

Students' Anxiety Levels in TOEFL Testing at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya

Fiha Aynun Jariah ^{1*}, Nuzulul Isna ¹

¹ STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the anxiety levels of students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya when taking the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) as one of the graduation requirements. Using a descriptive quantitative research design, data were collected from 70 English Education students—6 male and 64 female—who had taken the TOEFL but had not yet reached the passing score of 485 for the paper-based test. The Test Anxiety Questionnaire by Nist and Diehl, adapted by Muliawati et al. (2020), was used to measure cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects of anxiety. The results showed that the majority of students (77.1%) experienced moderate anxiety, followed by 18.6% with mild anxiety, and 4.3% with severe anxiety. Cognitive anxiety emerged as the most affected aspect, with difficulty choosing an answer being the most frequently reported symptom. These findings indicate that while anxiety is common during TOEFL testing, most students can manage it effectively. The study suggests the need for targeted strategies such as exam simulations, stress management training, and counseling services to help students optimize their performance

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Corresponding Author:

Fiha Aynun Jariah | STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya

Email: fihaaynunj@gmail.com

1. Introduction

English is a foreign language that is currently taught in all higher education institutions in Indonesia (Safura et al., 2023). In an increasingly sophisticated academic environment, students must possess excellent English language skills to attend lectures, read academic materials, write assignments, and participate in discussions, especially international discussions. Students must possess adequate English language skills to socialize globally (Rao, 2019; Yacob et al., 2023). Additionally, English proficiency gives graduates a competitive edge in the increasingly global job market (Annisa et al., 2023; Shrishthy). One aspect of academic and professional success is proficiency in English (Devi, 2023;

Safura et al., 2023; Tantri, 2018). It's no wonder that many colleges and universities around the world now require TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores for graduation (Alek et al., 2019; Devi, 2023). A good TOEFL score is required for those who wish to pursue higher education both domestically and internationally.

One of the internationally standardized tests for assessing English language proficiency is the TOEFL (Devi et al., 2024). TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is one way to standardize English language skills. The English Language Education Department requires students to take the TOEFL exam. The English TOEFL exam is divided into two versions: the computer-based test and the paper-based test. The Computer-Based Testing Model is a test that uses computer media. The score range for this model is 216-677, while Paper-Based Testing is a test that uses paper as its testing medium. The score values with this model are in the range of 450-550 and above. TOEFL test scores range from 310 (minimum score) to 677 (maximum score) for the PBT (paper-based test) version (Saifudin et al., 2006). A sufficient TOEFL score can provide students with opportunities to obtain scholarships, participate in student exchange programs, and pursue studies abroad, while a paper-based test is a written exam administered on paper.

Furthermore, many people now use their TOEFL score as a prerequisite for their thesis defense. Some people consider these requirements subjective and arbitrary. They are subjective; some see them as a challenge, while others view them as a threat that could lead to conflict. A person's perceived change in situation that can cause feelings of worry, anxiety, fear, and insecurity related to internal and external threats is called anxiety. Anxiety is the perception of a change in a situation that can cause feelings of worry, restlessness, fear, and insecurity toward internal and external threats (Sunarti et al., 2019). Based on information from one of the lecturers at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya, the TOEFL score has a passing score requirement of 485 when using the Paper-Based Testing method.

Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling caused by worry or fear that arises as a reaction to internal and external stimuli, according to (Boyd, 2017). This can manifest as physical, emotional, cognitive, and attitudinal symptoms. Someone might experience anxiety if they are worried about the situation. Anxiety can occur when someone feels worried about a situation. Anxiety can be a positive thing if someone fights their anxiety and does their best. If students cannot cope with the threat, they are likely to feel anxious (Keltner, Bostrom, & McGuinness, 2011). defines test anxiety as a combination of physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. In other words, test anxiety consists of a fear of failure, as well as other worries and negative thoughts that disrupt test-takers' focus during the exams (Sarason, 1984).

Exam anxiety refers to the nervousness or fear that students feel about receiving poor grades or performing poorly in exams (Horwitz & Young, 1991). Students placed in evaluative or testing environments are particularly prone to experiencing high levels of anxiety. This condition is especially common among EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

learners, who often feel intense stress during language examinations. Previous longitudinal research indicates that anxiety negatively impacts EFL students' performance during language assessments (Javanbakht & Hadian, 2014; Dordinejad et al., 2011; Amiryousefi & Tavakoli, 2011; Neamatia et al., 2014; Dodeen et al., 2014; & Ho, 2016)., test anxiety is a frequently observed characteristic among test-takers and plays a significant role in their exam experiences (Javanbakht & Hadian 2014). (Zeidner, 1998) also noted that anxious students often lose focus easily, struggle to comprehend even basic instructions, and face difficulties in retrieving necessary information during tests. In light of these challenges, (Dodeen et al, 2014) recommend efforts to reduce anxiety and boost students' motivation to help improve exam outcomes.

Cognitive, emotional, and physical symptoms are the three primary ways that test anxiety typically presents itself, according to anxiety expert Schwarzer. In this case, cognitive symptoms include comparing oneself to others, the perception that others may be performing better than oneself, and difficulty concentrating, which can lead to a loss of focus. Emotional symptoms include excessive negative feelings toward exams, such as fear of failure, nervousness, shame, and helplessness. Finally, there are physical symptoms characterized by an increased heart rate, sweaty palms, and headaches (Muliawati et al., 2020). In short, test anxiety negatively impacts test results because it can disrupt the cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being of test-takers, both during preparation and during the exam itself. According to (Mallo Jr. & James J, 2015), exams are often the largest component of a student's final grade

Based on interviews conducted with several students from STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya who have taken the TOEFL, it was revealed that some of them experienced anxiety and fear during the exam because they felt the questions, all of which were in English, were difficult. Before taking the TOEFL exam, some of them even experienced tension, anxiety, and a lack of focus. The students' anxiety is evident in the fear and worry they experience. Regarding the interview results, the researcher is interested in studying the level of anxiety experienced by students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya when facing the TOEFL exam. This research aims to describe the students' anxiety conditions when facing the TOEFL exam, which is one of the graduation requirements at the institution. With this research, the researcher hopes that students who have never taken the TOEFL will become calmer, more relaxed, and have good coping mechanisms so that when they take the exam, they can achieve high scores. By achieving high TOEFL scores, they can achieve academic success, especially when competing in the job market.

- a. What is the anxiety level of STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya students when taking the TOEFL examination?
- b. Which part of students' anxiety is the most affected?

2. Research Methodology

This research was conducted at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya using a descriptive quantitative research design. This study aims to describe the level of anxiety among students in facing the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam without providing treatment or intervention to the respondents. The descriptive research method is used to describe phenomena that are currently occurring (Sugiyono, 2019).

Research Subject

The participants in this study were 70 students from the English Language Education Study Program at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. Of that number, 6 are male and 64 are female. Based on semester level, the respondents consisted of 28 sixth-semester students, 35 eighth-semester students, 5 tenth-semester students, and 2 twelfth-semester students. All respondents in this study have taken the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test as a graduation requirement. The sampling technique used in this study is random sampling, focusing on students who have experience with the TOEFL test but have not yet achieved the passing score set by the study program.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire to measure anxiety at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. The instrument used was the Test Anxiety Questionnaire by Nist and Diehl. This questionnaire consists of ten question items with a 5-point scoring system: 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), and 5 (usually). The total final score of this study will be classified into three categories of anxiety levels as follows: >35 (very worried), 20-35 (somewhat anxious), and 10-19 (not nervous) (Nist & Diehl, 1990), which was adapted by (Muliawati et al., 2020).

To strengthen the theoretical basis for measuring anxiety, (Sarason, 1984) defined anxiety as a combination of cognitive, emotional, and bodily characteristics, which later became known as test anxiety. In this context, anxiety is defined as the fear of failure, including worry, excessive anxiety, and other negative thoughts that can interfere with test-takers' concentration during exams. Therefore, the 10 statements in this questionnaire are grouped into three categories of anxiety, including cognitive, physical, and emotional anxiety (Schwarzer in Muliawati et al., 2020). Cognitive anxiety includes comparing oneself to others, perceiving that others may perform better than oneself, and difficulty concentrating, which can lead to a loss of focus found in the questionnaire items: 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10. These five questionnaire items measure disturbances in the thinking process, such as difficulty concentrating, losing focus during exams, or difficulty choosing answers. Next, physical anxiety is characterized by an increased heart rate, sweaty palms, and headaches, which are included in questionnaire items: 1, 2, and 3. These three questionnaire items describe physical symptoms such as sweaty palms, nausea, trembling, and an increased heart rate as the body's response to stress. Finally, emotional anxiety includes excessive negative feelings toward exams, such as fear of failure, nervousness, shame, and helplessness,

which are found in questionnaire items: 5 and 8, which measure negative emotional responses like fear of failure, nervousness, or feelings of helplessness (Schwarzer in Muliawati et al., 2020).

This instrument was chosen for its relevance to the research topic and its high reliability, with a reported Cronbach's Alpha of 0.86 in previous studies (Banka & Hyland, 2016). Showed that all question items were statistically valid, with a correlation range of 0.468-0.884 (Muliawati et al. 2020).

Procedures

Data collection was done in two ways: by distributing printed questionnaires directly to students and through online Google Forms. The use of this mixed method aims to increase the response rate and minimize non-response bias. Mixed-mode surveys are effective in reaching respondents with varying levels of access. Next, students were explained the research objectives and participated voluntarily (Dillman et al., 2014). Based on observations during the filling process, the majority of respondents took no more than 15 minutes to answer all the questions on the questionnaire. All collected data was then compiled and further analyzed.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the help of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software version 27. The analysis results are presented in the form of mean, median, standard deviation, and percentages to describe the overall level of student anxiety when facing the TOEFL test.

3. Results

Descriptive Statistics of Student Anxiety

The purpose of this study is to describe the level of anxiety experienced by students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya when facing the TOEFL exam. Descriptive statistics are used to provide an overview of anxiety scores obtained thru questionnaires. This analysis includes the mean, median, mode, standard deviation, as well as the minimum and maximum values to show the overall distribution and trends in students' anxiety levels. The instrument used was the Test Anxiety Questionnaire by Nist and Diehl, a questionnaire consisting of 10 items with a 5-point scoring system, resulting in a total score ranging from 10 to 50. which are classified into 3 categories: not anxious (score 10–19), moderately anxious (score 20–35), and very anxious (score >35). (Nist & Diehl, 1990) adapted by (Muliawati et al., 2020).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Of Sudents' Anxiety Levels In TOEFL Testing.

N	Mean	Std. Error	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
70	25.41	705	26.00	26	5.901	14	41

The descriptive statistics for the students' overall anxiety scores are displayed in Table 1. With a median and mean of 26 and an average of 25.41, the data distribution is comparatively symmetrical. With a standard deviation of 5.901, the lowest value is 14 and the highest is 41. These numbers show that the majority of students have anxiety levels that are in the moderate anxiety range, or around the median. In addition to the overall score, item 10 (difficulty selecting an answer) had the highest average value, at 3.13, suggesting that cognitive impairment is more common. With a score of 1.70, item 3 (sweaty hands) has the lowest average value, indicating that students are less likely to have physical symptoms.

Students' Anxiety Levels in Facing the TOEFL Test

After calculating the total score for each respondent, the data was classified into three categories of anxiety levels based on the Nist and Diehl (1990) scale: not anxious (score 10–19), moderately anxious (score 20–35), and very anxious (score >35) are displayed in figure 1.

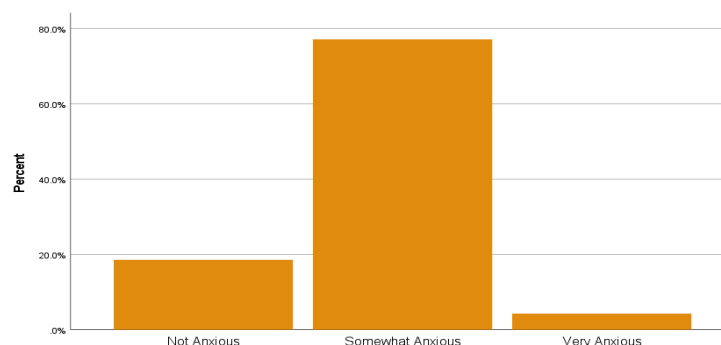


Figure 1. Graph of Sudents' Anxiety Levels In TOEFL Testing.

Based on my analysis and the data in Figure 1, most students' anxiety levels fall into the "somewhat anxious" category, meaning they are neither highly anxious nor low in anxiety. This category consists of 54 students (77.1%) with scores ranging from 20 to 35. This moderate level is considered manageable and does not significantly disrupt the student's ability to function. Although these students admitted to feeling anxious during the exam, the intensity was not excessive. Interestingly, students in this category reported experiencing more noticeable symptoms—both physically and emotionally—compared to those with mild anxiety.

Nevertheless, they maintained a good level of performance and were still able to carry out daily activities without significant disruption. Their ability to effectively manage symptoms allowed them to maintain stability during the testing period. These students demonstrate emotional resilience and cognitive control, which will enable them to manage

stress before, during, and after exams without experiencing serious health or psychological problems. Meanwhile, for the not anxious and very anxious categories, only a small number of students experienced those levels of anxiety, namely 13 students (18.6%) who felt not anxious and 3 students (4.3%) who were very anxious.

Therefore, it can be said that most students have a moderate level of anxiety. Anxiety that is still manageable and does not completely disrupt academic performance is known as state anxiety. Students in this category are still able to focus and answer questions despite feeling stressed. On the other hand, because its symptoms can disrupt focus and performance in exams, students with high levels of anxiety require extra attention. Based on this distribution, students often experience anxiety when taking the TOEFL exam, but most of it can be managed and overcome with appropriate coping mechanisms.

The Most Affected Anxiety

To answer the second research question, an analysis was conducted on the three aspects of anxiety measured in the questionnaire: cognitive, physical, and emotional.

Table 2. Cognitive Anxiety

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item 4	70	1	5	2.67	.959
Item 6	70	1	5	2.53	1.059
Item 7	70	1	5	2.77	1.092
Item 9	70	1	5	2.94	.946
Item 10	70	1	5	3.13	1.048

The processing results show that the cognitive aspect has the highest score compared to the other aspects. Item 10 ('difficulty choosing an answer') had the highest average score (3.13), followed by item 9 and 7, which are also in the cognitive aspect. These cognitive symptoms describe disturbances in thinking processes, such as loss of focus, blank mind, and difficulty choosing answers.

Table 3. Physical Anxiety

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item 1	70	1	5	2.63	1.079
Item 2	70	1	4	1.74	.846
Item 3	70	1	5	1.70	.953

Therefore Physical symptoms such as nausea, sweaty palms, and a racing heart are reflected in a low score of 1.70, indicating that physical symptoms are less frequently experienced by students compared to items 2 and 3.

Table 4. Emotional Anxiety

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q5	70	1	5	2.74	1.073
Q8	70	1	5	2.56	1.085

The emotional aspect, measured through items 5 and 8, shows a moderate level of emotional anxiety, including nervousness, fear of failure, and feelings of helplessness, with average scores of 2.74 and 2.56. therefore from the tree anxiety aspect the analysis indicates that cognitive anxiety receive the most affected by the test TOEFL testing. This finding is in line with the opinion of (Cassady & Johnson, 2002), who stated that test anxiety generally first appears in the form of cognitive disturbances. Therefore, efforts to manage student anxiety should focus on mental training, relaxation techniques, and exam simulations.

4. Discussion

The research findings show that the majority of students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya experience moderate anxiety (77.1%) when facing the TOEFL test. Only 18.6% of students are in the mild anxiety category, and (4.3%) experience severe anxiety. This result was obtained by processing the data using descriptive statistics, where the total anxiety score of the students had an average (mean) of 25.41, with a minimum score of 14 and a maximum score of 41. This score indicates that the students' anxiety levels are in the moderate category, reflecting a reasonable level of functional anxiety. Students in the moderate category are still able to take exams steadily, although they still feel pressure. The moderate standard deviation of this data also indicates that most values are clustered around the mean, without extreme outliers.

This aligns with the findings of (Syafrizal & Fadilah, 2018), who stated that the majority of students in Indonesia experience moderate anxiety in English academic situations. This is also consistent with research by (Muliawati et al., 2020), who reported that over 80% of EFL students in Indonesia experienced moderate anxiety when taking the TOEFL test. According to their research, this level of anxiety did not significantly hinder performance but kept students alert and focused. Additionally, (Muliawati et al., 2020), also added that students typically experience mild to moderate anxiety symptoms during the TOEFL test rather than high anxiety. This finding supports the Yerkes-Dodson principle, which states that moderate anxiety leads to optimal performance.

Based on the anxiety aspect, the results show that the cognitive aspect is the most dominant aspect experienced by students. Of the 10 statements in the questionnaire, 5 of them measure cognitive anxiety. The highest score was on item 10 with an average of 3.13, indicating that experiencing of having difficulty choosing the correct answer during exams is the most common experience for students. This is a hallmark of cognitive anxiety, which is the disruption of thinking processes due to psychological pressure. (Cassady & Johnson,

2002) explain that cognitive anxiety like this can interfere with working memory and information processing during exams. Cognitive anxiety is factored by self-comparison with others, the perception that others may perform better than oneself, and difficulty concentrating, which can lead to a loss of focus.

In addition to cognitive aspects, there are also physical aspects, such as nervousness and nausea. Physical symptoms like these are commonly experienced by students before exams and reflect a physiological stress response (Andrews & Wilding, 2004). Next, emotional anxiety is associated with excessive negative feelings toward exams, such as fear of failure, panic, worry, shame, and helplessness. There are several consequences of that sensation before the exam; one of them is difficulty sleeping at night. Although these two anxieties don't have a significant impact, it's necessary to ensure they are emotionally stable and physically healthy so they can participate in order for the test to go smoothly.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of descriptive statistical analysis, the majority of students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya showed a moderate level of anxiety when taking the TOEFL test. The average anxiety score for students is 25.41, with a median and mode of 26. The minimum anxiety score obtained is 14 and the maximum is 41, with a standard deviation of 5.901. This distribution shows that most students have anxiety scores concentrated around the midpoint, reflecting a reasonable level of anxiety.

Based on the Nist and Diehl (1990) classification scale, 54 students (77.1%) were classified as having moderate anxiety, 13 students (18.6%) experienced mild anxiety, and 3 students (4.3%) fell into the severe anxiety category. This indicates that anxiety about the TOEFL is a common condition experienced by students, but most are still able to manage it well. Thus, it can be concluded that although anxiety is present during the TOEFL exam process, most students are still in a condition that allows them to remain focused and complete the exam.

Additionally, cognitive anxiety was found to be the most dominant aspect experienced by students. Difficulty choosing an answer is the most frequently reported symptom, followed by difficulty focusing and other mental tension. This is based on factors such as comparing oneself to others, the perception that others may perform better than oneself, and difficulty concentrating, which can lead to a loss of focus. Physical and emotional aspects also emerge, but with lower frequency and intensity. Based on the research conducted, the author offers several suggestions to various relevant parties. For students, to be able to recognize the symptoms of anxiety experienced when facing exams, especially the TOEFL. Thus, students are expected to develop appropriate stress coping strategies, such as regular practice questions, effective study time management, and positive affirmations, to reduce students' psychological pressure.

It is hoped that the STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya Institute can provide ongoing psychological and academic support to students preparing for the TOEFL exam. This support can include intensive TOEFL training, regular exam simulations, counselling or academic guidance services, and workshops on stress management and academic anxiety. For Future Researchers This study still has limitations in its scope and the variables used. Therefore, future researchers are advised to conduct more in-depth research on the direct relationship between anxiety levels and TOEFL score results.

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