Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan
Vol.18, 1 (March 2026), pp.34-43
ISSN: 2087-9490 EISSN: 2597-940X, DOI: 10.35445/ alishlah.v18i1.7798

Emotional Freedom Technique in School-Based Group Counseling: A Strategy to Reduce Mathematics Anxiety

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT);
math anxiety;
group counseling;
quasi-experimental design;
school counseling intervention

Article history:

Received 2025-05-18
Revised 2026-01-01
Accepted 2026-02-10

ABSTRACT

Mathematics anxiety is a prevalent emotional barrier that negatively affects students' academic performance, motivation, and engagement in mathematics learning. School counselors play a crucial role in addressing this issue through effective and evidence-based interventions. Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), an integrative counseling approach combining cognitive, emotional, and somatic components, has shown promise in reducing anxiety; however, empirical evidence within school-based group counseling contexts remains limited. This study employed a quasi-experimental non-equivalent pretest–posttest control group design to examine the effectiveness of EFT-based group counseling in reducing mathematics anxiety among high school students in Indonesia. Nineteen students with moderate to high levels of mathematics anxiety were selected through purposive sampling and assigned to an experimental group (n = 9) and a control group (n = 10). The experimental group participated in six weekly EFT-based group counseling sessions, while the control group received no specialized intervention. Mathematics anxiety was measured using an adapted Mathematics Anxiety Scale. Data were analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test and the Mann–Whitney U Test. The results indicated a statistically significant reduction in mathematics anxiety in the experimental group following the intervention ($p < 0.05$), whereas no significant change was observed in the control group. Posttest comparisons revealed a significant difference between the two groups, favoring the experimental group. These findings suggest that EFT-based group counseling is a potentially effective intervention for reducing mathematics anxiety among high school students. Further research with larger samples, randomized designs, and longitudinal follow-up is recommended to strengthen the evidence base and generalizability of the findings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mathematics anxiety is a well-documented psychological phenomenon that affects students across educational levels and is consistently associated with poor academic performance, reduced motivation, and negative attitudes toward mathematics learning (Ashcraft & Moore, 2009; Beilock & Maloney, 2015). Mathematics anxiety is not limited to evaluative situations such as examinations; rather, it can also emerge during routine classroom activities, including completing homework, listening to teacher explanations, or engaging with new mathematical concepts. These anxiety responses involve a combination of physiological arousal, intrusive negative thoughts, and affective distress, all of which can disrupt working memory and impair mathematical problem-solving processes (Karatzias et al., 2011; Passolunghi et al., 2016).

Research has demonstrated that students experiencing high levels of mathematics anxiety are more likely to avoid mathematics-related tasks and academic pathways, thereby limiting their educational and career opportunities (Beilock & Willingham, 2014). Over time, repeated experiences of anxiety may reinforce maladaptive beliefs about one's mathematical ability, creating a cycle of avoidance and underachievement that is difficult to break without targeted intervention (Ashcraft & Moore, 2009). Consequently, mathematics anxiety represents not only an emotional concern but also a significant barrier to educational equity and student development.

Within the context of Indonesian education, mathematics is frequently perceived by students as a difficult and intimidating subject. This perception is often shaped by teacher-centered instructional approaches, high-stakes assessments, and an emphasis on correct answers rather than conceptual understanding. Such learning environments may unintentionally heighten students' fear of making mistakes and intensify performance pressure, thereby increasing vulnerability to mathematics anxiety (Dewi & Pujiastuti, 2020; Milena et al., 2022). Students who repeatedly experience anxiety in mathematics classrooms may develop avoidance behaviors, low self-confidence, and irrational beliefs regarding their academic competence. If left unaddressed, these patterns can persist into higher education and influence long-term academic and vocational choices.

Given the multifaceted nature of mathematics anxiety, school-based guidance and counseling services play a strategic role in supporting students' emotional well-being and academic adjustment. School counselors are uniquely positioned to provide preventive and remedial interventions that address emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of anxiety. Group counseling, in particular, has been shown to be an effective modality for addressing academic and emotional problems, as it facilitates peer support, normalization of shared experiences, and the development of adaptive coping strategies (Prayitno, 2011; Yandri et al., 2019).

One counseling approach that has gained increasing attention in recent years is the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT). EFT is an integrative intervention that combines elements of cognitive restructuring, emotional exposure, and somatic stimulation through tapping on specific acupressure points. The technique is grounded in the assumption that emotional distress is associated with disruptions in the body's energy system, and that stimulating meridian points while focusing on distressing thoughts can reduce emotional intensity (Craig, 2011; Flint et al., 2014). EFT is considered non-invasive, relatively easy to learn, and time-efficient, making it potentially suitable for implementation in school settings.

A growing body of international research has reported positive effects of EFT in reducing anxiety, stress, and test-related emotional distress among students and clinical populations (Church, 2013; Jain & Rubino, 2012; Sezgin & Özcan, 2009). Several studies have also suggested that EFT may be effective when delivered in group formats, allowing participants to benefit from both the therapeutic technique and group dynamics (Rogers & Sears, 2015). Despite these encouraging findings, empirical evidence regarding the application of EFT within school-based group counseling contexts remains limited, particularly in non-Western educational settings such as Indonesia.

Moreover, most existing studies on EFT have focused on test anxiety or general psychological distress, with relatively few investigations targeting mathematics anxiety specifically. Given that mathematics anxiety involves both cognitive and physiological components, EFT may offer a promising alternative or complementary approach to traditional cognitive-behavioral interventions. However, rigorous empirical evaluation is required to determine its effectiveness, feasibility, and relevance in school counseling practice.

Therefore, the present study aims to empirically examine the effectiveness of group counseling using Emotional Freedom Technique in reducing mathematics anxiety among high school students in Indonesia through a quasi-experimental research design. By providing empirical evidence on the use of EFT in a school-based group counseling context, this study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on academic anxiety interventions and to offer an evidence-based alternative for school counselors in supporting students' emotional well-being and academic achievement.

2. METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach with an experimental design to test the effectiveness of Group Counseling using the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) in reducing mathematics anxiety in students. The experimental approach was chosen because it is able to identify causal relationships between treatment variables and dependent variables under controlled conditions (Sugiyono, 2013).

2. 1 Research Design

This study used a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test control group design to evaluate the effectiveness of group counseling using the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) in reducing students' math anxiety. This design allows for comparisons of outcome changes within and between groups without full randomization.

Participants were not randomly assigned to experimental and control groups due to institutional and ethical constraints, such as maintaining intact class groupings. Consequently, this design poses risks to internal validity, particularly related to selection bias. However, efforts were made to ensure baseline equivalence between groups through pre-test analysis and demographic balancing.

2. 2 Participant

A total of 19 students from a high school in Indonesia participated in this study. The sample consisted of:

a. Experimental group: 9 students
b. Control group: 10 students

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, targeting students who exhibited moderate to high levels of math anxiety based on an initial screening. This method was chosen to ensure that the intervention was targeted to the intended population. However, this method can introduce selection bias, thus limiting generalizability beyond similar school contexts.

2. 3 Instrument

Mathematics anxiety was measured using an adapted version of the Mathematics Anxiety Scale originally developed by Chiu and Henry (1990), which was modified to be culturally relevant and tested for psychometric properties.

The scale consists of 38 items rated using a 5-point Likert scale:

- 1 = Never
- 2 = Rarely
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Often
- 5 = Always

A Likert-scale math anxiety instrument was used for *the pretest* and *posttest* in the experimental and control groups. Data collection steps include:

a. Preparing student math anxiety instruments
b. Determine data sources (respondents and documents)
c. Selection of research samples
d. Explain the instrument and how to fill it out to respondents
e. Carry out and analyze pretest data
f. Providing cognitive behavioral therapy group counseling to the experimental group and regular counseling to the control group
g. Carrying out *posttests* and analyzing *pretest - posttest results*

Table 1. Mathematics Anxiety Instrument Grid

Variables	Sub Variables	Indicator
Anxiety mathematics(There isn't anything , (2012)	1. AnxietyTest Mathematics	1.1 Think about test mathematics the day before implemented 1.2 Anxiety When existence quiz before beginning lesson mathematics. 1.3 Anxiety Which appear moment follow math test
	2. Anxiety Numeric	2.1 Anxiety When Do math homework 2.2 Anxiety when seeing the solution math problems 2.3 Anxiety that arises when completing own assignment
	3. Anxiety Abstraction	3.1 Anxiety that arises listen talks Teacher Mathematics speaks in time. Which long 3.2 Anxiety Which arise Whenlisten students otherexplain mathematics. 3.3 Anxiety When to watch The teacher is working. question mathematics in the whiteboard. 3.4 Anxiety Which appear When beginning learn Topics newin the mathematics

This study also used structured observation techniques to observe the manifestation of mathematics anxiety in research subjects (Coker, Coker, & Sanni, 2018) . Observations were conducted systematically with a focus on indicators of mathematics avoidance behavior, anxiety reactions when directly confronted

with mathematical content, and factors that influence mathematics anxiety (Saputra, 2014; Anditya & Murtiyasa, 2016).

2. 4 Data collection technique

The implementation of this study follows the following steps:

1. Pre-test Administration
   All participants completed the Mathematics Anxiety Scale to establish baseline anxiety levels prior to the intervention.
2. Group task
   Based on purposive sampling, 19 students were divided into two groups:
   - Experimental group (n = 9)
   - Control group (n = 10)
3. Counseling Intervention
   The experimental group participated in five group counseling sessions using Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT). The sessions were conducted as follows:
   - Once a week
   - Done for six weeks
   - Each session lasts 60 minutes.
   - Counseling sessions take place in a designated counseling room at the school.
4. Counselor Qualifications
   Counseling sessions are facilitated by licensed school counselors trained in EFT and group guidance procedures. These counselors have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in guidance and counseling and relevant field experience.
5. Counseling Framework
   The sessions follow the Prayitno Group Counseling Model (Prayitno, 2011), which includes the following structured stages:
   - Orientation and building good relationships
   - Identification of problems
   - Intervention delivery (EFT pressure procedure)
   - Group reflection and feedback
   - Closing the session and planning follow-up
     This model emphasizes structured emotional exploration, cognitive reframing, and behavioral strategies in a peer-supported environment.
6. Loyalty Monitoring
   To ensure the integrity of implementation, session notes were maintained by the counselors. Additionally, a supervising counselor conducted fidelity checks by reviewing session plans and observing randomly selected sessions using a checklist based on adherence to the EFT protocol and Prayitno's counseling framework.
7. Control Group Condition
   The control group did not receive any intervention during the treatment period and continued school activities as usual.
8. Post-Test Administration
   After the five-week period, both groups completed the Math Anxiety Scale again (Week 6) to measure changes in anxiety levels.
9. Research Ethics
   This research has received official permission from the school. Approval for participation was obtained through informed consent from parents/guardians and student assent. All data will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using non-parametric statistics because the results of the normality test indicated a non-normal distribution of the data. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was used to compare pretest and posttest scores within each group, while the Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare posttest scores between the experimental and control groups. Effect sizes were calculated using r.

The analysis consists of the following procedures:

a. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was used to examine within-group differences between pre-test and post-test scores in both the experimental and control groups. This test determines whether the intervention resulted in statistically significant changes in math anxiety levels among students in the treatment group.
b. The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to assess intergroup differences in post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. This analysis evaluated whether students who received EFT-based group counseling showed greater anxiety reduction compared to those who did not receive it.
c. To improve the interpretation of the results, the effect size was calculated using r, which was obtained from the Z value of each test using the formula:

Where Z is the test statistic, and N is the total number of observations. Effect size values were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) guidelines. All analyses were performed using SPSS version 27.00 (or equivalent statistical software), and the significance level was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

This study examines the impact of group counseling using the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) on reducing math anxiety among high school students. Data analysis was conducted using non-parametric tests due to the small sample size and non-normal distribution.

Table 2. Differences in Groups

Group	N	Average (Previous)	Average (Posts)	Wilcoxon Z	p-value	*N Gain Score*
Experimental	9	128	50.3	-2,666	0.008	77.67
Control	10	129.1	65.5	-2,805	0.005	63.6

The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test showed a significant decrease in math anxiety scores for the experimental group ($Z = -2.666$, $p = 0.008$), with a large effect size (*N Gain Score* = 77.67). This indicates that the EFT intervention had a substantial impact on students' emotional responses to mathematics. In contrast, the control group showed no significant change ($p > 0.05$), and the corresponding effect size was small (*N Gain Score* = 63.6), indicating minimal natural variation in anxiety levels without the intervention.

Table 3. Differences Between Groups

Test Statistics [a]	
	Posttest
Mann-Whitney University	18,000
Wilcoxon W	63,000
Z	-2,209
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.027
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.028 [b]
a. Grouping Variable: group	
b. Not corrected for ties.	

The results of the Mann–Whitney U test indicated a statistically significant difference in posttest mathematics anxiety scores between the experimental and control groups (Asymp. Sig. [2-tailed] = 0.027, $p < 0.05$). The obtained U value (U = 18.00) and corresponding Wilcoxon W value (W = 63.00) suggest that students who participated in EFT-based group counseling demonstrated lower levels of mathematics anxiety compared to students in the control group.

These findings indicate that group counseling incorporating the Emotional Freedom Technique was more effective in reducing mathematics anxiety than group counseling without a specific therapeutic intervention. The significant between-group difference supports the conclusion that the observed reduction in anxiety cannot be attributed solely to natural changes over time or general group counseling effects.

Accordingly, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was supported, indicating a significant difference in mathematics anxiety reduction between students who received EFT-based group counseling and those who did not receive specialized treatment. This result provides empirical evidence that the implementation of EFT within a group counseling framework contributes meaningfully to the reduction of students' mathematics anxiety.

3.2 Discussion

The present study investigated the effectiveness of Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)-based group counseling in reducing mathematics anxiety among high school students. The findings indicate a statistically significant reduction in mathematics anxiety in the experimental group compared to the control group, suggesting that EFT may function as a beneficial intervention within school counseling settings. These results are consistent with prior studies reporting the anxiety-reducing effects of EFT in educational and clinical contexts (Church, 2013; Sezgin & Özcan, 2009).

From a theoretical perspective, EFT integrates cognitive reframing, emotional regulation, and somatic stimulation through acupressure tapping, which may contribute to decreased physiological arousal and maladaptive cognitions associated with mathematics anxiety. Previous research has suggested that interventions addressing both emotional and physiological components of anxiety tend to be more effective than purely cognitive approaches (Beilock & Maloney, 2015; Flint et al., 2014). The group counseling format may further enhance intervention outcomes by providing peer support, normalization of anxiety experiences, and opportunities for observational learning (Prayitno, 2011).

However, despite these promising findings, several important limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size (N = 19) substantially limits the statistical power of the study and increases the risk of Type I error. Although non-parametric tests were appropriately employed, the results should be interpreted with caution, as small samples may overestimate intervention effects (Field, 2018). Second, the use of a quasi-experimental design without random assignment introduces potential selection bias. Although baseline equivalence was assessed using pretest scores, unmeasured

confounding variables—such as prior counseling experiences, motivation levels, or teacher support—may have influenced the outcomes (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

Third, the control group did not receive an active alternative intervention, which limits the ability to attribute observed differences solely to the specific mechanisms of EFT rather than to non-specific counseling effects such as attention, expectancy, or group interaction. Previous research has emphasized the importance of using active control conditions when evaluating psychosocial interventions to strengthen internal validity (Kazdin, 2017). Additionally, the absence of follow-up measurements prevents conclusions regarding the long-term sustainability of anxiety reduction, which is a critical consideration given that mathematics anxiety can be persistent over time (Ashcraft & Moore, 2009).

Furthermore, although an adapted Mathematics Anxiety Scale was used, the study did not report detailed psychometric properties of the instrument within the current sample. Without explicit evidence of reliability and validity, the precision of the anxiety measurements remains uncertain (American Educational Research Association et al., 2014).

In light of these limitations, the findings should be regarded as preliminary. While EFT-based group counseling shows potential as a school-based intervention for mathematics anxiety, future studies should employ randomized controlled trial designs, larger and more diverse samples, active comparison groups, and longitudinal follow-up assessments. Such methodological improvements are necessary to establish stronger causal inferences and to determine the robustness and generalizability of EFT interventions in educational settings.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine whether group counseling using Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) can effectively reduce math anxiety among high school students. Findings clearly demonstrated that the EFT intervention led to significant and meaningful reductions in students' anxiety levels, as demonstrated by statistical tests and interpretation of effect sizes. Students in the experimental group showed significant improvements compared to students in the control group, thus affirmatively answering the research question regarding the effectiveness of EFT in this context. These results support the integration of EFT-based counseling into school mental health programs, particularly for students experiencing subject-specific anxiety. However, given the study's limitations—such as non-random sampling, small sample size, and lack of follow-up—it is recommended that future research explore this topic through randomized controlled trials to strengthen internal validity. Further studies could also examine the use of EFT at different educational levels, such as elementary or high school, and assess whether the reductions in anxiety are sustained over time. Examining long-term outcomes and combining EFT with academic interventions could also provide deeper insights into its role in enhancing students' emotional and academic resilience.

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Dr. Zadrian Ardi, S.Pd., M.Pd., Kons as a supervisor who has guided and directed the author during the preparation of this article from the beginning until this thesis proposal can be completed. Thank you also to the Principal, Mr. and Mrs. Guidance and Counseling Teachers and Administrative Staff at SMAS Adabiah 2 Padang City who have provided the opportunity, assistance, and cooperation, so that the data for this article can be obtained and to the students who are the population and sample in this study for being willing to volunteer to help researchers.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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