



Managing Student Stress in English Language Learning: A Case Study at Sunan Doe Institute

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the significant sources of stress experienced by students learning English in a non-English-speaking academic environment. Previous research indicates that English learners in EFL settings often encounter psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural barriers that impede the development of proficiency, particularly when institutions mandate English as the medium of instruction. In line with this context, the Sunan Doe Institute has implemented intensive English policies, yet many learners continue to report anxiety and performance pressure. This mixed-method study involved 150 students at three proficiency levels and 10 English lecturers, employing surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations to obtain comprehensive data. Quantitatively, the results reveal that fear of negative evaluation, low self-efficacy, and peer comparison are the most significant psychological stressors. Linguistic challenges, particularly pronunciation accuracy, grammatical mastery, and limited vocabulary, emerged as additional pressure points. Environmental and cultural factors, including limited English exposure, unfamiliar cultural references, and insufficient interactive practices, further elevate students' anxiety. Qualitative findings reinforce these patterns, showing that low confidence and constrained opportunities for authentic communication hinder progress across proficiency levels. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of stress dynamics in EFL contexts and recommends culturally responsive, supportive, and interaction-rich pedagogical strategies to strengthen learner motivation and well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

English plays a critical role in non-English-speaking countries, particularly in global communication, career development, and education. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, English has emerged as the primary language for international collaboration across sectors such as business,

technology, and diplomacy; proficiency in English significantly supports cross-cultural communication and international business success (Agustina et al., 2025). In terms of career opportunities, English proficiency is often a key requirement in global industries; recent studies show that English proficiency, including standardized measures such as the TOEFL, increases employability and access to multinational work environments (Khoiruman & Irawan, 2025). Furthermore, English is a gateway to higher education and global academic engagement, as mastering English opens access to international academic resources and facilitates participation in global research communities (Haryadi & Aminuddin, 2023).

However, learning English at Indonesian universities presents unique challenges because outside the classroom, students may have limited opportunities to use English. Qualitative findings indicate that students struggle with speaking proficiency due to insufficient practice, reluctance to use English despite adequate vocabulary, and limited institutional support, including the absence of language laboratories (Putra & Suparni, 2023). Many non-English majors also perceive that their English instruction is too limited and insufficiently integrated to support global employability (Ardiansyah et al., 2024). These limitations, combined with psychological barriers such as speaking anxiety, hinder learners' confidence and communicative competence (Marlia et al., 2023; Wisrance & Kristanti, 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires a more immersive and practical approach to English education, along with greater access to learning materials and interactive language experiences to boost confidence and proficiency. Stressors in learning English in non-English-speaking countries have been identified as a range of factors. Sari and Rahmawati (2022) found that non-native English teachers in Indonesia struggled with producing lexical stress, which may affect their students' learning. Kasim and Yusuf (2023) highlighted the stressors experienced by EFL learners, including separation from families, changes in social roles, academic pressure, and classroom bullying. Roghani and Abdullah (2021) noted differences in the use of acoustic cues to indicate stress between native and non-native English speakers, particularly in the fundamental and second formant frequencies. Demirezen and Korkmaz (2021) emphasized the need for training in sentential stress patterns for prospective English language teachers. Recent studies further reinforce these findings. Arifin, Malihah, and Nabella (2025) revealed that English learning anxiety among EFL students is strongly influenced by personal beliefs, teacher behavior, and classroom atmosphere. Prameswari et al. (2025) demonstrated that speaking anxiety among

junior high school learners arises from low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and limited vocabulary mastery factors that often intersect with linguistic stress patterns highlighted in earlier studies. At the university level, Attia and Algazo (2025) found that both teachers and students experience foreign language anxiety, which affects classroom participation and communicative performance. Additionally, research by Zhang et al. (2025) showed that digital learning environments can reduce anxiety and enhance EFL achievement when learners engage in informal, low-pressure language exposure. Collectively, these studies underscore the complex interplay of linguistic, social, psychological, and educational factors in the experience of stress in learning English as a non-native language.

Understanding the challenges students face is significant for several reasons. It helps researchers identify the obstacles students encounter and develop strategies to overcome them. Additionally, it provides insights into the impact of these challenges on students' education and personal development. The research conducted by Erwin et al. (2023) explores students' experiences with educational-moral challenges, highlighting the importance of addressing false beliefs and assumptions that contribute to them. Another study by Aboulsaadat (n.d.) and Dorić et al. (2023) focuses on the challenges undergraduate software engineering students face when working in teams, emphasizing the need to prepare them for collaboration-intensive workplaces. Furthermore, the research by Wachyunni et al. (2023) provides a catalog of challenges faced by student teams and offers recommendations to address them and improve collaborative skills. Overall, these studies contribute to a better understanding of the challenges students face and provide valuable insights for educators and researchers in various fields.

Sunan Doe Institute of Islamic Studies is one of the private campuses in East Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, with a globally competitive vision and mission to be the only campus in West Nusa Tenggara that makes English the language of instruction and of lectures, both inside and outside the classroom. Sunan Doe's seriousness in making English a means of daily communication is evidenced not only by the existence of an English department but also by the development of related programs that help realize the vision and mission, one of which is the bilingual program. This program aims to provide intensive English language training to all lecturers, staff, and Sunan Doe students themselves.

At Sunan Doe Institute, students encounter distinct challenges in mastering English as a foreign language. Despite English being a crucial skill for academic and professional success, many learners at Sunan Doe Institute struggle

with aspects such as writing, speaking, and comprehension. Writing courses, in particular, have proven difficult, as students often require significant time and effort to develop proficiency in this skill and face issues such as limited vocabulary and structural challenges. Additionally, the use of English in daily communication is minimal, further hindering language acquisition. Many students experience difficulties in speaking, as they lack the confidence and practice opportunities needed to engage in conversations fluently. To overcome these hurdles, students employ various strategies, such as using diaries to improve writing and other creative approaches to enhance language skills. The challenges students face at Sunan Doe Institute highlight the need for more immersive, practical English teaching methods to help learners navigate these obstacles effectively and improve their proficiency.

The purpose of this program is to boost interest in learning English among all students and lecturers and to serve as an instrument for developing both verbal and written foreign language skills. However, in the end, this English language development program, on the one hand, is not only a source of progress for Sunan Doe itself, but also creates new problems that lead to stress in learning. Based on the problems outlined above, this research focuses on understanding why English language program has become a source of anxiety for some students, particularly due to its perceived complexity, which often diminishes their motivation and participation. Although the program aims to support academic progress at Sunan Doe, it simultaneously generates learning-related stress that affects students' well-being. Therefore, this study seeks to identify the primary sources of stress experienced during the English learning process such as homesickness, culture shock, discrimination, and foreign-language speaking anxiety, while also exploring how these stressors relate to sociodemographic factors, depression, and overall mental health. In addition, the research aims to investigate how individual differences shape these experiences and how students' stress levels evolve.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the sources of stress experienced by students learning English at Institut Studi Islam Sunan Doe, Indonesia. The use of mixed methods allows the research to capture numerical trends while also exploring students' and lecturers' lived experiences in depth. By combining these complementary approaches, the study strengthens the validity of its findings through triangulation. It provides a more nuanced and

comprehensive understanding of the complex factors contributing to stress in English language learning. The research was conducted at Institut Studi Islam Sunan Doe, where English is a compulsory subject for students across various academic programs. Participants included 150 randomly selected students representing different proficiency levels (see Table 1) and 10 English lecturers involved in teaching. This diverse sample is intended to ensure that perspectives from both learners and educators are represented, thereby enabling a holistic analysis of the stressors emerging from the instructional environment, course demands, and classroom interactions.

Table 1. List of participants involved

Participant Group	Sub-Category	Est. Percentage	Number of Participants	Description
Students	Beginner	40%	60	Students with foundational English proficiency
Students	Intermediate	35%	52	Students with developing English proficiency
Students	Advanced	25%	38	Students with strong English proficiency
Total students	-	100%	150	Randomly selected across proficiency levels
Lecturers	English lecturers	-	10	Instructors involved in English teaching and academic support

Data collection employed multiple qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a rich, balanced dataset. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with lecturers and students, focus group discussions for collective insights, and classroom observations to capture real-time learning dynamics. Quantitative data were obtained through structured student surveys measuring stress levels across specific linguistic and psychological factors, along with demographic information, academic performance records, and participation indicators. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings. In contrast, the quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software to produce descriptive summaries and inferential comparisons across groups. Together, these approaches enable

the researcher to build a thorough, evidence-based understanding of stress in English language learning.

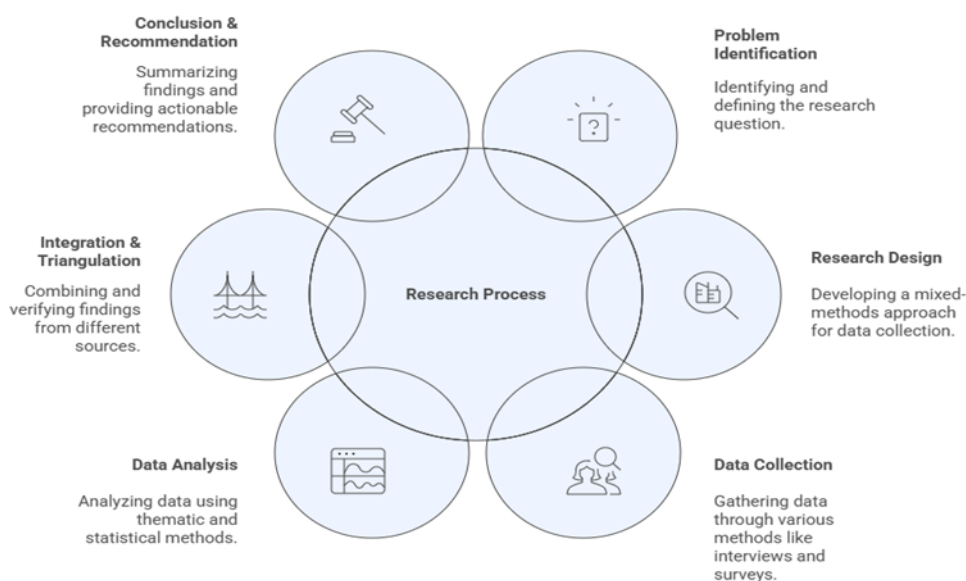


Figure 1. Overall research process

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The purpose of this program is to boost interest in learning English among all students and lecturers, and to serve as an instrument for developing foreign language skills, both verbal and written. The findings of the study can be used to develop programs and services that support the psychological well-being of non-English-speaking students and promote positive acculturation outcomes.

Participant Demographics

The sample consisted of 150 students from Sunan Doe Institute, Indonesia, who are currently studying English as part of their curriculum. Participants were divided among different levels of English proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced) and varied by year in school, with 60% of respondents in the first two years of study and 40% in the later years. Ages ranged from 18 to 25, and 70% of respondents identified as female, while 30% identified as male.

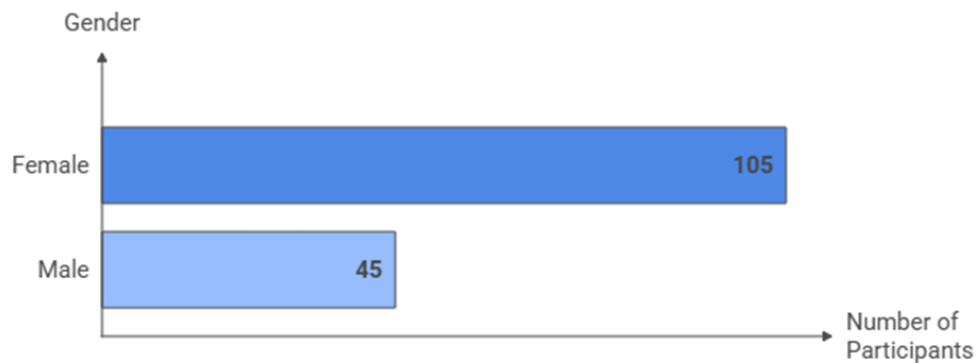


Figure 2. Diagram of participant demographics

Sources of Stress in Learning English

Analysis of survey and interview data revealed several key stressors affecting students' learning experience in English. Linguistic challenges were a dominant source of stress, as many students reported difficulties with pronunciation and grammar. Beginners experienced higher stress with pronunciation, and advanced learners struggled more with grammar. Vocabulary limitations also contributed significantly, as a large proportion of students, especially beginners, felt that the need to expand vocabulary continuously was a persistent challenge that reduced their confidence in speaking and understanding English. Cultural differences added another layer of stress, with many students feeling disconnected from cultural references in English learning materials due to limited exposure to Western cultural norms, and others expressing frustration with idiomatic expressions that often caused misunderstandings during written and spoken assessments. The learning environment further influenced stress levels, with many respondents noting that the instructor's teaching style, particularly the lack of interactive activities, heightened their stress because a predominantly lecture-based approach did not adequately support effective language acquisition. Classroom dynamics also contributed, as some students felt pressured by peer interactions, with a significant portion mentioning that peer comparison led to stress when they felt they were not progressing as quickly as their classmates. Social and psychological factors were equally impactful, as many participants reported fear of negative evaluation from peers and instructors, especially among beginners who worried that making mistakes would result in embarrassment, while others highlighted low self-efficacy and lack of motivation as additional sources of stress.

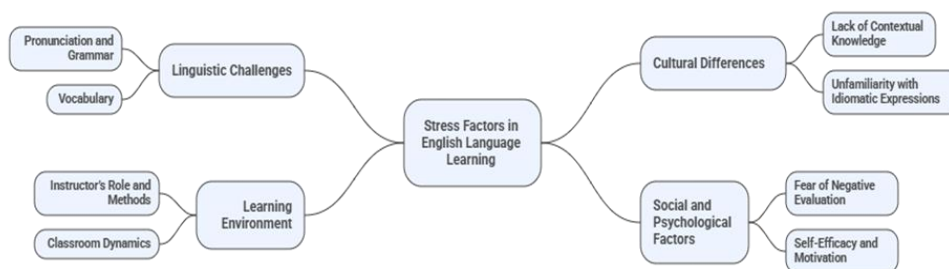


Figure 3. Visualized results of stress factors in English language learning

Quantitative analysis of stress levels using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 further illustrated the variation in stress intensity across these categories. Results indicated the following table:

Table 2. Students' Stress Sources in English Learning

Stress Source Mean Stress Level (1-5)	Stress Source Mean Stress Level (1-5)
Linguistic Challenges 4.0	Linguistic Challenges 4.0
Cultural Differences 3.7	Cultural Differences 3.7
Learning Environment 3.8	Learning Environment 3.8
Social and Psychological Factors 4.2	Social and Psychological Factors 4.2

Social and psychological factors emerged as the most significant source of stress, followed closely by linguistic challenges.

Discussion

The interpretation of findings indicates that students at Sunan Doe Institute experience stress from multiple interrelated sources, with psychological factors, particularly fear of negative evaluation and low self-efficacy, emerging as dominant contributors. These results align with recent studies published in Scopus- and SINTA-indexed journals (2019–2024), which similarly emphasize the salience of affective variables in generating foreign language anxiety, particularly in Asian EFL settings. Scholars such as Liu (2021), Rahmat (2020), and Zhang & Kim (2022) note that learners in non-English-speaking environments frequently experience heightened psychological tension due to limited exposure and fear of public performance, confirming the pattern identified in this study. However, unlike some studies reporting that psychological anxiety decreases at higher proficiency levels, the present findings show that even advanced learners experience persistent stress, particularly related to grammar accuracy,

suggesting a unique institutional or cultural influence.

The documented linguistic challenges, especially those involving pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, also reflect patterns widely confirmed in recent EFL literature. Studies by Suryani (2021), Chan (2023), and Abdullah (2022) highlight structural complexity, limited immersion, and insufficient corrective feedback as significant barriers. Nonetheless, this study differs by revealing that vocabulary stress is disproportionately higher among beginners, whereas advanced learners struggle more with grammar; several recent studies suggest a more uniform distribution of linguistic anxiety across proficiency levels, indicating that the English policy at Sunan Doe Institute may shape learners' stress differently. The alignment and divergence from prior research contribute to ongoing discussions about the nuanced nature of linguistic stressors in EFL contexts.

Cultural differences also shaped students' learning experiences, particularly their difficulty relating to cultural references and idiomatic expressions frequently embedded in English learning materials. Recent research (e.g., Tanaka 2020; Mahfud, 2022) similarly reports that cultural distance reduces comprehension and limits learners' ability to contextualize new vocabulary. The findings of this study reinforce these insights but highlight a more pronounced disconnect stemming from limited exposure to Western cultural norms within the institution, suggesting a need for localized, culturally adaptive teaching materials. This strengthens theoretical discourse on the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in mitigating affective barriers and improving retention.

Furthermore, stressors in the learning environment, including teaching methodology and classroom dynamics, underscore the importance of student-centered instruction. Recent studies (Hapsari, 2021; Kim & Lee, 2023) argue that interactive and communicative approaches significantly reduce anxiety and improve proficiency. The predominance of lecture-based methods observed in this study contrasts with these recommendations, indicating a practical gap in instructional implementation at Sunan Doe Institute. The findings thus contribute theoretically by reaffirming the role of pedagogical climate in shaping affective learning outcomes and practically by identifying specific areas where instructional reform is necessary.

Taken together, the findings provide valuable theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study enriches the literature on foreign language anxiety by offering evidence that psychological, linguistic, cultural, and environmental stressors interact more dynamically than previously described, particularly in institutions with strict English-use policies. Practically, the results

suggest clear interventions: integrating motivational and supportive teaching strategies, embedding culturally relevant materials, increasing interactive activities, and providing structured exposure to idioms and cultural norms. Although the study is limited to one institution, future research should broaden the sample to examine how these stressors manifest across diverse EFL contexts and test specific intervention models to determine their effectiveness in reducing learner anxiety.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the primary sources of stress experienced by students learning English at Sunan Doe Institute in Indonesia, using a mixed-methods approach that revealed how linguistic, cultural, psychological, and environmental factors interact to shape learners' experiences. Consistent with the recent literature, linguistic stressors such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary difficulties remain central challenges for EFL learners, particularly in contexts with limited immersion. Cultural unfamiliarity with idioms, pragmatic norms, and contextual references further reinforces cognitive load, aligning with studies showing that cultural distance increases language anxiety and reduces comprehension. However, this research emphasizes that psychological and social factors, especially fear of negative evaluation and low self-efficacy, are the most dominant stressors, a claim supported by findings that affective barriers often exceed structural linguistic difficulties in determining language success. These results highlight that English learning in Indonesian settings is not merely a cognitive task but a profoundly emotional experience influenced by learners' self-perceptions, peer interaction, and the sociocultural environment in which English is taught.

In addition to learner-related factors, this study confirms that institutional dynamics significantly shape students' stress levels. Teaching methods that rely heavily on lecture-style delivery, coupled with limited communicative practice, hinder the development of confidence and meaningful language production, echoing earlier research emphasizing the value of interactive, supportive, and student-centered learning environments. The findings imply several theoretical and practical contributions: theoretically, the study reinforces the integrated model of language learning stress, showing how psychological, cultural, and environmental dimensions jointly affect learner outcomes; practically, the study encourages educators to adopt culturally responsive materials, scaffolded feedback, and anxiety-reducing strategies that promote a safer learning space. Although limited to a single institution, this research provides a foundation for

future studies to test targeted interventions, such as self-efficacy training, peer collaboration, and culturally contextualized instructional modules, to ensure more sustainable, motivating, and psychologically supportive English-learning experiences.

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