

Exploring PBI New Student Anxiety in Learning Process

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Introduction

Transitioning to a new academic environment necessitates comprehensive preparation, encompassing both material resources and psychological readiness. This is particularly salient for students advancing to higher education, who encounter a multitude of unforeseen challenges for which they are often unprepared. The social and pedagogical landscapes of university life differ substantially from those of secondary school, compelling first-year students to undergo significant mental and physical adaptation. Within this critical phase, anxiety emerges as a prevalent affective response (Rasool, Tahir, & Jan, 2022). This anxiety often stems from apprehensions regarding an altered social milieu and a more rigorous academic climate. The elevated demands of tertiary education require new students to anticipate and develop strategies for adjustment. Notably, the pedagogical methodologies employed at the university level diverge sharply from high school practices. University lectures typically demand proactive student participation, encouraging dialogue and interactive engagement. This shift

can, however, induce apprehension in new students, particularly regarding verbal interaction with lecturers and peers.

For students in the English Language Education (PBI) program, this dynamic is further complicated by the imperative to communicate predominantly in English during instructional sessions. This linguistic demand constitutes a significant source of anxiety, with concerns over grammatical inaccuracies and limited lexical knowledge being paramount. Students often report a fear of vocalizing their ideas or responding to instructors' queries due to the perceived embarrassment of making errors. Furthermore, comparing oneself to peers who demonstrate higher English proficiency can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and inhibit class participation. These multifaceted factors collectively contribute to the anxiety experienced by incoming students, though, over time, individuals typically cultivate adaptive strategies to manage these challenges and acclimatize to the academic environment. This study aims to explore the phenomenon of anxiety among first-year university students, specifically within the PBI context, and to identify the coping mechanisms they employ. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with new students, an instrument chosen to elicit a diverse range of personal experiences and perspectives. Employing a qualitative methodological approach, the analysis will interpret these subjective accounts to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the primary factors that influence anxiety in first-year PBI students during the learning process? (2) How do these students manage and cope with anxiety in their academic activities?

Literature review

Semantically, "new" refers to something recently created or commenced (Cambridge Dictionary). A "student" is defined as a person engaged in learning at a college or university. Consequently, a "new student" or "freshman" denotes an individual in the initial year of a higher education institution (Cambridge Dictionary). This study specifically focuses on new students at the university level, namely those enrolled in the Department of English Language Education at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh.

These students enter an educational tier characterized by a more complex and autonomous system than secondary education. The university learning process demands greater activity, verbal expression of ideas, and proactive engagement—a shift that triggers unconscious adaptation processes as students move beyond a "high school" mindset. The first semester of university presents multifaceted challenges (Burke, 2016), heightening students' awareness of their novel circumstances. For many, entering higher education can feel akin to navigating an unfamiliar environment, an experience nuanced by factors such as social class and the perceived culture of the institution (Leese, 2010).

Anxiety

Anxiety is a normative emotional state that, when functional, provides critical feedback regarding an individual's interaction with and adaptation to their environment (Krauss, 2015). A certain

degree of anxiety in social situations is considered typical, adaptive, and can serve a positive function (Suryaningrum, 2021). While prevalent in contemporary fast-paced society, anxiety need not be debilitating (Elmore, 2018). It can be understood as a psychosomatic response to perceived environmental demands or threats.

For many students, anxiety is an integral aspect of the academic experience, often arising from the moment they enter university. This feeling typically originates from fears of making mistakes, deviating from peers, or becoming the focus of unwanted attention. Fundamentally, anxiety emerges when an individual perceives a significant threat to their personal integrity or core biographical plans (Krauss, 2015). Although anxiety levels vary interpersonally, their potential adverse effects are well-documented, including depression, insomnia, diminished academic performance, high attrition rates, and chronic procrastination (Hullinger, 2014). The intensity of the anxiety response is contingent upon individual psychological and physiological predispositions.

Learning process

Learning is conceptually defined as a behavioral change resulting from experience (Houwer, 2013). It is also described as the process of integrating prior knowledge with new information to revise one's mental representation of the world (Wang, 2001). In essence, learning constitutes the cognitive process of acquiring and comprehending new information. A robust definition of learning, as proposed by Lachman (1997), should:

1. Encompass all stimulus-response relationships recognized in psychology, including insight, imitation, operant conditioning, and classical conditioning.
2. Clearly differentiate learning from other phenomena like sensory adaptation, fatigue, injury, or maturation.
3. Treat learning as a distinct process, separate from its outcomes.
4. Utilize objective terminology, avoiding vague or mentalistic terms such as "experience."
5. Be applicable across all levels of biological organisms and human development.

The learning process itself is a key motivational factor in educational settings, with its nature varying according to the context, materials, and activities involved (Hedges, 2018). Thus, the learning process can be understood as the sequential cognitive and behavioral steps undertaken during knowledge acquisition and skill development.

New student anxiety in the learning process

Numerous factors contribute to the anxiety experienced by new students in unfamiliar academic settings. As first-year students, encountering such emotions is a common psychological response. Academic anxiety exerts a considerable influence on student achievement. Elevated anxiety can impede student progress by disrupting cognitive functions, thereby fragmenting the learning process. While this occasionally may paradoxically enhance performance through heightened alertness, it more frequently

hinders it. Consequently, recognizing and mitigating academic anxiety is of critical importance for fostering student success and well-being

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the lived experiences of first-year students at the university level, with a specific focus on their emotional and psychological state during the learning process. The primary aim was to identify and analyze the factors contributing to academic anxiety among new students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The resulting interview data were then processed and thematically analyzed to delineate the general condition of first-year students within the academic environment and to identify the specific factors that influence their anxiety during learning.

Research site and participants

The research was conducted at the Department of English Language Education (Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, PBI), Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. The university is located on Jalan Ibnu Sina No. 2, Darussalam, Syiah Kuala District, Banda Aceh. The participants of this study were purposively selected from the population of first-year (freshman) students enrolled in the PBI program. The study specifically focused on exploring anxiety within the learning process. The sample consisted of three (3) participants who self-identified as experiencing academic anxiety. All selected participants were recent high school graduates with no intervening gap year, ensuring their experiences reflected the immediate transition to tertiary education.

Data collection instruments

The data for this study were collected using two primary instruments: semi-structured interviews and audio recording for documentation.

Semi-structured interviews

The primary method of data collection was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted offline. Each participant engaged in a one-on-one interview session with the researcher, responding to a predetermined set of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of their experiences with anxiety in the learning process. Each interview session lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

Documentation

To ensure accuracy and facilitate in-depth analysis, all interview sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. These recordings served as crucial documentation, providing a verifiable record of the responses. The audio data were later transcribed verbatim. The transcripts formed the

primary dataset, which was then systematically analyzed by the researcher to identify emerging themes and draw conclusions regarding the research questions.

Finding and discussion

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study, structured according to the research question aimed at exploring the anxiety experienced by new PBI students during the learning process. The participants are hereafter referred to as S1, S2, and S3. Analysis of the interview data revealed three primary thematic categories that function as sources of anxiety: (1) anxiety stemming from achievement motivation and gender dynamics, (2) anxiety related to making mistakes and perceived vocabulary deficiencies, and (3) anxiety arising from interactions with strict lecturers.

Anxiety in achievement motivation and gender

The data indicate that a competitive classroom environment focused on high academic achievement serves as a significant source of anxiety. Furthermore, gender dynamics were identified as an amplifying factor. Participants reported that female students, in particular, felt intimidated by male peers who appeared more confident and less apprehensive about participating in class, such as by answering lecturers' questions or speaking in front of others.

Most of my classmates have big ambitions to achieve good grades. I feel there is a competition between male and female students in the classroom. (S1) My classmates sometimes compete with each other, and also female students most likely feel challenged by male students who are less afraid than them. (S2) It is really fun when my classmates have big ambition, but at the same time I feel intimidated by them. (S3)

All three participants corroborated that anxiety was influenced by both achievement motivation and gender. They recounted a shared experience from their first day of university, where despite being strangers, they felt compelled to provide optimal answers and link their ideas to others' responses when prompted by the lecturer. Over time, however, this competitive atmosphere, coupled with growing familiarity among peers, has been reinterpreted as a motivational force for self-improvement. The participants collectively expressed a belief that fair and constructive competition with classmates is an acceptable, if challenging, aspect of the academic environment.

Anxiety in making mistakes and lack of vocabulary For new students with limited prior experience in English-medium instruction, the fear of making linguistic errors emerged as a profound anxiety trigger. This fear is compounded by the social apprehension of being ridiculed by peers, which subsequently diminishes self-confidence and disrupts focus during learning activities.

It's very challenging for me if friends laugh at me. It makes me lose my focus and afraid to continue speaking while answering the lecturer's questions.' (S1) I am afraid of making mistakes; although it is normal, I just can't deal with it. I have just a few vocabulary words, which makes it hard for me to face the learning process. (S3)

The participants explicitly associated anxiety with the prospect of making mistakes during learning, with one student specifically highlighting limited vocabulary as a contributing factor. This reflects an implicit belief, common among language learners, that English must be spoken with flawless grammar and pronunciation. As noted by Huda and Ma'mun (2020), a perfectionist mindset can be detrimental, potentially leading to passive learning if students fear mockery for errors. This anxiety initially resulted in reduced classroom participation, thereby hindering effective academic performance. However, a process of normalization was observed; the students reported beginning to accept mistakes as an inherent part of the learning journey. They also noted that some lecturers actively mitigated this anxiety by providing supportive hints and vocabulary-building techniques, which they found instrumental in facilitating their learning process.

Anxiety in meeting strict lecturers

Interactions with lecturers perceived as strict were consistently reported as a direct cause of nervousness and anxiety. This anxiety is twofold: first, a fear of making mistakes that might provoke the lecturer's displeasure, and second, apprehension about the potential impact of stringent classroom rules on final grades. I am really nervous in the strict lecturer's class. Even when they just step into the class, I can feel the atmosphere that makes me anxious. (S2) Class with a strict lecturer really makes me anxious. (S3) The participants asserted that the demeanor of a strict lecturer significantly impacts their anxiety levels during learning. They described a heightened sense of scrutiny, feeling as though they were constantly erring even when adhering to rules. In response, they employed avoidance strategies, such as remaining silent and choosing seats away from the front of the class to minimize participation and visibility. Paradoxically, they also acknowledged a potential adaptive outcome: this high-pressure environment heightened their desire to learn and master the material, fostering greater self-discipline in their academic approach

Conclusion

Anxiety within the learning process is a prevalent phenomenon among new students entering higher education, particularly in the English Language Education (PBI) program. This affective state poses significant challenges, including difficulties in social adjustment and adaptation to a more demanding academic environment. For PBI students, the specific requirement to engage primarily in English further exacerbates this anxiety, with fears of grammatical inaccuracy and lexical insufficiency often leading to diminished self-perception and academic confidence.

This study identified three primary catalysts for this academic anxiety: (1) anxiety stemming from achievement motivation and gender-based dynamics, (2) anxiety related to making mistakes and perceived vocabulary deficits, and (3) anxiety induced by interactions with strict lecturers. The findings indicate that motivation for high achievement, intertwined with classroom gender dynamics, was a commonly reported source of pressure. Participants reflected on a shared initial experience where the

drive to compete and perform was pronounced. Over time, however, this evolved into a more constructive form of competition, facilitated by growing peer familiarity and mutual support.

Furthermore, the fear of committing errors and a perceived lack of vocabulary were found to directly hinder active participation. This often resulted in students adopting passive learning strategies, which consequently impacted their academic performance negatively. A key step in their adaptation was the gradual normalization of mistakes as an inherent part of the language learning process, alongside an appreciation for instructional support aimed at vocabulary development.

Finally, the presence of a strict lecturer was consistently reported as a major anxiety trigger, creating an atmosphere of heightened scrutiny. In response, students frequently employed avoidance behaviors, such as reduced verbal participation and strategic seating choices. Paradoxically, this high-pressure environment was also acknowledged by some participants as a catalyst for increased motivation and the development of greater self-discipline in their studies.

The anxiety experienced by new PBI students is multifaceted, arising from a complex interplay of social, linguistic, and pedagogical factors. While initially disruptive, the findings suggest that students engage in a process of adaptation, developing both coping mechanisms and, in some cases, reframing these challenges as motivators for personal and academic growth

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