

Social Hierarchy and Linguistic Anxiety: A Quantitative Analysis of Arabic Speaking Barriers Among Indonesian Students in an Immersion Environment

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Abstract: Speaking skills (*Maharah al-Kalam*) are a vital component in foreign language acquisition; however, they are often hindered by psychological factors, particularly Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). This study aims to investigate the level of Arabic language anxiety among students of Universitas Darussalam Gontor, with a focus on the influence of interlocutor hierarchy: lecturers, seniors, and peers. This research employs a descriptive quantitative design involving 77 students of the Arabic Language Education Program as respondents, using a questionnaire as the research instrument. The findings indicate that students generally experience high levels of anxiety across all interaction contexts, with a clear hierarchical pattern. Interaction with lecturers triggers the highest level of anxiety (Mean: 13.21), influenced by fear of academic evaluation. Interaction with seniors ranks second (Mean: 13.10), psychologically influenced by the internalization of the cultural value of *ta'zhim*, which refers to deep respect for seniors/teachers and may create pressure to perform perfectly as well as fear of making mistakes. Meanwhile, interaction with peers shows the lowest level of anxiety (Mean: 12.74), although it still falls within the high category due to social pressure and concerns about negative judgment, such as being labeled "showing off" or "acting smart." This study concludes that Arabic language anxiety in the *pesantren* context is not only derived from individual factors but is also significantly influenced by social hierarchical structures. Therefore, this research contributes to the development of pedagogical communication in Arabic language learning, particularly in designing adaptive and socially sensitive communication strategies to reduce language anxiety.

Keywords: Arabic Language Anxiety, Interlocutor Hierarchy, Speaking Skill, Social Pressure, UNIDA Gontor.

Abstrak: Keterampilan berbicara (*Maharah al-Kalam*) merupakan komponen vital dalam pemerolehan bahasa asing; namun, hal ini sering kali terhambat oleh faktor psikologis, khususnya kecemasan bahasa asing (Foreign Language Anxiety atau FLA). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menginvestigasi tingkat kecemasan berbahasa Arab di kalangan mahasiswa Universitas Darussalam Gontor, dengan fokus pada pengaruh hierarki lawan bicara: dosen, senior, dan teman sebaya.

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Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kuantitatif deskriptif yang melibatkan 77 mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Arab sebagai responden, dengan menggunakan kuesioner sebagai instrumen penelitian. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa umumnya mengalami tingkat kecemasan yang tinggi di seluruh konteks interaksi, dengan pola hierarki yang jelas. Interaksi dengan dosen memicu tingkat kecemasan tertinggi (Rata-rata: 13,21), yang dipengaruhi oleh ketakutan terhadap evaluasi akademik. Interaksi dengan senior menempati peringkat kedua (Rata-rata: 13,10), yang secara psikologis dipengaruhi oleh internalisasi nilai budaya ta'zhim, yaitu rasa hormat yang mendalam kepada senior/guru yang dapat menciptakan tekanan untuk tampil sempurna serta ketakutan akan melakukan kesalahan. Sementara itu, interaksi dengan teman sebaya menunjukkan tingkat kecemasan terendah (Rata-rata: 12,74), meskipun masih dalam kategori tinggi karena adanya tekanan sosial dan kekhawatiran terhadap penilaian negatif, seperti label "pamer" atau "sok pintar." Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kecemasan berbahasa Arab dalam konteks pesantren tidak hanya berasal dari faktor individu, tetapi juga dipengaruhi secara signifikan oleh struktur hierarki sosial. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan komunikasi pedagogis dalam pembelajaran bahasa Arab, khususnya dalam merancang strategi komunikasi yang adaptif dan peka secara sosial untuk mengurangi kecemasan berbahasa.

Kata Kunci: Kecemasan Berbahasa Arab, Hierarki Lawan Bicara, Keterampilan Berbicara, Tekanan Sosial, UNIDA Gontor.

Introduction

Speaking is a fundamental component of human communication, enabling individuals to convey ideas, emotions, and information effectively. In language learning contexts, speaking is not merely a natural ability but a skill that requires continuous development through structured practice and interaction. It plays a crucial role in shaping learners' communicative competence and overall language proficiency (Harianto, 2020). In the context of Arabic language learning, speaking skill (maharah al-kalam) is considered a primary objective, as language mastery is often measured by the ability to communicate orally. Learners who possess adequate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar may still face difficulties in real communication if they lack speaking proficiency. Therefore, speaking skill becomes a key indicator of successful language acquisition (Mufidah et al., n.d.).

Despite its importance, many learners encounter psychological barriers that hinder their speaking performance. One of the most widely discussed factors is Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which refers to a specific type of anxiety associated with

language learning situations. This form of anxiety can negatively influence learners' confidence, participation, and overall performance in speaking activities (Horwitz et al., 1986; Borisova et al., n.d.). FLA often manifests in various forms, such as nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and difficulty in expressing ideas clearly. Learners experiencing anxiety tend to hesitate when speaking and may avoid communication altogether. These conditions can limit opportunities for practice, which in turn slows down the development of speaking skills (Borisova et al., n.d.).

Previous studies have shown that language anxiety is closely related to social factors, particularly fear of negative evaluation and comparison with others. Learners are often concerned about how they are perceived by peers and teachers, which can reduce their willingness to participate in speaking activities (Fitriani et al., 2022). This indicates that speaking anxiety is not solely an individual psychological issue but is also shaped by the surrounding social environment.

However, although research on FLA has been extensively developed since the introduction of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), most studies tend to focus on general classroom settings without considering the influence of social hierarchy in communication. In particular, there is still limited attention given to how different interlocutors—such as lecturers, seniors, and peers—may influence the level of anxiety experienced by learners. This issue becomes more complex in educational environments that emphasize hierarchical and cultural values, such as pesantren-based universities. Universitas Darussalam Gontor represents a unique context where Arabic is used not only as a subject of study but also as a daily communication tool. In this setting, interactions are strongly influenced by values such as respect (*adab*) and obedience toward authority figures.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of *adab* emphasizes proper conduct and recognition of hierarchical relationships in the learning process (Al-Attas, 1993). While these values aim to foster discipline and moral character, they may also unintentionally contribute to increased anxiety, particularly in speaking situations involving lecturers or senior students. Learners may feel additional pressure to avoid mistakes in order to maintain respect and social harmony. Therefore, this study aims to examine Arabic speaking anxiety by considering the hierarchical relationships between interlocutors, specifically lecturers, seniors, and peers, within the context of Universitas

Darussalam Gontor. This research seeks to fill the gap in previous studies by integrating psychological and socio-cultural perspectives in understanding Foreign Language Anxiety. The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it offers a more contextualized understanding of FLA by incorporating social hierarchy as a variable. Practically, it provides insights for educators to develop more effective and culturally sensitive strategies in reducing students' anxiety and improving their speaking performance.

Metode Penelitian

This study employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive design to examine the level of Arabic speaking anxiety among students based on interlocutor hierarchy. A quantitative approach was chosen because the data were collected in numerical form and analyzed using statistical procedures to provide systematic and objective results (Soesana et al., 2023). The descriptive design was considered appropriate as the study did not aim to test causal relationships or apply experimental treatment, but rather to describe and compare anxiety levels as they naturally occur in the field (Abdullah et al., 2022).

The population of this study consisted of all active students of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Darussalam Gontor, totaling 95 students. The sample was determined using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error, resulting in 77 respondents. A probability sampling technique, specifically simple random sampling, was employed to ensure that each member of the population had an equal chance of being selected (Mahmudi & Suryadarma, 2025).

Data were collected using a questionnaire adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), which was modified to fit the context of Arabic language learning and interlocutor hierarchy, namely lecturers, senior students, and peers. The instrument measured dimensions of language anxiety such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, with reverse scoring applied to negative items to ensure consistency. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate mean scores and categorize anxiety levels, while inferential analysis was conducted using Repeated

Measurers ANOVA to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in anxiety levels across the three interlocutor groups. A significance level of 0.05 was used as the criterion for statistical significance.

Result and Discussion

This study measures and compares Arabic language anxiety levels among students of the Arabic Language Education Study Program, specifically examining the influence of interlocutor hierarchy: peers, seniors, and lecturers. Data were collected from 77 respondents using a questionnaire utilizing a 4-point Likert scale. Based on the data analysis, mean scores were calculated for each interlocutor category. The theoretical score range for each variable spans from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 20.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Anxiety Based on Hierarchy

Variable (Interlocutor)	N	Mean Score (μ)	Standard Deviation	Anxiety Category
Lecturers (Items 11-15)	77	13.21	2.82	High
Seniors (Items 6-10)	77	13.10	2.60	High
Peers (Item 1-5)	77	12.74	2.11	High

The data in Table 1 demonstrate a hierarchical pattern regarding anxiety levels. Students experienced the highest anxiety when interacting with Lecturers (13.21), followed closely by interactions with Seniors (13.10), while the lowest anxiety levels were observed during interactions with Peers (12.74). To identify specific anxiety triggers at each hierarchical level, an analysis of the mean scores per questionnaire item was conducted.

Table 2. Repeated Measurers ANOVA - Within Subjects Effects

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
RM Factor 1	170.9	2	85.459	36.38	< .001
Residuals	357.1	152	2.349		

Table 3. Repeated Measurers ANOVA - Test of Sphericity

	Mauchly's W	Approx. χ^2	df	p-value	Greenhouse-Geisser ϵ	Huynh-Feldt ϵ	Lower Bound ϵ
RM Factor 1	0.936	4.962	2	.084	0.940	0.963	0.500

Table 4. Repeated Measurers ANOVA - Post Hoc Comparisons

		Mean Difference	SE	df	t	p _{Holm}
Peers	Seniors	0.468	0.214	76	2.180	.032
	Lecturers	-1.545	0.268	76	-5.775	< .001
Seniors	Lecturers	-2.013	0.256	76	-7.869	< .001

To statistically validate the observed differences in anxiety levels across the three interlocutor hierarchies, an inferential analysis was conducted using a Repeated Measures ANOVA. Prior to the main analysis, the assumption of sphericity was evaluated and confirmed using Mauchly's test ($p = .084$), indicating that the variances of the differences between conditions were statistically equal. The ANOVA results revealed a highly significant main effect of interlocutor hierarchy on students' Arabic speaking anxiety, $F(2, 152) = 36.38, p < .001$. This finding confirms that the variations in anxiety scores are not due to sampling error or chance, but are systematically influenced by the social status of the communication partner.

Furthermore, a post-hoc analysis utilizing Holm's correction was performed to examine the specific pairwise differences. The results demonstrated that anxiety levels when interacting with peers were significantly different from interactions with seniors ($p = .032$) and significantly lower than interactions with lecturers ($p < .001$). Crucially, the analysis also revealed a highly significant statistical difference between interactions with seniors and lecturers ($p < .001$). These inferential findings provide robust quantitative evidence that each level of the social hierarchy uniquely contributes to the students' psychological burden.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Anxiety Items: Lecturer Interlocutor

Code	Statement	Mean (μ)	Category
L1	I feel nervous when suddenly called upon by the lecturer to answer a question.	2.51	High
L2	I fear receiving a negative academic evaluation from the lecturer if I make a mistake.	2.74	High
L3	I feel intimidated if the lecturer maintains eye contact while I am constructing sentences.	2.81	High
L4	I feel more at ease if the lecturer permits questions in Indonesian.	2.34	Moderate

L5	I feel anxious if asked to present an Arabic paper in front of the lecturer.	2.82	High
Total Mean for Lecturer Variable		2.64	High

Regarding the Lecturer variable, based on Table 2, Item L5 ("I feel anxious if asked to present an Arabic paper in front of the lecturer") and Item L3 ("I feel intimidated if the lecturer maintains eye contact while I am constructing sentences") emerged as the highest score contributors, followed closely by Item L2 ("I fear receiving a negative academic evaluation"). This indicates that anxiety towards lecturers is significantly influenced by formal performance situations and the pressure of direct scrutiny.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Anxiety Items: Senior Interlocutor

Code	Statement	Mean (μ)	Category
S1	My heart beats faster when invited to a serious discussion by a senior.	2.47	Moderate
S2	I feel reluctant to speak because I perceive the senior's knowledge to be far superior to mine.	2.58	High
S3	I fear being judged as impolite if my Arabic sounds crude in front of a senior.	2.55	High
S4	I often feel my mind "go blank" (forgetting vocabulary) due to nervousness when facing a senior.	2.19	Moderate
S5	I feel burdened by expectations to perform perfectly in front of a senior.	2.95	High
Total Mean for Senior Variable		2.55	High

Regarding the Senior variable, based on Table 3, Item S5 ("I feel burdened by expectations to perform perfectly in front of a senior") yielded the dominant score, followed by Item S2 ("I feel reluctant to speak because I perceive the senior's knowledge to be far superior to mine"). This indicates the presence of a psychological barrier manifesting as a heavy burden of expectation and a sense of academic inferiority.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of Anxiety Items: Peer Interlocutor

Code	Statement	Mean (μ)	Category
P1	I lack confidence when speaking Arabic with friends.	1.68	Low
P2	I worry about being laughed at by friends if I use incorrect vocabulary.	2.81	High
P3	I feel awkward if I have to converse in Arabic with	2.81	High

	friends.		
P4	I prefer to remain silent rather than join the conversation when gathering with friends.	2.91	High
P5	I fear being perceived as "pretentious" or "acting like an Arab" by friends if I speak fluently.	2.91	High
Total Mean for Peer Variable		2.62	High

Regarding the Peer variable, as shown in Table 4, although it yielded the lowest total score among variables, Item P4 ("I prefer to remain silent rather than join the conversation") and Item P5 ("I fear being perceived as 'pretentious' or 'acting like an Arab'") recorded high scores compared to other items in this category. This suggests the presence of strong peer pressure to avoid standing out or being judged socially. Visually, the data indicate that students generally report high anxiety levels across all interlocutors, with specific triggers varying by hierarchy.

Based on the data findings above, it is evident that the social hierarchy of the interlocutor plays a significant role in determining the level of students' Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). The following is an in-depth interpretation based on psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic theories.

1. *Lecturer Hierarchy: Dominance of Fear of Negative Evaluation and Academic Authority*

The research results position interaction with lecturers as the highest anxiety trigger (Mean: 13.21). In this context, lecturers are perceived not only as communication partners but also as authority figures who determine students' academic outcomes. This condition leads to what is known as fear of negative academic evaluation, where students associate their speaking performance with potential academic consequences.

Students tend to perceive that making mistakes in speaking Arabic may negatively affect their grades or academic image. This creates a dual cognitive burden, as they must focus on both linguistic accuracy and evaluative pressure simultaneously. As a result, students often experience hesitation, reduced fluency, or even mental blocks during communication. This finding indicates that anxiety is not solely caused by linguistic limitations but also by the perceived threat to academic evaluation. The post-hoc statistical analysis reinforces this claim, showing that the anxiety experienced with lecturers is not only significantly higher than with peers ($p < .001$), but also

statistically distinct from the anxiety felt toward seniors ($p < .001$). This solidifies the premise that formal academic authority creates the highest affective filter among the three groups.

The data indicate that respondents feel more anxious in "Presentation" (Item L5) and "Intimidation/Eye Contact" (Item L3) situations. This confirms that formal situations involving direct performance assessment raise students' affective filters, making it difficult to access vocabulary (going blank) despite actually understanding it. This discovery aligns with the findings of Samia Haroud et al., who found that the fear of speaking incorrectly and being corrected is a major contributor to foreign language speaking anxiety. (Haroud et al., 2025, pp. 7 and 9) Because excessive emphasis on errors by teachers can create a punitive classroom atmosphere and trigger anxiety related to evaluation and judgment by others. (Aldubaikhi, n.d., pp. 36-37)

2. Senior Hierarchy: Culture of *Ta'zhim* and Intellectual Inferiority

Anxiety toward senior students ranks second (Mean: 13.10), which is particularly significant given that seniors do not possess formal authority in academic grading. This finding highlights the strong influence of socio-cultural values, especially the concept of *ta'zhim* (respect and reverence), within the pesantren-based academic environment.

Students tend to perceive seniors as more knowledgeable and experienced figures, creating a psychological distance that leads to feelings of inferiority and hesitation. More importantly, this study reveals that seniority can function as an informal authority that produces psychological pressure comparable to that of lecturers. The inferential statistics perfectly capture this phenomenon. The post-hoc test confirms that anxiety towards seniors is significantly different and higher than towards peers ($p = .032$). More importantly, the highly significant difference between the senior and lecturer variables ($p < .001$) quantitatively proves that the informal authority derived from the culture of *ta'zhim* produces a distinct type of psychological pressure. Students are not only afraid of making linguistic errors but also concerned about violating social norms, being judged as impolite, or appearing incompetent.

Data analysis indicates that the primary factors of this anxiety are the burden of "Perfect Expectations" (Item S5) and feelings of "Reluctance/Hesitation" (Item S2). In the Indonesian educational culture, particularly within the Arabic Language Education

Study Program which is closely tied to Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) values, a strong culture of *ta'zhim* (reverence/respect) exists.

Students feel a tangible knowledge gap. They view seniors as more competent figures ("Senior's knowledge is far above mine"), leading to feelings of intellectual intimidation. Anxiety here stems not from fear of bad grades, but fear of violating social ethics or being corrected by someone considered an expert. This aligns with Norahmi's (2022) findings stating that Indonesian cultural factors emphasizing humility and the worry of being perceived as impolite or incompetent are major triggers of speaking anxiety; students hold back for fear of negative judgment or making others uncomfortable. (Norahmi et al., 2025, pp. 210–212)

3. *Peer Hierarchy: Psychosocial Barriers and Peer Judgment*

Interaction with peers yielded the lowest anxiety score (Mean: 12.74), and the post-hoc analysis confirms that this level is statistically separated and significantly lower than interactions with both seniors ($p = .032$) and lecturers ($p < .001$). This confirms that equal status reduces psychological tension. However, raw data show that this anxiety is not zero. A critical point at this level is the fear of being perceived as "Pretentious" (Item P5) and the preference to remain "Silent" (Item P4). This is a unique phenomenon in student social dynamics. Students tend to refrain from speaking fluently to avoid alienation from their group. They worry that if they speak too well or too frequently in Arabic, they will face social sanctions in the form of mockery or negative labeling from friends; this aligns with Mahmudi's findings that while casual interaction with peers induces relatively lower anxiety, students remain worried about being mocked or judged poorly by classmates. (Mahmudi & Anugerahwati, 2021, pp. 78–79)

The significant differences in anxiety levels indicate that learning strategies for Speaking Skills cannot be generalized. Based on these findings, the implications for learning are:

1. Lecturers need to build a more humanistic classroom atmosphere and reduce tension by normalizing mistakes as part of the learning process. (Haroud et al., 2025, p. 10)

2. Mentoring programs with seniors need to emphasize a friendship approach (*ukhuwah*) to eliminate the sense of inferiority among junior students.
3. The peer environment needs to be conditioned to become a supportive system rather than a judgmental one ("pretentious"), so students feel safe to practice.

Based on the findings, several strategies can be proposed to reduce students' Arabic speaking anxiety. First, lecturers need to minimize the perception of excessive academic evaluation by creating a more supportive classroom atmosphere. Errors should be normalized as a natural part of the learning process rather than treated as failures. Second, informal interactions between lecturers and students, such as casual discussions or informal gatherings, can help reduce psychological distance and lower students' affective filter. Third, senior students should be positioned as mentors rather than authority figures through a more collaborative and supportive approach (*ukhuwah*). Finally, peer environments should be developed into safe and non-judgmental spaces so that students feel confident practicing Arabic without fear of negative labeling.

Conclusion

This study concludes that students' Arabic speaking anxiety is profoundly and significantly influenced by the hierarchical structure of their interlocutors. Through the application of Repeated Measures ANOVA, this research successfully validates that the varying levels of anxiety experienced when communicating with lecturers, seniors, and peers are not due to chance, but are statistically significant phenomena ($p < .001$). This confirms that foreign language anxiety in an immersion environment is systematically shaped by the social status of the communication partner. The findings reveal that interactions with lecturers produce the highest level of anxiety. Driven primarily by the fear of negative academic evaluation, students perceive that their speaking performance carries direct consequences for their academic image and grades. Crucially, interactions with senior students also generate a distinctly high level of anxiety. The post-hoc statistical analysis proves a highly significant difference between the pressure of facing lecturers and seniors ($p < .001$), confirming that the socio-cultural value of *ta'zhim* in the pesantren context functions as a unique informal authority. This cultural reverence creates a distinct psychological burden, where students are heavily pressured by the expectation to perform perfectly and the fear of

violating social ethics. Furthermore, while peer interactions result in the lowest anxiety levels—statistically distinct from both seniors ($p = .032$) and lecturers ($p < .001$)—the descriptive data demonstrate that students are not entirely free from psychological barriers. Equal social status reduces tension, but it shifts the anxiety trigger toward psychosocial constraints, specifically the fear of negative peer judgment and social alienation (e.g., being labeled "pretentious"). Ultimately, this study provides robust quantitative evidence that Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is deeply intertwined with social hierarchy and cultural contexts, moving beyond mere individual linguistic competence. Therefore, pedagogical strategies must be socially sensitive and adaptive. Creating a supportive, low-tension classroom environment to reduce evaluative pressure, shifting senior-junior dynamics toward an ukhuwah-based collaborative mentoring system, and fostering non-judgmental peer spaces are essential steps to minimize anxiety and enhance students' willingness to communicate in Arabic.

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