate anxiety allows someone to focus on important issues and ignore other issues, so that someone has a main concern, but they can still do something directly. Manifestations that occur at this level include increased fatigue, faster heartbeat, heavy breathing, increased muscle tension, speaking faster with a higher volume, narrow perception, inability to learn optimally, decreased concentration, selective attention and focus on stimuli that do not increase anxiety, being easily offended, impatience, forgetfulness, being easily angered and crying. Some Bali Tourism Polytechnic students also experienced similar things in learning German. Reasonable anxiety before an exam, or proportional feelings of worry when required to speak in front of their lecturer, became commonplace. Some students couldn't answer (went blank) when given a sudden question, or chose to remain silent because they lacked confidence to answer. There were also students who, due to nervousness, couldn't think and answered incorrectly.

The next level is high anxiety, which greatly reduces one's perception. Someone with high anxiety tends to focus on details and specifics, and also does not think too much about other issues. Someone at this level of anxiety requires more guidance to focus on other areas. Manifestations that appear at this level sometimes include complaints of vertigo, headaches, insomnia, frequent urination, diarrhea, narrowed area of perception, unwillingness to learn effectively, focus on oneself and one's own desire to eliminate anxiety, feeling trapped, or confused due to disorientation.

The last level of anxiety is panic. Panic is related to shock, fear, and terror due to loss of control. Someone who panics cannot do anything even with guidance. The symptoms that usually occur at this level of anxiety are difficulty breathing, dilated pupils, looking pale, incoherent speech, inability to understand simple instructions, screaming, yelling, experiencing hallucinations, and delusions. The last two levels of anxiety mentioned above, namely high anxiety and panic, were not apparent in the process of learning German at Bali Tourism Polytechnic.

3.3. The Effect of Anxiety

According to MacIntyre in Young (1999), the impacts of anxiety on foreign language learning are: (1) Decreased achievement and language performance, where anxiety can disrupt the learner's cognitive ability to process and remember new information, which negatively affects language acquisition; (2) Inhibiting active participation in class; (3) Causing avoidance of language situations, where learners may avoid situations that require the use of a foreign language, such as speaking in class or participating in discussions, which could hinder their progress; and (4) Negative impact on motivation, where prolonged anxiety can reduce the motivation to learn, which could ultimately affect their academic achievement in that language.

In psychology, the impacts of anxiety in learning a foreign language can be classified into several categories, namely cognitive impact, affective impact, physiological impact, and behavioral impact (Young, 1999). And here are the impacts of anxiety that occurred in learning German at Bali Tourism Polytechnic:

1) Cognitive Impact

Anxiety affected students' cognitive processes in learning German, such as: difficulty concentrating and focusing attention, difficulty remembering vocabulary and grammar rules, difficulty understanding instructions or explanations, and difficulty processing new information.

2) Affective Impact

Anxiety also affected students' emotional aspects and feelings, such as: low self-confidence, shyness or fear of speaking, and loss of motivation and interest in learning. However, the opposite also occurred, where students became motivated to study harder.

3) Behavioral Impact

Anxiety also affected students' behavior in the process of learning German, such as: low participation in class, avoiding German language situations, postponing or avoiding tasks, and poor performance in tests or exams.

Meanwhile, the physiological impacts of this foreign language anxiety, such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, headaches or stomachaches, did not appear to occur in students learning German, due to their level of anxiety being relatively low.

3.4. How to Minimize Anxiety of Students

To minimize the emergence of foreign language anxiety among learners, teachers should help prevent or deal with their anxiety. Teachers can provide basic knowledge about anxiety (normal/ abnormal anxiety), teach ways to cope with it, and help them with appropriate responses when they feel anxious.

Providing positive and constructive feedback can reduce students' fear of judgment or failure. Teachers can also adequately prepare students for lessons or exams, with appropriate materials and sufficient practice. In addition, teachers can use more collaborative and supportive learning methods, which can help reduce anxiety levels. Teachers should also encourage students to focus on the learning process and their personal growth, rather than just on the end result.

According to Phillips (1992), to help learners reduce their anxiety, first teachers need to start with a lot of attention and empathy towards the negative effects that learners may experience. Then, teachers should speak openly with learners about setting realistic goals for learning. Teachers should also provide information to learners about language anxiety. Meanwhile, Crookall and Oxford in (Young, 1999) state that teachers can greatly help reduce anxiety in the classroom by making the classroom atmosphere as friendly and relaxed as possible. They also suggest improving the classroom climate through the use of pair work, small group work, games, simulations, and structured exercises. Then they also suggest some ways to deal with feelings of anxiety when presenting in public, namely: (1) Being positive, (2) Good preparation, (3) Learning relaxation techniques, and (4) If learners have very high anxiety, refocusing and breathing.

By implementing these approaches, teachers not only help learners reduce their anxiety, but also increase the effectiveness of the learning process. The active involvement of teachers in supporting learners emotionally and academically is crucial in shaping a positive and productive learning experience.

4. CONCLUSION

Anxiety is often a manifestation of feelings of incompetence, where the trigger is the worry of being watched, judged, or compared to others. Foreign language anxiety is a psychological factor that influences the process of mastering a foreign language. This anxiety can manifest in various forms such as fear of making mistakes, shyness to speak, or worry about other people's judgments.

The anxiety experienced by students in learning German at BiTP consists of various types of anxiety such as state anxiety, situation-specific anxiety, anxiety in testing situations, facilitating anxiety, and debilitating anxiety. The level of anxiety experienced by these students is mostly low and moderate. This foreign language anxiety has negative impacts such as decreased achievement, avoidance of language situations, and decreased motivation. However, there are also positive impacts, where anxiety is well-managed, so that it becomes a motivation to study harder. To minimize anxiety, teachers can provide positive feedback, prepare adequate materials and exercises, use collaborative and supportive learning methods, and encourage students to focus on the learning process and personal growth.

With the right approach, language teaching can be transformed from a stressful experience into a more inclusive, supportive, and positive learning process, in which all learners feel empowered and engaged.

REFERENCES

- Asnur, S. M. (2013). The Students' Anxiety in Delivering English Presentation. *Elite: English and Literature Journal*, 40-53. Retrieved from <https://journal.uin-alauddin.ac.id/index.php/elite/article/view/3350>
- Aydin, S. (2008). An Investigation on the Language Anxiety and Fear of Negative. *Asian EFL Journal*, 421-444. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512266.pdf>
- Cheng, Y. s. (2001). Learners' Beliefs and Second Language Anxiety. *Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistics*, 27(2), 75-90.
- Dewaele, J. M., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2014). The two faces of Janus? Anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 237-274.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.
- Koba, N., Ogawa, N., & Wilkinson, D. (2000). Using The Community Language Learning Approach to Cope with Language Anxiety. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6(11). Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/>
- Macintyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The Subtle Effects of Language Anxiety on Cognitive Processing in the Second Language. *Language Learning: A Journal of Research in Language Studies*, 44(2), 283-305. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1994.tb01103.x>
- Musthachim, A. (2014). Students' anxiety in learning english: a case study at the 8th grade of SMPN 9 South Tangerang.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Wilson, V. A. (2003). Statistics Anxiety: Nature, etiology, antecedents, effects, and treatments--a comprehensive review of the literature. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(2), 195-209. doi:<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/1356251032000052447>
- Phillips, E. M. (1992). The effects of language anxiety on students' oral test performance and attitudes. *Modern Language Journal*, 76(1), 14-26.
- Ratnawati, Rusdiah, & Kone, A. M. (2014). Minimizing Anxiety of Students in Learning English. *SETALI 2014* (pp. 530-533). Bandung: UPI Press.
- Sari, M. N., & Ningsih, P. E. A. (2022). AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' MOTIVATION AND ANXIETY ON LEARNING ENGLISH AT SMA NEGERI 6 KERINCI. *Pendekar: Jurnal Pendidikan Berkarakter*, 5(3), 181-188.
- Shao, K., Yu, W., & Ji, Z. (2013). An exploration of Chinese EFL students' emotional intelligence and foreign language anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 97(4), 917-929.
- Tran, T. T. L. (2022). An Investigation into the Causes of Students' Anxiety in Learning English Speaking Skills. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, 2(3), 183-196.
- Wilson, S. (2006). Anxiety in Learning English as a Foreign Language. Spain, Granada. Retrieved from <http://hera.ugr.es/tesisugr/1635290.pdf>

Young, D. (1999). *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.