

***“I am afraid of Learning English”: The Interplay between Anxiety and Learning Experience on Indonesian Senior High School Students’ Academic Performance***

Winda Ari Anggraini, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

The Asian Conference on Language Learning 2017  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of learning experience and anxiety on senior high school students’ academic performance in Indonesia. A small-scale quantitative study was conducted using convenience sampling. Two kinds of data collection were administered: a questionnaire and an evaluation of students’ academic record. A 40 items Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to measure students’ learning experience and level of anxiety and students two-year progress reports were studied and tabulated to analyse students’ performance in learning English. By using descriptive analysis and correlation, the study found that: (1) Students who have positive learning experiences develop a low level of anxiety but a high academic performance. (2) The correlation between language experience and academic performance is significantly positive. It can be seen from sig. 0,000 < 0,01 and because the correlation is high with a coefficient of 0,747. (3) The correlation between language anxiety and academic performance was negative. Here we see sig. 0,000 < 0,01 and a high coefficient of 0.748.

Keywords: anxiety, learning experience, academic performance

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## **Introduction**

“I can’t speak English.”

“Learning English is only for smart students.”

“I don’t understand at all what the teacher says.”

Those above expressions are commonly heard in my classroom, even though English is taught since elementary school. In Indonesia, it is introduced as a foreign language and a compulsory subject. Despite having been mandatory for a long time, there are negative stereotypes of how complicated it is. In class, students are required to show their ability both in oral and written skill. Additionally, an important parameter of successful academic performance on English in Indonesia is a student’s national exam score. This is a standard test designed by the government to measure the students’ comprehension of English and to grade the quality of a school. It is held annually for students in the twelfth grade of senior high school. Students are made aware early on their studies of their responsibility to prepare themselves for the national exam and the university entrance. For most this is a troublesome burden. Having such perspective in mind the students feel more worried in studying English.

Anxiety over individual differences is believed to be one of the most important factors affects second language (L2) learning. Unfortunately, some students had felt uneasy and worried since the very first time they learned a L2, while others might experience it later after some negative occasions (Price,1991). Feeling nervous, worried, anxious, and uneasy in a L2 classroom is certainly led to disadvantages. In fact, anxiety can bring detrimental effects by reducing the opportunity to comprehend study materials. Research has consistently shown that anxiety can have a negative influence on the L2 learners’ performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; Macintyre, 1995; Arnold & Brown, 1999; Kitano, 2001; Gardner, 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

For decades, researchers have believed that many learning variables are linked to the presence of anxiety, for instance: Saito & Samimi (1996) investigate the effect of anxiety on language performance. Additionally, Bailey et al., (1999) correlate language anxiety and learning style. Gregersen & Horwitz (2002) discuss the link between anxiety and perfectionism. Furthermore, Gopang et al. (2016) establish the relation between anxiety and learners’ belief. However, the potential relationship between anxiety and learning experience is not empirically tested. That is why the purpose of this study is to investigate the link of those variables as well as their influence on academic performance.

### **Defining foreign language anxiety**

Even though anxiety is mostly seen as a negative trait, some researchers believe that it can be positive in particular situations. It has become one of individual characteristics that is believed to have a significant impact on L2 learners. Dörnyei (2005) classifies anxiety into two different groups. First, beneficial vs inhibitory or facilitating vs debilitating. Despite the dichotomy of terminologies, they represent both the positive and negative sides of anxiety. Anxiety in certain condition can support individual performance under certain conditions, depending on the kinds of emotions at play. For example, feeling nervous of parents’ presence in a school performance might encourage a student to perform her best. However, if she feels too worried, she may

be afraid come on stage and cause mistakes. The second group is referred to as state and trait anxiety. State anxiety occurs as a response to a threatening situation, which lasts temporarily and fades once the threat disappears (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Meanwhile, trait anxiety is a kind of permanent individual difference that makes the person anxious in every situation (Scovel, 1991). This kind of anxiety differs from one individual to another. For example, some students will be anxious when interacting with new classmates, whereas others will enjoy the opportunity.

However, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) differs from both of those kinds. Horwitz et al., (1986, p. 128) says that FLA is 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the L2 learning process'. Unlike state anxiety, which can diminish over time, if repeated occurrences cause students to associate anxiety with L2 performance, anxiety becomes a trait rather than a state (Tanielian, 2014). Once language anxiety has evolved into a lasting trait, it can have pervasive effects on language learning and language performance (Oxford, 1999).

### **Sources of foreign language anxiety in second language classroom**

Many factors can trigger the prevalence of anxiety. Anxiety is related to what happens in a classroom, such as teacher-students' interaction. The teachers' behaviour plays a crucial role; their supportive talk can facilitate or debilitate anxiety. For example, if the students feel uncomfortable because of over correction, anxiety might emerge. However, the situation can be different if the teachers encourage and support them in less anxious L2 classroom climate. (Phillip, 1992).

Based on her research, Young (1991) categorizes potential sources of anxiety into six types: personal and interpersonal anxiety, learner's belief toward learning, teacher's belief about teaching, teacher-student interaction, classroom procedure, and language testing. The first cause reflects on how students view themselves. Those with low self-esteem tend to be more anxious about their existence in the L2 classroom, especially when it relates to their readiness to face competition or show their ability. In addition, learners' belief about learning itself is considered important; negative stereotype of the capabilities required when mastering a L2 will affect a student's anxiety. If students have an assumption that learning will be difficult they are likely more anxious than those who can approach the L2 learning experience more positively. Moreover, teachers' belief in their teaching methods also contributes to the level of anxiety. This belief influences their interaction with the students, thus teachers who create a tense atmosphere and who focus on correcting every mistake may create more fear and anxiety. Therefore, by being less supportive, they create an unpleasant learning environment. The anxiety related to interacting with the class can affect some student's performance; being asked to communicate in front of an audience is a daunting task. Students can feel nervous, scared, and unready when answering a teacher's question orally, when presenting idea in a group, or when demonstrating a project in front of the class. The last potential source is L2 testing. Test anxiety involves both communicative and non-communicative elements. Students' confusion of the test format and content can provoke higher levels of anxiety; for example, those students who have spent many hours studying but who are presented with a different assessment will complain and become upset.

Otherwise, three interrelated causes of anxiety are proposed by Horwitz et al., (1986): communication apprehension, language testing, and fear of others' evaluation in the L2 classroom. The first cause is related to expressing thought orally. It refers to a discomfort speaking in front of other people, whether in a small group or in front of the whole class. Understanding a L2 completely is impossible and expressing opinion in other languages requires a complicated thought process. Miscommunication might always therefore occur, which can lead to frustration for both speaker and listener (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). The second aspect involves being anxious in the face of examination. This fear comes when students have a high concern for their academic achievement and place high demand on themselves (Liu & Jackson, 2008). It also occurs when students find the difference between material taught and the substance of the test. Meanwhile, the last aspect is fear of negative evaluation from other people, specifically teachers and classmates. Students are afraid of being corrected for their performance (whether written and spoken language) so they may become anxious in attending a L2 class. Those students who already had anxiety remain silent in the classroom.

### **Learning experience in influencing anxiety**

A student's learning experience is formulated during the years they spend in the classroom itself. This factor then influences the attitude of the student towards the act of learning. That classroom is noticeably vital in creating a student's experience and attitude toward L2 learning (Nikolov, 1999; Czier & Kormos, 2009).

A model of the relationship between learning experience and anxiety has been developed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) and later summarized by Ellis (2008). This model describes how learning experience in different stages influences anxiety. At first, students are not anxious starting their language learning, thus any anxiety at this stage is likely to result from low degree state anxiety. Then, if the students have a negative experience of the learning process once it actually commences their emotions and attitude being to be shaped accordingly; at this time, their anxiety will continuously grow and affect their performance. Heron (1989) calls it *archaic anxiety*, which is 'repressed distress of the past-the personal hurt, particularly of childhood, that has been denied so that individual can survive emotionally' (p.33). Therefore, such unpleasant past experience can threaten current situation (Arnold & Brown, 1999).

The model is outlined in the following table (Ellis, 2008 P. 483):

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Type of anxiety</b>	<b>Effect on learning</b>
Beginner	Very little-restricted to state anxiety	None
Post-beginner	Situation anxiety develops if the learner develops negative expectations based on bad learning experiences	Learner expects to be nervous and performs poorly.
Later	Poor performance and continue bad learning experiences result in increased anxiety.	Continued poor performance

## **Methodology**

### **Context**

This research investigated students at one senior high school in Indonesia, located on a small island. The students have been learning English as a foreign language, which is primarily only studied in school. Nevertheless, some of them might be learning English in a private institution in addition. All students were in the twelfth grade (the last year of high school) and were aged between 16 and 17 years old.

### **Method**

Quantitative method usually measures learners' attitude or behaviour in learning by gathering closed-ended information. In this research, it was deployed to generate a broad picture of the correlation between students' learning experience and anxiety and their academic performance.

### **Research questions**

1. To what extent does learners learning experience influence their academic performance?
2. How does anxiety influence a learner's academic performance?

### **Participant**

Because I considered the problems within the school I taught, convenience sampling was employed in selecting the research participants. This selection of sampling was aimed for practical reasons (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2010). 45 twelfth grade of my students were chosen on the basis of their different levels of academic performance. A criterion for inclusion in the study is that they should have been learning English for a long time and should be facing the national language exam the following April.

## **Data Collection**

The data was collected through two different methods. First, a modified questionnaire, constructed using insight from relevant research, was deployed. This used a five-point Likert scale (absolutely disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neither agree nor disagree = 3, agree = 4, strongly agree = 5) and was distributed to participant online (using a Google form). Second, in order to understand the relationship between student anxiety and academic performance, I studied school documents on student scores. After distributing the questionnaire, the names of students participated were listed to find their scores from the past two years.

## **Instruments**

The instrument used for this research was developed around several five-points Likert scales, using close-ended items. The questions were selected from two sources: the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) questionnaire proposed by Horwitz (1983) and cited in Horwitz et al., (1986) and a learning experience questionnaire developed by Csizer and Kormos (2009). The questionnaire consisted of 40 items measuring these following aspects:

- 33 items asked about student anxiety. This focused on anxiety surrounding difference aspects of learning English, including preparation prior to class, performance in class, and learning outside the class. To simplify participant understanding about the context, the words language and foreign language in the original FLCAS were replaced by the word English.
- A number of questions covering learning experience were included. These focused on the way in which students like to learn English, both inside and outside classroom and their attitude toward English and activities related to it.

## **Data Analysis Procedure**

Scores for each of 40 items for each questionnaire were initially recorded in Microsoft Excel, where data were organized in separated tabs for independent groups. After that, all items of the FLCAS Likert scale were reversed for the negatively-worded questions to obtain the mean. Similarly, the 7 items focusing on learning experience were organized in positively-worded statements, before the mean was counted. Furthermore, 8 columns of scoring data were taken from the students' record from their first and second year of senior high school. The scores represented both the students' testing and practical skill, on the scale of 1-4, in which 4 for the highest. Raw data was then copied and pasted into SPSS 24 for numerical analysis.

In analysing the data, both descriptive and correlation analysis were used to obtain a clear picture of result. Descriptive analysis illustrated the distribution of variable percentages in pie charts. Furthermore, the correlation analysis chosen was a non-parametric statistical analysis. This is one of several used when parametric assumptions cannot be filled. Non-parametric statistic does not tend to specific parameter or known as free-distribution procedure (Verma & Mallick, 1999). It has some distinct advantages. Because two variables outcomes in this research were ordinal, using parametric analysis was impossible. As Daniel (2000) says outcomes which are ordinal, ranked, not relied on normality, or measured imprecisely are

difficult to analyse with parametric test without having a major assumption of their distribution. In addition, analysis is relatively simple to conduct since it does not require a complicated math.

Using a nonparametric statistical correlation, which is Spearman's rank correlation coefficient or known as Spearman's rho, is 'the most straightforward procedure of all' (Connolly, 2007. P. 214). It measures the relationship between two variables by using correlation coefficient or  $r$ .

$$r_s = 1 - \frac{6 \sum_{i=1}^N d_i^2}{N^3 - N}$$

Note:

$d_i$  : the difference between two variables  
 $N$  : the number of sample

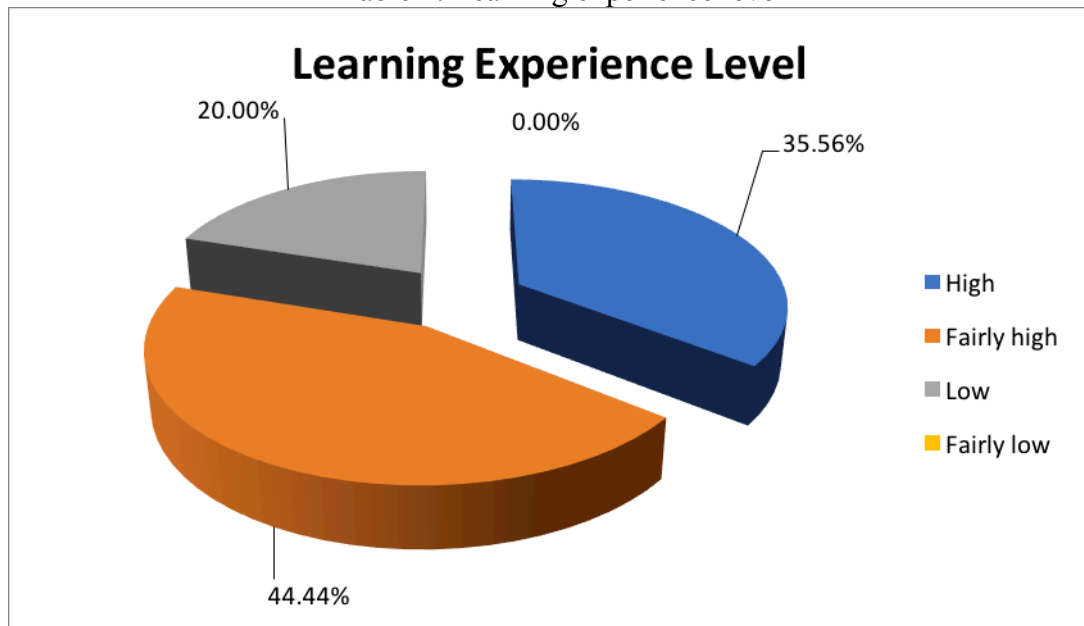
The score of correlation coefficient ranges from  $\pm 0,00$  until  $\pm 1,00$ . + is a sign for positive correlation, while – describes the contrary. Furthermore, to measure the significance correlation between variables, the score of sig. is considered. If sig. < 0.01 means there is a significant correlation between variables. Otherwise, if sig. > 0.01 describes no sufficient correlation.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Descriptive analysis**

As Dörnyei & Taguchi (2010) argue, rather than listing every score taken from a study, summarizing the numerical data by presenting the mean and range of values is more acceptable. Based on the questionnaires distributed, there were 7 items of learning experience that represent conditions in the language classroom. The statements focused on the extent to which students enjoy learning English, both in the classroom or outside. The mean percentage was then grouped into four categories: High :  $\geq 4$ , fairly high :  $\geq 3$ , low :  $\geq 2$ , and fairly low :  $\geq 1$ . Looking on the data taken, we can talk of three categories of student learning experience: 35.56% high, 44.44% fairly high, and 20.00% low.

Table 1. Learning experience level

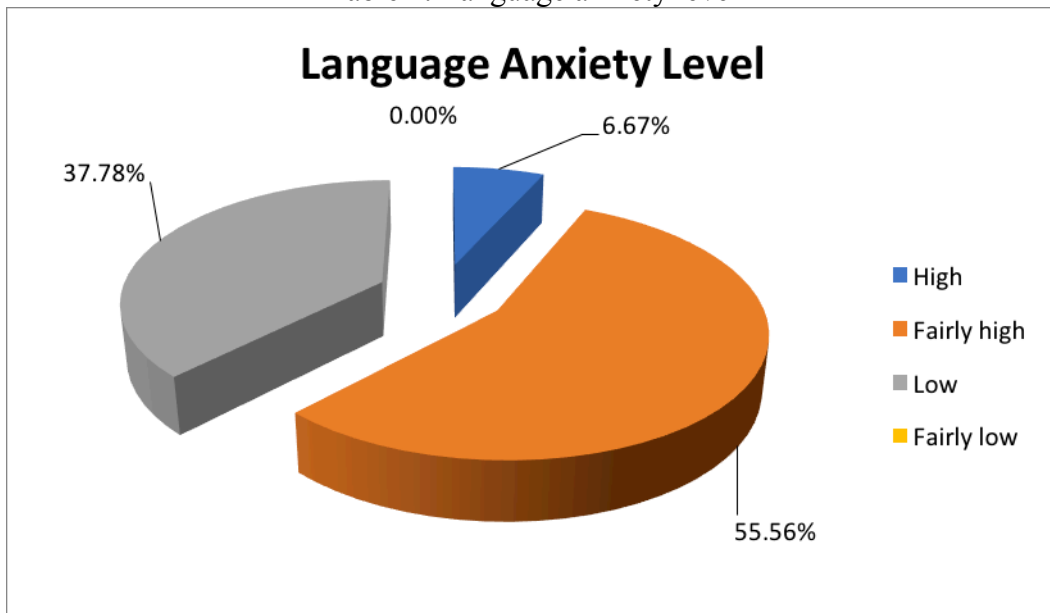


The 33 items of FLCA are generally divided into three categories of anxiety: communication apprehension, testing anxiety, and fear of others' evaluation. Items such as statement number one "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class" measures student communication apprehension anxiety. This kind of statement is repeatedly tested to explore the first cause of a student's frustration. At the same time, some questions investigated the worry of preparing for or undertaking a language test. This is shown in statement number (21) "The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get", which seeks to understand whether students become uneasy even though they have already prepared themselves for the test. With regards to a student's fear of negative evaluation, whether from peers or teachers, item number (7) asks "I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am". This type of anxiety prevents the students from expressing their ideas because they are scared of not being seen to fail.

The distribution of language anxiety shows most participants have a high level of anxiety in learning English. The percentages are classified using the similar groups as before. The result shows as follow, 6.67% high, 55,56% fairly high, and 37.78% low.



Table 2. Language anxiety level



### Students' academic progress report

Unlike both above variables, data for which was obtained through questionnaires, the data covering academic performance as drawn from the previous two years of a student's record, including two different aspects of scoring. First is theoretical knowledge, which focuses on student understanding on the grounding theory of a topic. The score reflects performance in a number of tasks from the beginning of the semester: daily tasks, homework, the mid-term test, and the final test. Second, practical skill concerns student application of their learning. For instance, the use of certain grammar in a writing task or different expressions when speaking. The range of scores can be seen in the following table:

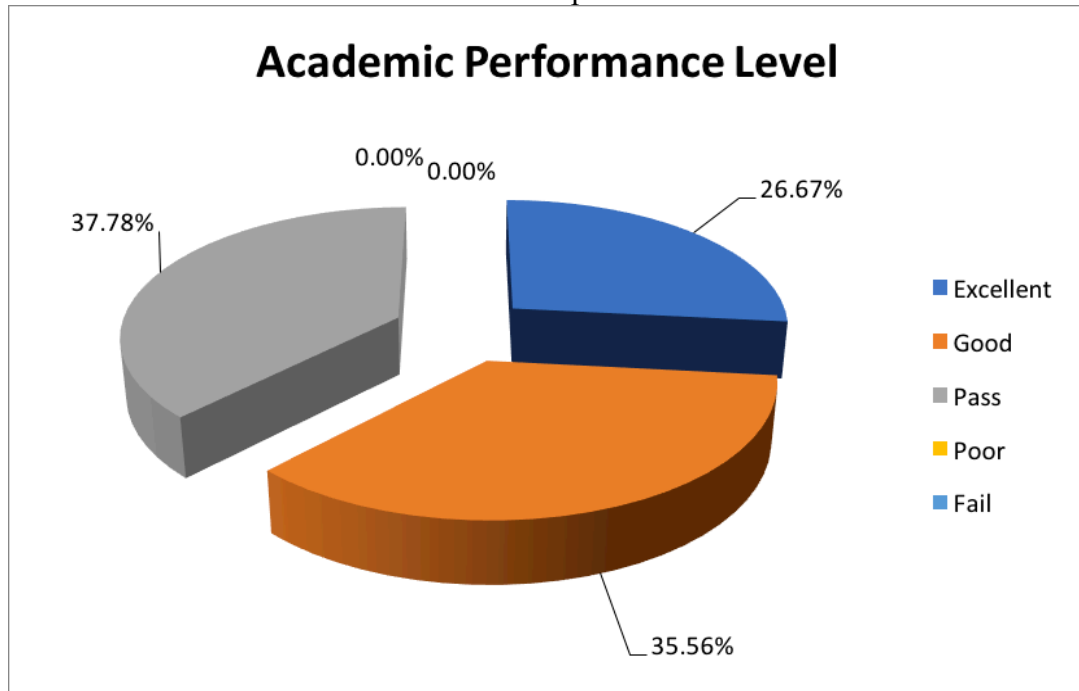
Table 3. Academic score description

Score Description			
Mark	Theoretical Knowledge	Practical Skill	Attitude
A	3,85 - 4,00	3,85 - 4,00	Excellent
A-	3,51 - 3,84	3,51 - 3,84	
B+	3,18 - 3,50	3,18 - 3,50	Good
B	3,00 - 3,17	3,00 - 3,17	
B-	2,51 - 2,99	2,51 - 2,99	Pass
C+	2,18 - 2,50	2,18 - 2,50	
C	1,85 - 2,17	1,85 - 2,17	Poor
C-	1,51 - 1,84	1,51 - 1,84	
D+	1,18 - 1,50	1,18 - 1,50	Fail
D	1,00 - 1,17	1,00 - 1,17	

*Taken from: students' progress report*

The calculation was started by tabulating scores for the previous four semesters across the two dimensions above for each. Then, the sum of the eight columns of scores were drawn to find the mean of score for each student. It can be seen that the majority of students' academic performance were good, with the percentage of 26.67% excellent, 35.56% good, and 37.78% pass.

Table 4. Academic performance level



### Learning experience, language anxiety and academic performance in scatter diagram

Before explaining the correlation of each variable, we can map the relationship between variables on a scatter plot, which can depict the link between them. First, we focus on the relationship between learning experience and academic performance (see diagram 1 below). Data was sorted from the smallest to the largest score. It can be clearly seen that higher level of student experience is correlated with higher academic performance. Students' experience goes together with their level of performance. Both variables present a positive relation.

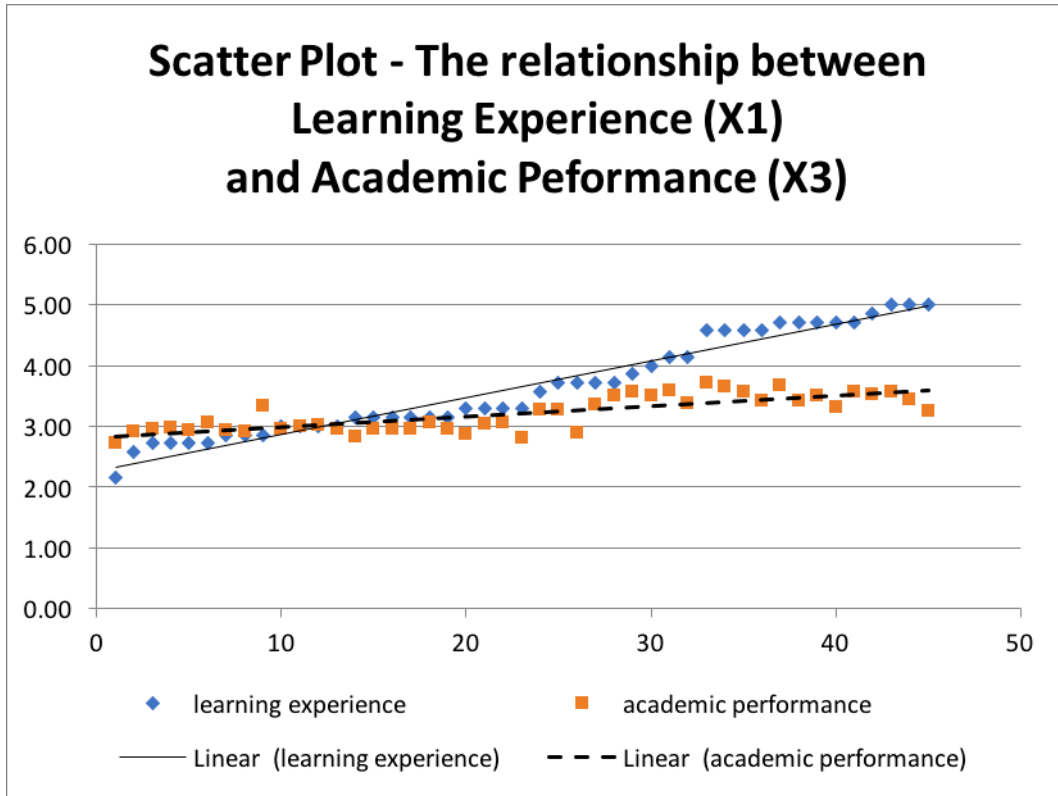


Diagram 1 scatter plot-the relationship between x1 and x3

On the contrary, when we focus on language anxiety we see it has a negative relationship with academic performance. From the following diagram, it is obvious that the line of x2 is crossing x3. It means that the higher level of anxiety, the lower the student's academic performance is.

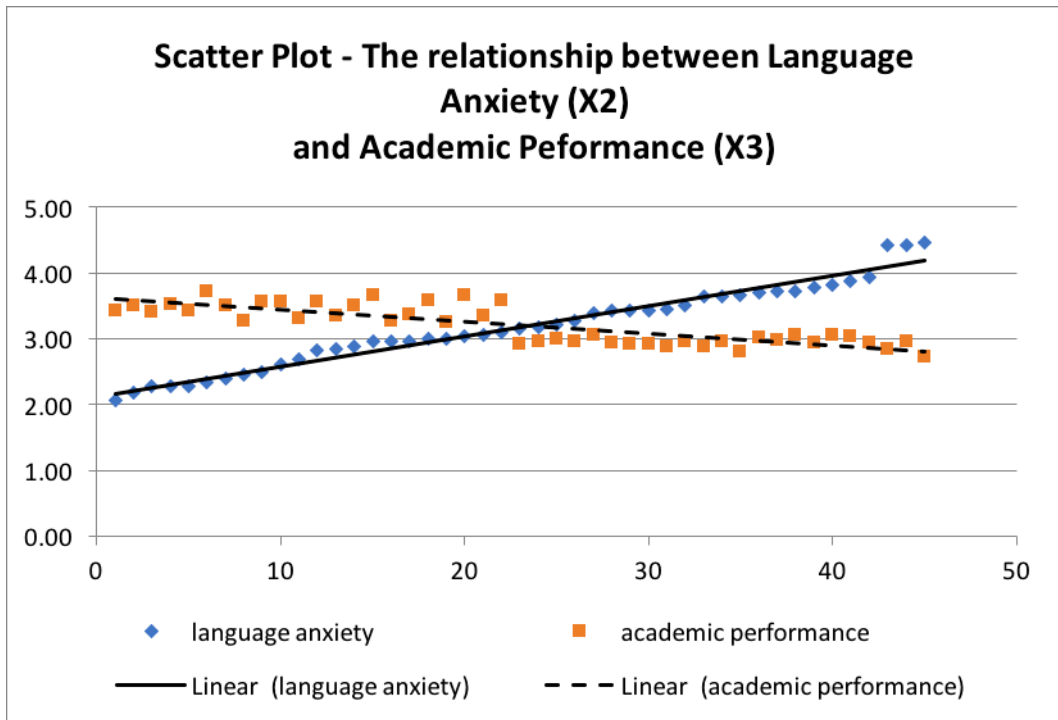


Diagram 2 scatter plot- the relationship between x2 and x3

## Correlation Analysis

The correlation used to test these following hypotheses:

H<sub>0</sub> : Learning experience does not influence student academic performance.

H<sub>1</sub> : Learning experience has a significant impact on student academic performance.

While,

H<sub>0</sub> : Language anxiety does not affect students' academic performance.

H<sub>2</sub> : Language anxiety has a significant effect on students' academic performance.

Nonparametric Correlations					
			learning_experience	language_anxiety	academic_performance
Spearman's rho	learning_experience	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	-,700**	,747**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000	,000
		N	45	45	45
	language_anxiety	Correlation Coefficient	-,700**	1,000	-,748**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.	,000
		N	45	45	45
	academic_performance	Correlation Coefficient	,747**	-,748**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	.
		N	45	45	45

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5- non-parametric correlation among learning experience, anxiety, and academic performance

Based on the Spearman's rho analysis, it can be concluded that: The correlation between language experience and academic performance is significantly positive. It can be seen from sig.  $0.000 < 0.01$  (H<sub>0</sub> rejected) and the correlation is high with coefficient  $r = 0.747$ . However, the correlation between language anxiety and academic performance was negative, we can see this when we look at sig.  $0.000 < 0.01$  and the high coefficient  $r = 0.748$ .

## The Role of Teacher in L2 classroom

The question addressed by this research was whether learners' experience or anxiety in the classroom effects their theoretical and practical academic performance. It was found that a more enjoyable experience of L2 learning can be beneficial for improving students' performance. We also saw that higher levels of anxiety are

negatively correlated with academic performance. Since both variables are related to teachers' role in the classroom the need to create a supportive learning environment is increased. A supportive environment allows students to focus on improving their skill without being over worried of their surroundings (Phillip, 1992). To provide such an atmosphere it can be clearly seen that the role of teachers is significant. Their contribution in providing classroom experience influences the students' level of anxiety. 'Each had vivid memories of past teachers and how these teachers had treated them in class. In some cases, instructors had alleviated their anxiety' (Price, 1991, p. 106). Since anxiety is a personal feeling that varies from one student to another, teachers cannot merely generalize and adopt one strategy. Therefore, teachers should focus on responding to individual students' needs.

However, although feeling worried is universal, another factor need to be considered when talking about anxiety is students' cultural background (Horwitz, 2001). As their reaction is influenced by their origin and custom, one practice that is acceptable could be burdensome for others. For instance, Indonesian students do not find it comfortable to argue with and oppose their teacher during learning, unless they are asked to do so. Teachers should identify their students, start from a less confrontational situation and then teach accordingly. As Dewaele & MacIntyre (2014) argue, the frequency of using foreign language helps lowering the level of anxiety. In short, when the students start feeling comfortable, their anxiety will decrease.

### **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

The aim of this study was to find the correlation between L2 experience and anxiety toward academic performance. The results indicate that L2 experience positively affects performance, while anxiety works conversely. The more positive experience students have been gained in a classroom, the better their performance in that L2 subject. On the contrary, when the students feel under pressure and feel anxious across the three different dimensions of anxiety (communication apprehension, language test, and fear of others' evaluation) they do not perform well.

This leads to a number of suggestions for teachers in the L2 classroom and raises questions for further research. First, an important idea to consider is that teachers hold major responsibilities for student progress. The knowledge of how learning experience and anxiety are predominant in facilitating students' performance makes the teachers task more important. After diagnosing anxiety amongst their students, they should be encouraged to create a classroom with less pressure and provide a more supportive atmosphere. Since learning a L2 itself is already a complicated matter, teachers can take several steps to support their pleasant experience (Oxford, 1999):

- Start working on students' self-esteem and self-confidence, especially for those who have been anxious for a long period. Building their belief of their own capabilities can help them change perspective about language learning. However, it will not be easy for high school students, who tend to be doubtful and worried about themselves and their emotional development (Dörnyei, 2001).
- Teachers should foster a non-threatening classroom by avoiding competition amongst students from the start.

- Help students to realize when they feel worried as soon as possible. They can then make them overcome their anxiety more effectively.

After knowing that anxiety play an important role in supporting or hindering academic performance, more continuous research on this area should be maintained. Although, there have been many finding on this field using different participants, continued investigation and comprehensive research into anxiety, especially in Indonesia, to find its sources and the strategy to overcome it, is necessary to help teachers foster lower anxiety in order to help students to enjoy learning a foreign language (Kitano, 2001).

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan) for sponsoring the journey of my study and this conference. My supervisor for this research, Dr Magdalena Kubanyiova, thank you for your guidance and advices. My deepest gratitude also goes to my husband, for your unlimited support, my family, and my students who became a part of this research project.

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**Contact Email:** [winda.a.violetta@gmail.com](mailto:winda.a.violetta@gmail.com)