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Exploring TOEFL Anxiety in First-Time Test-Takers: Emotional, Cognitive, and Motivational Perspectives

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Abstract

The present study examined the test anxiety of TOEFL among non-English major college students who took the test for the first time. The aim is to explore emotional responses, cognitive problems, and motivational-behavioural implications associated with TOEFL anxiety. A descriptive qualitative study was adopted and six first-time TOEFL test takers were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using descriptive thematic analysis to identify common themes across participants' experiences. The results of the study suggest that students showed less anticipatory fear at the start but experienced more emotional pain during the test, especially during the Listening segment. The anxiety experienced was in the form of fear of failing, difficulty concentrating and lack of self-confidence, in accordance with theories of language anxiety that underline the effect of assessment pressure and perceived language proficiency. Cognitive obstacles included a limited vocabulary, problems with auditory information processing and poor strategy use which led to cognitive overload and reduced efficiency in performance. There were cognitive distortions among participants such as an overestimation of the task difficulty and underestimation of their talents, contributing to increased anxiety during test performance. TOEFL anxiety had also positive motivating effects, students reported an increased motivation to learn, improved study habits, and greater engagement in practicing English. Methods of coping included self-encouragement, support from friends and parents and constant practice, which eased anxiety and increased resilience. The statistics imply that TOEFL anxiety is a multidimensional entity consisting of emotional, cognitive and behavioural components which interact dynamically during test performance. The results highlight the significance of structured TOEFL preparation programs that integrate language skill building with anxiety reduction approaches to improve student readiness and performance on crucial English proficiency tests.

Keywords

TOEFL test, language anxiety, foreign language test.

Introduction

Test anxiety is a common issue, particularly for students taking high-stakes exams like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and it can have a significant impact on their academic results. This type of anxiety occurs as increased nervousness, tension, and fear in the process of preparing and taking the exam, which may cause problems with cognitive functioning and reduce overall performance (Sunarti et al., 2019). The TOEFL experience might be particularly challenging for non-English majors in higher education as it is the first formal assessment in English. The students might encounter challenging language problems under a time limit and they have little experience to the framework of standardized language tests (Azhari et al., 2022).

Test anxiety affects not only performance deficits but also students' emotional and motivational states. Setiawan and Munawaruzaman (2025) assert that students experiencing high TOEFL-related anxiety commonly show lower self-efficacy and hesitation to engage thoroughly with the test material, leading to poor performance on the test related to their actual language skills. This aligns with the findings of Amiryousefi & Tavakoli (2011), who emphasize that test anxiety correlates with motivation and cognitive load, influencing outcomes in the reading, listening, and writing sections of the TOEFL iBT. The fear of failure among students, accompanied by an inexperience with the examination format, may worsen stress reactions, creating a cyclical pattern in which anxiety negatively impacts performance.

Many studies have been done on the contextual factors that affect TOEFL anxiety among first time test participants. As stated by Hikmah & Daniel (2025), Indonesian EFL learners suffer test anxiety because of several factors such as cultural expectations, past academic experiences, and perceived linguistic shortcomings. The results suggest that individual and systemic factors including pedagogies and assessment methods influence students' emotional responses to standardised testing. In a similar vein, Janeri and Edy (2024) suggest that students' ignorance of test processes and the pressure to achieve target scores are substantial factors that contribute to stress, underlining the need for pre-interventions to minimize the impact of anxiety.

Empirical research also suggests a connection between TOEFL anxiety and actual performance scores. For example, Sunarti et al., (2019) found a negative correlation between anxiety and TOEFL scores, showing that anxiety may interfere with cognitive processes and test-taking strategies. In contrast, Yoestara and Putri, (2019) suggest that preparation programs with an emphasis on motivation are efficient in decreasing anxiety and improving performance expectations, highlighting the need of organized guidance and support systems in educational environments. This view is supported by Putri et al., (2025), who asserted that targeted therapies to students' problems in listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing activities can significantly reduce anxiety and increase test readiness.

Test anxiety has cognitive and physiological foundations as psychological mechanisms. Students may have intrusive thoughts, increased sense of task difficulty and fear of negative assessment which may be presented as physical symptoms including higher heart rate, perspiration and muscle tension (Jariah and Isna, 2025). These reactions can interfere with concentration and memory recall, and may affect also emotional states, such as self-confidence and resilience when performing tests. Thus, inexperienced TOEFL test takers, particularly from non-English subjects are more vulnerable to high stress on the test.

Although there are many studies on TOEFL anxiety and EFL learners' performance, there are few studies on the first-time experiences of non-English major college students taking the TOEFL. Previous studies show that anxiety is influenced by several factors, such as personal, cognitive, and contextual (Muliawati et al., 2020; Sunarti et al., 2019). However, the specific problems faced by new test takers, such as unfamiliarity with the test format, fear of failure, and limited access to adequate preparatory support, have not been extensively studied. Awareness of these problems is important to come up with strategies that can help reduce test-related anxiety and improve academic accomplishment (Fitria, 2021; Mardiyah, 2024).

The current study aims to explore the nature and extent of TOEFL anxiety experienced by non-English major students who are taking the test for the first time. It intends to identify key sources of anxiety, their impact on students' preparation for the test, and offer insights for enhancing psychological resilience and language skills in high-stakes English tests.

Method

Research Design

This study is conducted with a qualitative research design to explore the TOEFL test-taking anxiety of non-English major college students who are taking the test for the first time. Such research allows for a deep understanding of students' own experiences, perceptions and emotional responses which are difficult to measure using standardized questionnaires (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), thus, this study is ideal for qualitative research. The emphasis is on presenting the scope and diversity of the feelings and management strategies of participants.

Participants of the Study

Six first-year college students from non-English major programs who had recently taken the TOEFL test for the first time participated in this study. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants to ensure they met the criteria of being first-time TOEFL test-takers and were willing to share in-depth insights into their experiences.

Data Collection

Data were acquired through semi-structured interviews which provided an opportunity for the participants to share their experiences within the context of pre-determined questions. The interview explored important issues like emotional reactions before and during the examination, perceived difficulty of each section of the TOEFL (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), coping strategies, and preparation assessments. Each interview lasted around 30 to 45 minutes and was tape recorded with the permission of the participants to allow for accurate transcription.

The interview data were interpreted using descriptive qualitative analysis (Nassaji, 2015). The transcriptions were carefully analysed and categorized to identify recurring patterns, themes and notable remarks concerning test-taking anxiety. The coding process was iterative, allowing themes to develop organically from the data rather than imposing pre-existing topics before analysis. Later major themes were developed that captured the common experiences, emotional responses and coping techniques of individuals. The investigation was intended to understand the intensity, triggers and manifestations of concern and its perceived effect on students' readiness and performance in examinations.

Findings & Discussion

Findings

The interview results provide a deep insight into TOEFL exam anxiety experienced by non-English major college students taking the test for the first time. Participants described emotional, cognitive, and motivational responses before, during, and after the exam, and described both personal and contextual factors that contributed to test-related stress.

Table 1. Result of Emotional Responses and Anxiety Patterns

Topics	Participant Code	Participant	Initial Code
Emotional Responses and Anxiety Patterns	P1	<i>When I first heard about the TOEFL test, I was afraid of failing even though there was no minimum score requirement at that time.</i>	Fear of failure
	P2	<i>I felt anxious on the morning of the test because I was worried that I would not be able to answer the questions correctly.</i>	Test-day anxiety
	P3	<i>The Listening section made me the most nervous because I could not clearly understand what the speakers were saying.</i>	Listening-related anxiety
	P4	<i>When I became anxious during the test, I lost focus and found it difficult to concentrate on the questions.</i>	Loss of concentration
	P5	<i>I was worried that my vocabulary and grammar knowledge were not sufficient to achieve a good score.</i>	Linguistic insecurity
	P6	<i>At first, I felt nervous, but as the test progressed, I became calmer and more relaxed.</i>	Anxiety reduction over time

Participants reported a range of emotions in response to the TOEFL test, from dread and anxiety to final relief. Many people admitted to fear of failure and anxiety of getting a satisfactory grade. Participants felt most anxious during the Listening phase and said it was the hardest portion. Anxiety also had a negative impact on attentiveness and several participants lost concentration when answering questions. Their concern was further heightened by worries about limited vocabulary and grammatical competence. However, some participants reported a reduction in anxiety during the course of the assessment as they became more familiar with the exam structure. Collectively, these studies make up the theme of Emotional Responses and Anxiety Patterns, and highlight the shifting nature of TOEFL-related anxiety among students. These findings collectively form the theme of *Emotional Responses and Anxiety Patterns*, highlighting the dynamic nature of TOEFL-related anxiety among students.

Table 2. Result of Cognitive Challenges and Performance Implications

Topics	Participant Code	Participant	Initial Code
Cognitive Challenges and Performance Implications	P1	<i>I was afraid that I would not be able to answer the questions because I had never learned about TOEFL before.</i>	Lack of test familiarity
	P2	<i>When I felt anxious during the Listening section, I could not fully understand what the speakers were saying.</i>	Reduced listening comprehension
	P3	<i>Anxiety made it difficult for me to focus on the test, especially at the beginning.</i>	Difficulty concentrating
	P4	<i>I lost focus during the test because I was nervous, and that affected my ability to answer the questions.</i>	Cognitive interference
	P5	<i>My limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge made me worry that I would misunderstand the questions.</i>	Language-processing difficulty
	P6	<i>Sometimes I could not understand the questions, not only because they were difficult, but also because I was too anxious to think clearly</i>	Impaired cognitive processing

Participants reported a number of cognitive issues during the TOEFL test which were substantially related to anxiety. A number of participants indicated that their lack of acquaintance with the TOEFL format contributed to their doubt and decreased their confidence in answering the questions. One area where anxiety had the greatest impact was in the listening portion, with people struggling to follow spoken content and to maintain concentration. For some, concentration was lost during the evaluation, thus impacting their ability to absorb information and respond accordingly. In addition, their understanding of test items was further impaired because of the concerns of limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. The cognitive difficulties were conceived as reductions in performance, suggesting that anxiety not only impacted on emotional well-being, but also impaired individuals' cognitive functioning during the evaluation. Therefore, these findings support the theme of *Cognitive Challenges and Performance Implications*.

Table 3. Result of Motivational and Behavioural Outcomes

Topics	Participant Code	Participant	Initial Code
Motivational and Behavioural Outcomes	P1	<i>Because I was worried about my TOEFL performance, I realized that I should have studied English earlier.</i>	Increased learning awareness
	P2	<i>My anxiety motivated me to study harder and pay more attention during TOEFL preparation classes.</i>	Enhanced learning motivation
	P3	<i>Although I felt nervous about TOEFL, I believed there was still enough time to improve my score through practice.</i>	Persistence and self-improvement
	P4	<i>When I felt anxious before the test, I tried to stay calm and think positively.</i>	Anxiety coping strategy
	P5	<i>After receiving a low score, I accepted it and planned to take the TOEFL test again.</i>	Behavioural resilience
	P6	<i>I would advise other students to be confident, avoid overthinking, and keep practicing before the test</i>	Adaptive behavioural response

Participants indicated diverse motivational and behavioural outcomes resulting from their TOEFL anxiety. Anxiety affected performance and encouraged students to recognize the importance of preparation, motivating them to improve their English proficiency. Numerous participants reported an increased commitment to studying and practice after acknowledging their shortcomings in English. Others demonstrated persistence by viewing the TOEFL as a challenge that could be overcome via continuous work and repeated attempts. Participants employed coping strategies, such as cultivating a positive mentality and maintaining composure before to the examination. Furthermore, receiving a low result did not discourage them; instead, it motivated them to retake the examination and seek improvement. These experiences indicate that TOEFL anxiety can lead to constructive behavioural changes and increased motivation, forming the theme of *Motivational and Behavioural Outcomes*.

Discussion

Emotional Responses and Anxiety Patterns

Interviews revealed participants' differing emotional responses to the TOEFL, especially higher anxiety on test day and in the Listening section. Most students began with little pre-exam anxiety but the emotional stress rose as they faced varied test formats and performance expectations. This is in line with the findings of [MacIntyre & Gardner \(1989\)](#), who note that language anxiety tends to surface in high-stakes testing contexts and is closely related to learners' sense of evaluative pressure. [MacIntyre \(1998\)](#) argues that

anxiety in second-language learning is a complicated emotional construct. It is described with worry, stress and tension and may hinder concentration and comprehension.

The participants' anxieties about failing and their own abilities often arose, particularly in the Listening tasks, which also correlates with the cognitive and emotional processes. [Kondo \(2005\)](#) found that Japanese learners of English also found that language anxiety is more pronounced when learners experience a lack of control over understanding and expression, similar to the students' experiences of reduced focus when isolated auditory inputs. This underlines the importance of perceived task difficulty and unpredictability as main drivers of emotional reactions in examination circumstances ([Muntasir et al., 2022](#)).

Peer and social support also seem to influence emotional responses. Certain individuals observed that parental encouragement alleviated stress, aligning with [Situmorang \(2019\)](#), who established an association between self-efficacy, peer support, and diminished anxiety prior to high-stakes examinations. This indicates that social scaffolding can mitigate the strength of emotional responses, fostering a more stable psychological condition during assessments.

Cognitive Challenges and Performance Implications

The interviews revealed that the subjects suffered from cognitive problems which significantly affected their TOEFL scores. The students said that they had problems understanding listening activities, limited vocabulary in reading and difficulty in organizing structure section. These shortcomings are an indication of the cognitive component of test anxiety, which can impair working memory, attention, and problem-solving during high-stakes assessments ([Cassady and Johnson, 2002](#)). Cognitive test anxiety is often characterized by distorted cognitive processes, such as an increased perception of task difficulty and an underestimation of one's ability for accurate responses, which aligns with [Ackerman \(2019\)](#) description of cognitive distortions.

Such cognitive difficulties are further complicated in language acquisition by confusion surrounding linguistic structures, inadequacies in lexis and unfamiliarity with assessment forms. [Horwitz & Young \(1991\)](#) argue that language anxiety is a function of learners' judgments about their language competency, and that negative evaluations might interfere with cognitive processing and learning. The participants in this study said that their lack of awareness of language and vocabulary was an obstacle to a full understanding of the questions and in some cases led to cognitive overload.

In addition, learners' beliefs about effective language learning processes affect their cognitive performance. According to [Pratolo \(2019\)](#), students' expectation of language acquisition may influence the way they address problem-solving activities in the presence of stress. First-time TOEFL test-takers are more prone to cognitive disruption when faced with unexpected question types for which they have no pre-formed strategies, leading to reduced accuracy and longer reaction times.

The statistics show that cognitive barriers in TOEFL testing depend on the task and the student. Cognitive distortions and negative self-evaluations compound the difficulties of processing auditory information in listening tasks, time-limited comprehension, and strategic planning for writing tasks. This indicates that the cognitive aspects of test anxiety are crucial in the performance results and underscores the importance of preparing children linguistically and intellectually for high-stakes assessments ([Cassady & Johnson, 2002](#); [Horwitz & Young, 1991](#)). Cognitive barriers can be addressed by strategy training, task familiarity, and cognitive restructuring to decrease anxiety and enhance exam performance.

Motivational and Behavioural Outcomes

Interviews showed that TOEFL anxiety had both negative and facilitative effects on students' motivation and learning habits. The increased anxiety in Listening activities negatively affected their focus, but on the other hand, it motivated the participants to learn English more intensively. This dual effect is in line with other work demonstrating that moderate anxiety can increase effort but excessive worry can impair performance and reduce motivation (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Schwarzer, 1986).

Participants reported that TOEFL anxiety increased their awareness of their skill shortcomings, which in turn led them to adopt more structured study schedules and deliberate practice strategies. This accords with the findings of Cheng et al., (2014), which found that driven examinees often translate fear into proactive preparatory measures, thus boosting their preparedness for high-stakes language assessments. As Dodeen et al., (2014) note, test-taking attitudes and motivation combine with anxiety such that students who are proactive use anxiety to boost study strategies and time management.

Participants described certain behaviours such as a greater engagement with listening activities, ongoing tracking of vocabulary and grammar, and seeking support from classmates and parents. These adaptive behaviours support Dobson (2012) argument that coping strategies can reduce the negative effects of academic anxiety while also boosting the development of skills. Moreover, the participants' self-regulatory activities, such as self-encouragement and cognitive reframing, highlight the necessity of sustaining positive self-related cognitions when dealing with anxiety (Schwarzer, 1986).

Some individuals notably mentioned that a constant fear was a continuous motivator, which resulted in continuous engagement in English study even after assessment. This result is in line with the study of Fakhari et al., (2016), who emphasized the cumulative impact of pre-test stress and sleep-related behaviour on the performance with a focus on the behavioural outcomes of dealing with test-related anxiety. The students transformed worry into a useful activity and gained resilience and proactive study habits. These results suggest that test anxiety has motivating effects that are not entirely negative but can lead to academic progress when handled correctly.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the TOEFL exam anxiety of non-English major college students who face the test for the first time. The results indicate that the students were mainly anxious throughout the exam phase, notably in the listening test, when they had problems processing information in isolation. Emotional responses included fear of failure, anxiety and reduced concentration. Cognitive barriers included limited language, problems with understanding auditory information and less than ideal testing techniques. The combination of these variables decreased the kids' perceived performance and confidence during the examination. However, the study also indicated that TOEFL anxiety did not have only negative impacts. It can also lead to the students improving their learning behaviours and studying English more seriously. Participants showed adaptive reactions such as self-motivation, support from peers and family, and more practice through their testing experience. These responses indicate that concern may be both a preventative and a promoter depending on the way children interpret and deal with it.

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