The Students' Reading Anxiety in Foreign Language Classroom at Elementary School

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Abstract – Reading anxiety in foreign language learning is a psychological phenomenon that can hinder students' learning processes. At SDN 100/II Bungo, this issue appears among fifth-grade students who avoid reading activities, such as refusing to read aloud, speaking in very low voices for fear of making mistakes, or pretending not to hear when called by the teacher. This study aims to identify the types of reading anxiety experienced by elementary school students in English learning. A qualitative approach was used, involving five students who showed symptoms of reading anxiety. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Horwitz et al.'s (1986) framework. The findings reveal three main types of reading anxiety: Communication Apprehension, which is the most dominant and relates to fear of ridicule when reading aloud; Test Anxiety, shown through forgetting material during exams; and Fear of Negative Evaluation, reflected in embarrassment when corrected and avoidance of participation. These results highlight the need for a supportive classroom environment to reduce anxiety.

Keywords – Reading Anxiety, Foreign Language Classroom, Elementary School Students, Students' Anxiety

I. Introduction

Reading is an activity that involves understanding the message conveyed in written form. According to Liu (2010), reading is defined as "the process of acquiring linguistic information from printed media" which shows that reading is a one-way process from the author or source text to the reader. Although many people have an understanding of the concept of reading, the definition of the term "reading" has not been explained in detail until now.

In the context of Indonesian education, the Learning Outcomes in the Merdeka Curriculum state that grade V students are expected to be able to understand vocabulary commonly used in daily life, read and respond to various types of simple and familiar short texts, and find information in one sentence and explain the topic of the text that has been read or observed. Reading skills at the fifth grade level of elementary school fall under the category of "reading comprehension" which emphasizes students' ability to understand, interpret, and derive meaning from the text they read.

With the implementation of mandatory English language learning at the elementary school level, one of the competencies taught is reading skills which is in line with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. However, in foreign language learning, a psychological phenomenon appears that can hinder the learning process, namely reading anxiety. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language reading anxiety refers to the subjective feelings, physiological symptoms, and behavioral responses of foreign language learners who experience anxiety, which is basically similar to specific anxiety. Saito et al. (1999) confirmed that tension when reading in a foreign language is a form of reading anxiety that can affect students' academic performance.

Based on observations in the research, a problem was found namely the existence of several students who showed varying anxiety responses when asked by the teacher to read and understand a text. From observations in grade V, 5 students showed restless behavior such as avoiding eye contact, reading very slowly, or refusing when asked to read the text. There are several gaps between the expected achievements in the Merdeka Curriculum Learning Outcomes and the actual conditions in the field, where some students experience anxiety, fear, or even refuse to read.

Based on the results of research conducted during the School Field Introduction (PLP) 2 activity at SDN 100/II Bungo, it was found that some students in each class felt anxious when doing reading activities. This was identified when the researcher asked students to read a story text from an English textbook. The researcher suspects that one of the main causes of this anxiety is the students' inability to read or their lack of knowledge in pronouncing English vocabulary.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), indicators of anxiety when reading in elementary school students can be seen from four aspects: physiological (appearing tense, sweating, biting nails), behavioral (avoiding reading activities, refusing to read in front of the class), emotional (feeling afraid, anxious, or embarrassed), and cognitive (difficulty understanding meaning, forgetting text content, difficulty concentrating). This research is relevant because it raises real issues that occur in schools and focuses on the phenomenon of reading anxiety experienced by grade 5.2 students when reading texts in English.

In conclusion, this study has an urgency to identify types of reading anxiety at the elementary school level, with the hope that it can be a reference for English teachers in choosing appropriate learning strategies to reduce students' reading anxiety. Based on this background, this study is entitled "Students' Reading Anxiety in Foreign Language Classroom at Elementary School: A Case Study on Grade V Students of SDN 100/II Bungo".

II.   Methodology Section

This study employed a qualitative research method with an interview approach. The qualitative method was chosen because the aim of this research is to identify the types of anxiety experienced by elementary school students when reading in English. Specifically, this study applied a descriptive qualitative method. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to ensure that the information obtained could be clearly understood. The selection of fifth- grade elementary school students as respondents for the interviews was conducted by observing classroom reading activities to identify students who showed signs of different types of anxiety. Subsequently, purposive sampling was applied to select participants who represented various types of reading anxiety.

The research was conducted at SDN 100/II Bungo, where the researcher collected data directly. The data of this study consisted of interview transcripts obtained through face- to-face interviews with students. The data sources were students of class V.B at SDN 100/II Bungo. Out of 30 students in the class, 5 students were selected as participants for this study. Since the researcher had previously completed the *Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan* (PLP) 2 program at this school, class V.B was chosen because several students had shown symptoms of anxiety when reading in front of the class. This school was also considered appropriate for the study because it is one of the elementary schools in Bungo Regency that has integrated English learning into the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, making it a suitable setting to observe the phenomenon of students' anxiety when reading in English.

To achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher used an interview guide as the primary instrument for data collection. The interview protocol was semi- structured in nature, and the questions consisted of open- ended items. The researcher designed the interview guide for students, which contained components aimed at identifying the factors that cause reading anxiety. In total, the interview guide for students comprised 14 questions.

In this study, the researcher employed structured interview techniques. Structured interviews allowed all respondents to receive the same set of questions, which ensured consistency in data collection. The researcher conducted face- to-face interviews to allow immediate responses to students' answers and to ask follow-up questions related to the previous ones. Moreover, face-to-face interviews enabled the researcher to manage the flow of the conversation in order to explore more in-depth information. During the interviews, the researcher recorded the conversations using a smartphone while also taking notes to capture key points.

The data collected in the form of interview transcripts were analyzed using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman. According to Miles and Huberman (1984), qualitative data analysis must

be carried out interactively and repeatedly until the data become saturated or no new information emerges. The analysis process involved four stages: (a) data collection through observation, in- depth interviews, and documents; (b) data reduction, in which the researcher summarized, selected essential points, and focused on important aspects by identifying relevant themes and patterns; (c) data display, which could be presented in several forms such as narrative descriptions, diagrams, inter-category relationships, and charts; and (d) drawing conclusions based on the presented data.

III. Results

To address the research objective, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five elementary school students at SDN 100/II Muara Bungo in order to reveal and identify the types of reading anxiety experienced by the students. The data were analyzed using NVivo 15 software.

The research sample consisted of students who attended English classes and showed signs of anxiety, such as fear, avoiding their turn to read, or refusing when the teacher asked them to read. The use of this technique was based on the consideration that five fifth-grade students experienced reading anxiety, so purposive sampling allowed the researcher to obtain more in-depth and specific data related to the phenomenon under study.

There are three types of reading anxiety based on Horwitz et al. (1986). Within these categories, several sub-themes emerged from the responses of the five participants. A summary of their responses is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Result of Reading Anxiety

Type of Anxiety	Findings
Communication Apprehension	1) Fear of mockery 2) Anxiety when asked to read aloud 3) Avoiding questions 4) Fear of helping others 5) Shame and fear in public reading 6) Fear of mistakes in reading 7) Low confidence in reading aloud
Test Anxiety	1) Indifference to test results 2) Forgetting during the test 3) Fear of failing the test
	4) Resigned attitude towards tests
Fear of Negative Evaluation	1) Embarrasment for public misreading 2) Sadness from teacher's correction 3) Pretending not to hear

a) Communication Apprehension

Communication Apprehension emerged as the most dominant form of anxiety, affecting all participants in this study. The major concern was the fear of peer ridicule, as expressed by P1: *"Takut diejek kawan kalua salah baca, apalagi kalau bacanya didepan kelas, makin jadi ejekan mereka."* This fear significantly influenced participation patterns, with participants preferring to remain silent rather than risk embarrassment. P4 further explained: *"saya bukan takut saat membacanya, tapi saya lebih takut kalau saya ngelakuin kesalahan lalu diejek sama teman, itu yang membuat saya malas membaca."*

The impact of this anxiety also extended to peer support behavior. Both P1 and P2 refused to help their classmates with reading tasks, citing concerns about causing academic harm: *"Saya nolak membacakan teman, karna saya gak mau teman salah gegara saya"* (P2).

b) Test Anxiety

In addition to Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety also emerged as a significant form of anxiety, particularly manifested through memory disruptions during examinations. Four participants reported sudden memory loss despite having prepared beforehand. P1 described: *"Saya sering ketika ujian tiba-tiba saya tidak mengingat lagi pelajaran yang telah saya pelajari selama semalaman tersebut. Dan yang saya lakukan ialah saya berusaha menjawab sebisa saya, tapi ketika saya tetap tidak mengingatnya maka yang saya lakukan adalah menjawab sebisa saya atau bahkan tidak menjawab sama sekali."*

Besides memory disruptions, pre-exam anxiety was also evident among participants who expressed anticipatory fear of failure. P1 stated: *"Saya merasa takut jika saya salah semua, karena saya tidak suka baca teks Bahasa inggris apalagi kalau teks nya panjang."* This anxiety created a cycle where concerns

about performance further weakened actual performance.

c) Fear of Negative Evaluation

The third type of anxiety identified was Fear of Negative Evaluation, in which all participants showed sensitivity toward negative judgment from both teachers and peers. Public correction was perceived as a highly distressing situation, as explained by P1: *"Saya merasa sedih miss, karena saya malu pasti diejek teman kalau saya salah apalagi jika dikoreksi oleh guru."*

As a response to this anxiety, avoidance strategies were commonly employed, such as pretending not to hear when called upon. P4 noted: *"Saya pernah berpura-pura tidak mendengar jika guru meminta saya untuk membaca, namun hal tersebut seperti sia-sia saja karena guru memaksa saya untuk membaca."*

The three types of reading anxiety above demonstrate that reading anxiety among elementary students is an interconnected and complex phenomenon. Communication Apprehension, dominated by the fear of peer ridicule, was the most pervasive factor, subsequently influencing students' test performance and their sensitivity to correction. These findings indicate that reading anxiety should not be viewed as an isolated individual issue but rather as the result of reinforcing social and psychological dynamics within the context of foreign language learning at the elementary school level.

IV.   Discussion

The findings indicate that Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) among elementary school students is a complex phenomenon encompassing three main components: communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety (TA), and fear of negative evaluation (FNE) (Horwitz et al., 1986), which are interrelated and influence students' motivation, concentration, and participation in reading activities. Among these, communication apprehension was the most dominant; the fear of making mistakes and becoming the target of peer ridicule encouraged students to avoid reading aloud, refuse to help peers, evade questions, or pretend not to hear—a pattern that reflects the social dimension of language learning at the elementary level (Fitrawati et al., 2023; Dang, 2024; Li et al., 2024).

Test anxiety was also evident in almost all participants, manifesting in memory disruptions during exams (forgetting reading content), feeling overwhelmed by long texts, tension, and eventually resignation or learned helplessness, a defensive coping mechanism that reduces the use of adaptive reading strategies and weakens long-term motivation (Ahmad et al., 2013; Ismail, 2015; Dang, 2024). Meanwhile, fear of negative evaluation was observed through feelings of embarrassment when corrected, sadness caused by public correction, and avoidance behaviors that undermined students' psychological safety in the classroom. Such responses highlight that the manner of feedback delivery and peer reaction norms strongly determine students' willingness to participate (Horwitz et al., 1986; Fitrawati et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024).

The interconnection among these three types of anxiety creates a reinforcing cycle, for instance, the fear of ridicule (CA) increases vulnerability to memory disruptions during exams (TA) and heightens students' sensitivity to evaluation (FNE). The collectivist cultural context of Indonesia may further amplify the role of peer influence in avoidance behavior.

Practically, these findings underscore the need for comprehensive pedagogical interventions: fostering a supportive classroom climate (anti-ridicule norms), developing structured peer support and collaborative activities to build confidence, providing more sensitive feedback (e.g., private and positively framed), and implementing gradual reading practice to reduce performance-related anxiety. Theoretically, this study reinforces Joo's (2015) view that FLRA should be understood as a distinct construct, while adding new emphasis on the role of learned helplessness and the necessity of social support as buffers against communication anxiety—implications that are relevant for designing literacy curricula and teacher training programs at the elementary level.

V.   Conclusion

This study set out to explore the reading anxiety experienced by elementary school students in foreign language classrooms, with the aim of identifying the factors that shape their participation in reading activities. The findings reveal that students' anxiety is primarily influenced by three interrelated dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Students reported feeling anxious and

reluctant to read aloud due to fear of ridicule, often avoiding class activities to minimize embarrassment. Test-related anxiety was also prevalent, with many students expressing fear of failure, difficulty handling long or complex texts, and a tendency toward resignation when faced with challenging tasks. In addition, the fear of negative evaluation— particularly from teachers and peers—was found to discourage participation, undermine self- confidence, and reduce students' willingness to engage in reading practice.

These findings align with the work of Horwitz et al.(1986) and Fitrawati et al. (2023), who emphasize and teacher feedback in shaping language learning anxiety. By demonstrating how communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation intersect to affect students' reading performance, the study hightlight that foreign language reading anxiety is not merely a linguistic problem but also a psychological and social challange. The results underscore the need for supportive classroom practices, constructive teacher feedback, and peer-based collaboration strategies that can reduce students' anxiety and encourage active participation. Ultimately, the study concludes that addressing the emotional and social aspects of reading anxiety is as essential as improving linguistic competence, particularly in the elementary school context where students' confidence and motivation are still being developed.

VI.   References

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