University student strategies to cope with anxiety in learning English

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ABSTRACT

This article has been prepared to report a quantitative study that revealed the strategies of students of English major and non-English major to cope with anxiety in the learning of English as a foreign language, including the description of student anxiety in learning English and strategies to cope with English learning. The respondents consisted of 173 students from English major and 173 students from non-English major of a private university in North Sulawesi Province. The validated adapted constructs of the questionnaire, namely strategies and anxiety, were originally proposed by He and Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope respectively. The research findings showed that both English major and non-English major students had no significant difference in their strategies to cope with anxiety in learning English and in their level of anxiety in learning English. However, there were four strategies to cope with anxiety in learning English which significantly contributed to the anxiety in learning English as a foreign language.

1. Introduction

The issue of anxiety in language learning has been widely discussed for its significant effects on the students' language performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; Ohata, 2015; Galuhwardani and Pratolo, 2019; Ardiani & Pratolo, 2019; Fatimah, 2019). Although language anxiety might be also viewed as a helpful factor that can motivate language learning (Wehner, 2014) the potentially negative effects of language learning anxiety can still occur such as shown in the study of Aghajani and Amanzadeh (2017) that confirmed that those who had high level of anxiety might get low high academic achievement.

English language learning anxiety has been revealed as a factor that can negatively influence success in second or foreign language learning (Lucas et al, 2011). In this case, English learning anxiety had negative effects on the academic achievement of the students. This implies that the students were more likely to have higher grades if they had lower levels of anxiety.

A lot more studies have been conducted in regard with anxiety in learning language, particularly English language (Afiqah, 2015; Shabani, 2012; Hashemi, 2011; Mahmud et al, 2016; Karatas et al, 2016) Not many studies, however, have explored the student strategies to cope with anxiety when they learn English as a foreign language (He, 2017). Young (1992) conducted a qualitative study, wherein she interviewed four language specialists. She came up with 16 strategies of how to cope with anxiety in learning a foreign language. The strategies, among others, were formation of small groups or work in pairs and students could speak only when they were ready. Her strategies were similar to those of Lucas (1984) who conducted a study in Japan, wherein she was able to manage her students of English as a foreign language. She created a warm and friendly classroom where students felt welcome by everyone.

Kondo and Yang (2004) conducted a study which involved 219 students of English as a foreign language in Japan. They came up with 70 strategies for coping with foreign language learning anxiety. The strategies included classroom principles of relaxation, positive thinking, and peer thinking. These strategies were invented so as to build the students' self-confidence as they interacted in English classroom.

In China, a similar study was conducted by Liu and Jackson (2008). Regardless of the small sample size of respondents (only 27 students), the respondents were students of non-English majors whom she interviewed whether they had particular strategies to cope with their language learning anxiety. With only a couple of responses, the students suggested, for instance, that they should have been given more time to practice their skill and build up self-confidence; and teachers should have accommodated a friendly, supportive and non-threatening learning condition.

In their metaanalysis study, Hashemi and Abbasi (2013) reviewed previous studies and they came up with twenty strategies to cope with anxiety of learners of English as a foreign language. First of all, the teachers admitted that anxiety was present among the learners as they learned English in the classroom. In order to reduce the students' anxiety, the teachers employed more formative assessment of the students' classroom performance, so that the students were not worried about their final grade score. The classroom environment was positive and encouraging the students to talk.

Alrabai (2015) had proposed and tested seven strategies for teachers to apply, including the demonstration of appropriate teaching behavior to learners. These strategies were found to be effective in reducing students' communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. His study was conducted in Saudi Arabia, using participants of various levels in terms of English proficiency.

Lately, He (2017) conducted a comprehensive study on coping strategies with language learning anxiety. It involved 320 students at university level and 30 English language teachers at two different universities in China. It was a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative approaches, wherein he utilized a self-constructed questionnaire with 12 items and interviews to cross-check the numeric data generated in the questionnaire. He came up with 32 strategies for coping with the students' anxiety in learning English as a foreign language. These strategies were then applied for a period of four months and were found to be effective and the students' learning was made more enjoyable.

University students in Indonesia have difficulties in learning English as a foreign language, particularly in listening and speaking skills (Kaharuddin, 2014), even though they have studied English in middle and high schools, namely before they enter university (Marcellino, 2008). One of college students' difficulties in learning English is due to their anxiety, as English language anxiety was associated with English achievement (Fadila et al, 2015).

The reviewed literature has shown that much more work conducted on causes of student anxiety in learning English than the work on strategies to overcome student anxiety in learning English in Indonesia, such as those of Abdul (2018) in Makassar and Widhayanti (2018) in Surabaya. Different from those two studies that came up with general strategies to overcome general anxiety in learning English, this reported study did not simply intend to describe the anxiety level and strategies, but more on comparison between students of English major and non-English major, whether or not there was a significant difference in their anxiety level and strategies. Ultimately, it sought to find out what student strategies to cope with anxiety could significantly predict their anxiety in using and mastering English as a foreign language.

Specifically, this article reported a study that was conducted in Universitas Klabat, Airmadidi Manado, during the 2nd semester of 2018-2019 academic year. It did not cover the causes of their anxiety as reported in many studies, yet it endeavored to compare the English major and non-English majors' student strategies to cope with English learning anxiety. Both the anxiety and strategies to cope with anxiety were respectively measured by structured questionnaires adapted from Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (cited in Cao, 2011) and He (2017). These two questionnaires focus on anxiety in learning English speaking skills and strategies to cope with the anxiety in learning English speaking skills. This article, therefore, did not come up with a generalization of anxiety when learning English and strategies to handle anxiety of university students, but more specific on students at Universitas Klabat alone.

2. Research Method

2.1. Research Design

This research was a descriptive quantitative research, designed to explore the respondents' English learning anxiety level as well as their strategies of how to cope with the anxiety when learning English as a second language. It was also comparative as it attempted to compare the difference of anxiety and strategy between the students of English major and non-English major. Eventually, it was an associative or correlational design as it sought to associate the strategies with anxiety, which ended up with a model of anxiety in learning English as a foreign language.

2.2. Respondents

The respondents of this current study consisted of students who officially registered at Universitas Klabat for the 2nd semester of 2018-2019 academic year. They were freshmen and sophomores, selectively divided into two categorical groups, namely the students of English major non-English major. However, the respondents participated on a voluntary basis, depending on their availability and willingness.

Purposive sampling technique was employed since this current study was intended to compare two categorical groups, namely the students of English major and non-English major. The population of the students in Klabat University was around 3400 students. By using Sample Size Calculator (Raosoft, 2004) with margin of error 5%, confidence level of 95%, response distribution of 50%, it was calculated that the sample size of 346 students was appropriate for this current study. The 346 respondents were divided into two categorical groups, namely the students of English department and non-English department. There were 173 respondents in each categorical group.

2.3. Instruments

This study utilized a questionnaire in order to gather data. The questionnaire consisted of two constructs, namely the English Language Learning Anxiety and The Strategies to Cope with Anxiety in English Language Learning. The English Language Learning Anxiety (ELLA) was adapted from Foreign Language Anxiety Scale, which was originally developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (cited in Cao, 2011). The Strategies to Cope with Anxiety in English Language Learning (SCAELL) was adapted from Foreign Language Anxiety Coping Scale that was designed by He (2017). Initially there were 33 items in ELLA instrument and 12 items in SCAELL. Content validity was employed, wherein some items in ELLA are removed in order to avoid repetitive statements. The two constructs were then translated into Indonesian language so that the respondents could understand more easily. The questionnaire implemented a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree; never) to 5 (strongly agree; always).

The adapted questionnaire underwent a pilot study so as to validate each item of the questionnaire. This pilot study was intended for statistical validity and reliability. There were 30 respondents (aside from the sample respondents for actual study) picked out for statistical analysis of validity and reliability of the two constructs used in the study. The responses were fed into a statistical application software. Mean score of each item was correlated to the average sum of all items in the constructs of ELLA and SCAELL. With the significance value of 0.05 assumed, there were three items in the construct ELLA, namely items # 6, 9, and 19 were found not valid, while all the 22 items in the construct SCAELL were valid. The three invalid items were removed and thus were not used for actual study. Further, each valid item was tested for reliability by using scale reliability. With Cronbach alpha = 0.93 for ELLA and 0.86 for SCAELL, the constructs were considered as acceptable and reliable.

2.4. Statistical Treatment of Data

This study uses descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data as following:

1) Descriptive analysis of mean score and frequency is used to find the level of students' anxiety in English Language Learning Anxiety and the frequency (indicated in percentage) of 12 strategies that were commonly used by the students in order to cope with English learning anxiety.

2) Comparative analysis of t-tests was used to find whether there was any significant or remarkable difference between the English-major students and non-English major students in

terms of their anxiety level and strategies to cope with the anxiety in learning English in the foreign language context.

3) Linear regression analysis with stepwise method was used to yield the English learning strategies that significantly predict the student anxiety in English learning. It resulted in a model of anxiety in learning English.

2.5. Interpretation of 5-point Likert Scale

Since the questionnaire responses were designed with 5-point Likert scale, the interpretation of the mean score of ELLA level was as follows:

1.00 – 1.49 ☐ 1.00	= very low
1.50 – 2.49 ☐ 2.00	= low
2.50 – 3.49 ☐ 3.00	= moderate
3.50 – 4.49 ☐ 4.00	= high
4.50 – 5.00 ☐ 5.00	= very high

Likewise, the mean score of frequency of SCAELL strategies used by students was interpreted as follows:

1.00 – 1.49 ☐ 1.00	= never used
1.50 – 2.49 ☐ 2.00	= rarely used
2.50 – 3.49 ☐ 3.00	= sometimes used
3.50 – 4.49 ☐ 4.00	= frequently used
4.50 – 5.00 ☐ 5.00	= always used

Interpretation was possible after the scores of reverse items were recorded accordingly.

3. Findings and Discussion

With descriptive statistics, it was found that averagely the mean score of anxiety level in learning English was interpreted as moderate level ($M = 3.16$; $SD = 0.45$), where there were 71.4% responses in moderate level and 21.4% responses in high level.

The mean score of all strategies were found to be frequently used, where there were four strategies, namely nos. 8, 9, 10, and 12, were found to be above 4.00 (See Table 1).

Table 1. Average Score of Strategies

No.	Strategies to Cope with Anxiety	Mean	SD
1	Having classmates work in small groups helps reduce my nervousness when speaking English.	3.83	1.02
2	It helps reduce my nervousness to talk with other students about the fears in speaking English.	3.58	0.96
3	Participating in a supporting group or activity helps reduce my fears in speaking that language.	3.86	0.88
4	Doing relaxation exercises helps reduce my fears in speaking English.	3.54	0.90
5	If accuracy is not the focus, I will not be so nervous about speaking English.	3.55	0.84
6	I do not feel so anxious when speaking English in a friendly environment.	3.94	0.87
	Teachers' encouragement makes me feel relaxed when speaking English.	3.92	0.99
8	A humorous teacher helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English.	4.23	0.87
9	A patient teacher helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English.	4.24	0.94
10	I feel relaxed about speaking English if I know that mistakes are part of the language learning process and made by everyone.	4.17	0.88
11	I feel relieved about speaking English if my teacher corrects my mistakes indirectly.	3.98	0.93
12	Playing language games helps reduce my nervous-ness in speaking English.	4.02	0.89

Overall, the anxiety level of English major students ($M = 3.21$; $SD = 0.45$) was found to be slightly higher that of non-English major students ($M = 3.12$; $SD = 0.45$). When inferential

statistics *t*-test was employed, it was found that the difference of the anxiety levels was not significant ($p > 0.05$), implying that both students of English major and non-English major had similar levels of anxiety when they learned English in class. Deeper analysis, however, of the 25 anxiety items showed that there were 6 items, namely nos. 3, 6, 7, 8, 13, and 18 significantly different ($p < 0.05$), where students of English major had higher scores of anxiety than students of non-English major. With Levene's test where equal variances were not assumed, the significant six items were generated and are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Significant Items of Anxiety

No.	Anxiety in Learning English	p-value (2-tailed)
3	I tremble when I know that I´m going to be called on in English class.	0.001
6	During English class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.	0.00
7	I keep thinking that the other students are better at English than I am.	0.002
8	I am usually at ease during tests in my English class.	0.012
13	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my English class.	0.037
18	I feel confident when I speak in English class.	0.030

Apparently, compared to students of non-English major, students of English major indicated more anxiety which was related to situations where they were knowing that their names were to be called on, concentrating in English class, thinking that others were better, facing class test, answering questions, and not confident in speaking English in class.

However, when comparing the strategy used by students of English major and non-English major, they apparently had no significant difference in use of strategy ($p > 0.05$). Only strategy no. 5 was revealed to be significantly different ($p = 0.04$) in use, where English major students ($M = 3.65$) had significantly higher mean scores than non-English major students ($M = 3.46$). It implied that when compared with students of non-English majors, students of English majors were not so nervous about speaking English if accuracy of English use was not the main concern.

Further exploration of the anxiety model, a linear regression analysis was conducted with a stepwise method. Each of the 12 strategies as independent variables was fed into linear regression where the average score of the 25 anxiety items was the dependent variable. The analysis output resulted in 4 models, where model No. 4 was taken as the best model with strength of relationship

$R = 0.30$ (which was a moderate linear relationship) and coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.09$ (See Table 3).

Table 3. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.179[a]	.032	.029	.44471
2	.234[b]	.055	.049	.44006
3	.273[c]	.074	.066	.43613
4	.304[d]	.092	.082	.43256

a. Predictors: (Constant), S07

b. Predictors: (Constant), S07, S11

c. Predictors: (Constant), S07, S11, S12

d. Predictors: (Constant), S07, S11, S12, S05

Model No. 4 excluded six strategy items out of the 12 proposed strategies, remaining four strategy items as significant predictors in the model (See Table 4). They were all significant at 0.01 with two negative (Items Nos. 7 and 12) and two positive (Items Nos. 11 and 5) direction of relationship.

Table 4. Strategies with Coefficients

Item No.	Strategies to Cope with Anxiety	Standardized Coefficients β	Sig.
7	Teachers' encouragement makes me feel relaxed when speaking English.	-0.194	0.001
11	I feel relieved about speaking English if my teacher corrects my mistakes indirectly.	0.183	0.001
12	Playing English games helps reduce my nervous-ness in speaking English.	-1.80	0.002
5	If accuracy is not the focus, I will not be so nervous about speaking English.	0.141	0.010

The significant contribution of the strategies to the anxiety model were as follows: Strategy No. 7 with negative contribution of 19%, strategy No. 11 with positive contribution of 18%, strategy No. 12 with negative contribution of 18%, and strategy No. 5 with contribution of 14%. With moderate strength of relationship (30%) and small coefficient of determination (9%), altogether these four strategies were not a large part of prediction to anxiety model, allowing other variables – which was not included in this study – for larger contributors to explain the model.

4. Conclusion

The level of the respondents' anxiety in learning English was just moderate, those of the students of English department and non-English department who were officially registered for Semester II, academic year 2018/2019 at Universitas Klabat, Sulawesi Utara, Indonesia. Overall, in terms of anxiety level, there seemed to be no significant difference between English major and non-English major students. Students were more likely to be in a similar level of anxiety in learning English. However, deeper analysis of items revealed that the students of English department showed more anxiety when they knew that their names would be called on in class; when they did not focus to get involved in English class; when they assumed they were no better than their classmates; when they were facing test in class; when they were voluntary in answering questions in class; and when they were not confident enough to speak English in class.

The strategies in the model of anxiety were English classroom situations where the students were more likely to reduce their anxiety in learning English. There were initially 12 strategies proposed to predict the model of anxiety. Nevertheless, results showed that only four strategies comprised significant contributions to reduce the student anxiety in learning English. Two strategies had negative and positive directions of linear relationship.

Teacher's encouragement did not seem to aid the students in reducing their anxiety in using English. The more the teachers gave encouragement, the more likely the students did not feel relaxed when they spoke English. This might be something to do with the teacher's choice of words of encouragement or the students' confidence in themselves and in their teachers. It could be a psychological matter in the students or an inadequate personal relationship between teacher and students.

When the students had a teacher who did correct their mistakes right away, they were relieved about speaking English in class. They preferred to have a teacher who could show the corrected mistakes indirectly. They might be embarrassed of being corrected directly by the teachers or being laughed at by their classmates. Indonesian students seem to be fun of laughing at someone's mistake, even though they themselves might not like to be made fun of.

English games did not help the students reduce their anxiety in speaking English. It was obvious that the students were stressful when they were asked to express their ideas or feelings in the English games. The students might not be familiar with the games or just because of their reserved attitude, introvert personality, or not a kinesthetic personality.

The students were not nervous about speaking English, if the teacher just wanted a communicative English class, where the students were allowed to make any mistakes in speaking English. Apparently, the students preferred a classroom environment where the teacher was accommodative to and understanding the students' weaknesses and limited English competency.

With these findings, the students as well as the English teachers at Universitas Klabat could be aware of these English class situations to make some adjustment in instruction and learning as deemed necessary for the improvement of English use in class that might influence the use of English outside the classroom and even the whole campus. Besides, the findings of these four strategies were just small, yet significant, contributors to the model, and opportunities are thus open for further in-depth studies to investigate more variables that might become other significant predictors to the anxiety model.

Acknowledgment

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