

## Exploring Student's Anxiety in Learning Performance Through Pair Work Activity

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### Abstract:

Anxiety in the learning process is one of the significant obstacles experienced by many students and can affect their academic performance. This study aims to explore how pair work activities can help reduce student learning anxiety at MAN 2 Probolinggo. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data collection techniques were conducted through in depth interviews, direct classroom observations, and documentation. The results of the study indicate that pair work activities have a positive impact on reducing learning anxiety. Students feel more confident, comfortable, and active when learning with supportive partners. Interactions in pair work create a safe and collaborative learning environment, encouraging students to be more open and less afraid of making mistakes. Although challenges such as mismatched pairs or dominance by certain students exist, this strategy is generally proven effective. Therefore, paired work can be adopted as a routine learning strategy that supports the creation of an inclusive and participatory learning process, particularly for students with high levels of anxiety.

**Keywords:** *Student's Anxiety, Pair Work Activity.*

### Introduction

In the context of modern education, psychological and emotional factors are crucial in shaping students' learning experiences and outcomes. One common but impactful factor is learning anxiety. Learning anxiety refers to the negative emotional states, such as nervousness, tension and worry that students experience during learning activities. Learning anxiety can have a serious impact on student performance. When students feel anxious, they tend to find it difficult to concentrate, forget easily, and cannot think clearly. This certainly disrupts their learning process and makes learning results not optimal. As explained by Putwain (2017), high levels of anxiety can interfere with students' cognitive functions such as attention and memory, thus affecting overall learning performance.<sup>1</sup> This anxiety can appear in a variety of subjects, not only limited to language, but also in math, science and other fields. As the demands of education become increasingly complex, a deeper understanding of learning anxiety is crucial to the development of effective learning strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Putwain, "Examination Stress and Test Anxiety," *Psychologist* 21, no. 12 (2008): 1026–29.

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Anxiety not only affects students' learning outcomes but also affects how they interact with teachers, classmates and subject matter. Students who feel highly anxious usually become passive in class, reluctant to ask questions or answer, avoid difficult tasks, and lose confidence. This can make them fall further behind, as anxiety decreases learning performance, and when learning results are poor, anxiety can only increase. This is known as the negative anxiety cycle.<sup>2</sup> Excessive anxiety can negatively impact daily life functioning. Jendra and Sugiyo (2020) state that when anxiety develops into a disorder, it can hinder an individual's function in undergoing normal activities.<sup>3</sup> In the context of education, anxiety can also reduce students' self-confidence, making them silent and nervous in certain situations. This is reinforced by Said and Weda (2018) who assert that anxiety has a real impact on students' learning achievement.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is important for educators to design learning strategies that not only emphasize cognitive aspects, but also support emotional comfort, encourage active participation, and create a psychologically safe learning environment.

One learning strategy that is considered effective to implement in the learning process is pair work. In this activity, students are invited to actively cooperate with peers in completing tasks or solving problems. This kind of interaction helps create a sense of shared responsibility and provides space for students to exchange ideas in a more relaxed and less stressful atmosphere. By working in pairs, students not only learn from the subject matter, but also support each other emotionally and academically. Pair work allows students to optimally benefit from both cognitive and affective aspects, as they are encouraged to help each other complete tasks or achieve learning goals together. This method is particularly appropriate for helping students improve critical thinking and communication skills. Previous research also shows that this method has a positive impact on learning processes and outcomes. One of them is a study by Taka (2020), who found that the use of pair work technique is effective in improving students' competence. Through this collaboration, students can not only share ideas, but also get support that can reduce anxiety and increase overall learning motivation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Abbas Alamer and Faisal Alrabai, "The Role of Anxiety in Student Learning Performance," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 114 no.3 (2022): 567–82.

<sup>3</sup> Arya Firmanu Jendra and Sugiyo Sugiyo, "The Effect of Self-Efficacy on Presentation Anxiety of Grade XI Students at SMA Negeri 1 Wuryantoro," *Konseling Edukasi: Journal of Guidance and Counseling* 4, no. 1 (2020): 138–59.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Said And Sukardi Weda, "Foreign Language Anxiety and Its Impact on Students' Achievement," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 9 no.1 (2018): 80–87.

<sup>5</sup> Soleman D.T, "The Efficacy of Using Pair Work Technique in Teaching Conditional Sentences to Indonesian English as Foreign Language (EFL) Students.," *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature* 8(2) (2020): 602–10.

Although pair work is often associated with language learning, a number of studies have shown that this strategy also provides benefits in a variety of other subjects. Students report increased comfort, motivation and understanding when they engage in well-designed pair work.<sup>6</sup> The social interaction that occurs during this activity also creates a more comfortable and emotionally supportive learning environment, especially for students who tend to be passive or experience anxiety during the learning process.<sup>7</sup> However, most studies have focused on the general benefits of pair work, and not many have examined specifically how this strategy can affect students' anxiety which has a direct impact on their learning performance. Therefore, it is important to further explore the role of pair work in helping students reduce anxiety and improve learning performance in various educational contexts.

This research was conducted based on preliminary findings from interviews with several teachers at MAN 2 Probolinggo, which revealed that many students still experience anxiety in the learning process. They tend to be afraid to express opinions, hesitate in expressing ideas, and lack confidence for fear of making mistakes. This condition has an impact on low student participation and non-optimal learning outcomes. Therefore, this study aims to explore students' experiences in dealing with learning anxiety, as well as identify how pair work activities can help reduce such anxiety. The problem formulations in this study are:

1. How can the pair work process help students reduce anxiety in learning?
2. What are the factors that cause learning anxiety in students?

This research is expected to provide new insights into the importance of a collaborative approach in creating an emotionally safe learning environment, as well as providing practical guidance for teachers to help students learn more confidently and effectively.

## Methods

This study used a qualitative research approach with a case study design. The data collection process used several techniques, including interviews, observation and documentation. In depth interviews were conducted with selected students to explore their experiences, perceptions and emotional responses related to learning anxiety during pair work activities. Participants were selected based on teacher recommendations and observations of classroom behavior, to ensure various perspectives were represented. In addition, classroom observations were conducted to look at student behavior and interactions during the pair work sessions. These observations focused on

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<sup>6</sup> Yu Zheng and Zhen Cheng, "Enhancing Student Learning Through Pair Work," *Asian Journal of Education and Learning* 9 no.4 (2018): 102–9.

<sup>7</sup> Marjan Laal and Seyed M. Ghodsi, "Benefits of Collaborative Learning," *Social and Behavioral Sciences* 31, 2016, 486–490.

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identifying signs of anxiety such as hesitation, avoidance, and nervousness as well as positive engagement, such as collaboration and active participation. Supporting documentation, including lesson plans and teaching materials, were also reviewed to provide contextual background and support data triangulation.

The data collection process was conducted over two weeks to ensure a comprehensive understanding of classroom dynamics and student experiences. Data analysis involved several steps, starting with data reduction to focus on relevant and meaningful information. The reduced data was then systematically categorized and presented to highlight emerging themes related to learning anxiety and the impact of pair work. Finally, conclusions are drawn to provide insight into how collaborative learning can support students emotionally and improve their learning performance.

### Results and Discussion

This study reveals that pair work activities have a significant impact on reducing students' learning anxiety. Through data collection techniques in the form of in-depth interviews, direct observation in the classroom, and supporting documentation, the researcher found that most students showed an increase in self-confidence and more active learning participation when engaged in learning activities in pairs. This condition is different when students have to do individual speaking tasks in front of the class, where students tend to feel nervous, silent, and reluctant to speak. The pair learning situation provides a safe space for students to express ideas, share responsibilities, and get immediate feedback from peers without excessive pressure. The interaction in pair work also builds a more relaxed yet focused collaborative atmosphere, thus reducing feelings of fear of making mistakes or fear of being judged by other peers. In this context, pair work serves not only as a learning strategy, but also as an affective approach that supports students' emotional needs.

The interview results showed that some students felt more confident expressing their ideas or opinions when working in pairs. Support from peers provided a sense of security that they did not feel when speaking individually in front of the class. This finding aligns with the perspective of Lightbown and Spada (2013), who state that pair work can create a safe and supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable to try and are not afraid to make mistakes due to the emotional support from their peers.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, pair work is not only effective as a collaborative learning strategy but also serves as a means to reduce students' learning anxiety and improve their learning performance. Additionally, observations in Class XI D at MAN 2 Probolinggo show that when students are given tasks in pairs, they tend to exhibit more positive learning behaviours. This

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<sup>8</sup> N. Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, "How Languages Are Learned,," *Oxford: Oxford University Press*, 1999.

is evident from body language such as being more relaxed, not avoiding eye contact, and more active participation. Students also provide more meaningful feedback. Furthermore, subject teachers confirm that the pair work strategy helps previously passive students become more active, confident, and willing to express their opinions in class. These findings reinforce that pair work not only impacts learning outcomes but also affects students' affective aspects, particularly in addressing anxiety related to learning performance.

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This finding is in line with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory (1978), which states that a person's cognitive development can occur better through social interaction.<sup>9</sup> In this case, pair work can serve as a form of assistance or scaffolding that helps students overcome their difficulties when studying alone. By working together, students can support each other, provide feedback, and learn from one another. This process not only helps them understand the material better, but also improves students' ability to interact with their peers.

Although pair work offers many benefits, there are also some challenges in its implementation in the classroom. Some students feel uncomfortable with the partner assigned by the teacher, or feel that the time given is too short to complete the task to the best of their ability. Additionally, there are cases where more confident students dominate the discussion, leaving their partners passive. This highlights the importance of the teacher's role in balancing study pairs, providing sufficient time, and ensuring all students can participate fairly. This study also identified several factors that cause students to feel anxious when learning, especially when speaking English. These factors include: fear of making mistakes, fear of being laughed at by friends, lack of confidence, previous bad experiences, and limitations in vocabulary or language structure. These factors can originate from within the student or from their surroundings. However, all of these can be reduced if teachers implement supportive learning strategies, such as pair work.

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<sup>9</sup> Lev Vygotsky, "Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes," *Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press*, 1978.

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With proper planning, pair work can be an effective learning solution. This method can help create a more enjoy and safe classroom atmosphere, encouraging students to participate more actively. Therefore, teachers are advised to incorporate pair work into their regular teaching activities, especially for students who tend to feel anxious. Teachers also need to continuously adjust this strategy to suit the conditions and needs of students in the classroom.

### Conclusion

The use of pair work method in English learning at MAN 2 Probolinggo proved to be effective in helping to reduce students' anxiety, especially in the aspect of speaking skill. The results show that this strategy is able to create a more comfortable and supportive learning atmosphere, so that students feel more confident and actively involved in the learning process. Collaboration between students through pair work allows them to support each other, exchange ideas, and get immediate feedback without excessive pressure.

This activity also provides an opportunity for students to learn in a safe environment, which encourages them to be more courageous in expressing their opinions and actively discussing. Evidence from classroom observations and interviews showed positive changes in student behavior, such as increased participation and less fear of public speaking. Although there are still obstacles, such as mismatched pairs or domination by certain students, the benefits of pair work far outweigh the challenges.

Overall, pair work is a learning strategy that should be integrated regularly, especially to help students with high levels of anxiety. With proper planning and fair management of learning pairs, this strategy can be an inclusive and effective approach, both in supporting students' speaking development and in creating a more positive and enjoyable learning experience.

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