

**LEVEL AND CAUSES OF PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS’
ENGLISH TEST ANXIETY: A CASE STUDY ON
MINDANAO STATE UNIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

The Pre-University Center (PUC) in Mindanao State University-Main Campus (MSU), Marawi City, accommodates students who failed in the MSU-System Admission and Scholarship Examination (MSU-SASE) to undergo a bridging program in preparation for college. This study was conducted due to the researcher’s concern on pre-university students’ low performance in English, both new enrollees and repeaters. A modified test anxiety questionnaire identified the students’ experiences with test anxiety and indicated their test anxiety level. The second part of the questionnaire asked students to write in detail the reasons why they have anxiety towards tests in English. The data revealed that whether or not students are new enrollees, they still have the tendency to fail in English exams when they have moderate and high levels of text anxiety. Moreover, they revealed that factors such as parents’ high expectations, worry about test results, linguistic incompetence and negative perception on English, time pressure, and inadequate preparation are the main causes of their anxiety. Significant recommendations are offered to solve this impediment to students’ learning and success in going to college.

Keywords: Test Anxiety, Second Language Anxiety, Second Language Learning, English Performance.

INTRODUCTION:

Learning, to some learners with difficulties, is undeniably tedious and challenging. Thus, it is a challenge for teachers to make learners feel comfortable while the teaching-learning process is taking place. In the humanistic point of view, the learners' affective realm is of great importance in teaching. Facing the fact that learners also have their emotions attached to the learning process, their feelings, attitudes, and behaviors should also be considered. This is given much attention in lessons where learners are required to spend much cognitive process, such as higher analytical applications, deeper comprehension, and more advanced memory retention.

One of the subjects seen to confront learners with learning challenges is English. English is considered a second language in the Philippines and is constitutionally declared as the country's official language alongside Filipino. However, English still needs to be studied, as it is not a native language of Filipinos. In studying and learning the English language, four macroskills are to be acquired and those are listening, reading, speaking, and writing. English language learners are expected to be able to apply English in situations which involve the above said macroskills through different assessment methods. With this expectation, there will be no doubt why learners feel the 'heavy load' while being enrolled in the subject.

Hence, the need to determine how learners feel about learning English has been going on for decades already. In addition, as far as conducted researches are concerned, the concept called language anxiety came into being and has been investigated in many ways to answer different questions involving the said subject.

Anxiety, in its simplest sense, "is a kind of troubled feeling in the mind, a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system" (Horwitz, 1986). Furthermore, according to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), Foreign Language Anxiety "... is a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 31). Kao and Craigie (2010) mentioned that previous researches have shown the perplexity of relationship between anxiety and foreign language learning which offers opportunities for more researches.

Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) noted that foreign language anxiety is "the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a foreign language with which the individual is not fully proficient" (p.5). This definition points out that anxiety happens when a certain language foreign to individuals is supposed to be used in a given context. Based on this, developments in language anxiety research boiled down to different types of anxieties according to different contexts. Some researchers dealt with speaking anxiety, others with reading anxiety, while several others with writing anxiety. Test anxiety also sprouted out from the on-going investigations on the field.

As defined by Horwitz, et al. (1986), test anxiety is the cause of being afraid to fail. Batiha, Mohd Noor, and Mustaffa (2014) noted Aida's (1994) statement that test anxiety is independent by concept from other component of Foreign Language classroom, but rather is most likely a general anxiety problem. It is the fear of learning assessment and could be defined "as a fear of failing in tests and an unpleasant experience held either consciously or unconsciously by learners in many situations." This type of anxiety further concerns apprehension towards academic evaluation based on a fear of failure (Horwitz and Young, 1991). Nonetheless, Cebros (2003) found that the most critical level of classroom anxiety exhibited by students is test anxiety. In the study of Cui (2011), anxiety and English achievement were negatively correlated in terms of test anxiety, which means that as it increases, achievement decreases.

Generally, test anxiety can be an enormous problem of all stakeholders of education. It is quite alarming that due to anxiety, the quality of teaching and learning that students receive would be affected. This is more a critical issue among pre-university students in Mindanao State University (MSU). Most of test anxiety researches were conducted among high school students (Sridevi, 2013; Xiao, 2013; Putwain & Daly, 2013) and college students (Olaitan & Moroluyo, 2014; DordiNejad et al., 2011; Rana & Mahmood, 2010). In the Philippines, no other university offers a pre-university program, having only English, Mathematics, and Values Education as courses, other than MSU. Until

now, questions about why they end up failing the admission and scholarship examination and why they still fail a subject in the Pre-University Center are left unanswered. In this case, the researchers aim to look into the possible contribution of test anxiety to pre-university students' failures, particularly in English.

This study holds a significant key in understanding the kind of students that the Pre-University Center has. Aside from being demotivated and deficient, fear and negative perceptions may also have been infesting their minds. Problems related to the concept of anxiety should also be looked into since the affective domain plays a role in students' learning success. Moreover, no local studies dealing with pre-university students' test anxiety are conducted so far in the said university. Thus, this study can be of great help in giving valuable information as to how students with special needs should be dealt with, considering their test anxiety.

METHODS:

RESEARCH DESIGN:

This study combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. The researchers used the questionnaire method to collect quantitative data such as students' status as enrollee in PUC and their extent of experience with test anxiety. The written response of the respondents to the second part of the questionnaire, which is an open-ended question, served as the qualitative data.

PARTICIPANTS:

Students enrolled in the Pre-University Center are those who did not make it to the cut-off score of 75 points and above in the Mindanao State University's System Admission and Scholarship Examination (MSU-SASE). Specifically, pre-university students' admission test scores range from 55 to 74 points. They undergo a one-semester training, taking three college preparatory courses, namely, English, Mathematics, and Values Education. By employing convenience sampling, the respondents of this study were 51 pre-university students enrolled in the second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. They were considered as respondents since one of the researchers was their English instructor, thus, direct supervision was at hand. Also, during the data collection, only 51 students were present while some were not able to participate due to their absence. Their ages ranged from 16 to 24 years old in which many of them were 17 and 18 years of age. In terms of sex, 66.7% of them are female while 33.3% are male.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT:

This study is concerned with the pre-university students' extent of experience with test anxiety, their test anxiety level, and the reasons behind their test anxiety. The researchers used the test anxiety questionnaire of Chapman and King (2009) and made some modifications. The first modification was making all statements negative while the other one was adding an open-ended question at the last part, "*Why are you afraid of taking a test in English?*" This questionnaire was pilot tested in the Pre-University Center using 40 students from other sections and was found reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.77. Based on its reliability index, the questionnaire is reliable to be used among students in the Pre-University Center. There are only 10 statements in the first part of the questionnaire, which served as indicators of test anxiety. It utilizes 4-point Likert scale to rate the extent of respondents' experience with test anxiety, namely, *Always*, *Often*, *Sometimes*, and *Rarely*. The second part of the questionnaire was a question that asked respondents about the reasons behind their test anxiety. Although students were not personally interviewed, they were able to express individually through writing their answers.

DATA ANALYSIS:

The quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 14.0 to analyze their responses through frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The mean

of each indicator was the basis of the interpretation of data. To interpret the computed mean, the following scale was used:

Table 1: Mean Range and Interpretation

Mean Range	Interpretation	Level
1.00 – 1.74	Rarely	Low Anxiety
1.75 – 2.49	Sometimes	Moderate Anxiety
2.50 – 3.24	Often	High Anxiety
3.25 – 4.00	Always	Very High Anxiety

The qualitative data, which was the written responses of the respondents, were analyzed through examining the content of the responses and grouping was done together with similar contents to identify recurring themes in their answers.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS:

QUANTITATIVE DATA:

This section presents the gathered quantitative data in terms of respondents’ status as enrollee, extent of experience with test anxiety and level of test anxiety, and their cross-tabulations.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents according to Status as Enrollee

Status	Frequency	Percent
Repeater	40	78.4
New Student	8	15.7
Total	48	94.1
Missing System	3	5.9
Total	51	100.0

The table above shows the distribution of respondents according to their status as enrollee in PUC. There are two categories in this data, which are *Repeater* and *New Student*. It can be gleaned for majority (40 or 78.4%) of the students are repeaters while only eight (15.7%) are new enrollees or first-timers. Data may mean that majority failed in a subject during their previous semester.

Table 3. Respondents’ Extent of Experience with Test Anxiety

Descriptors	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Description
1. I am nervous before tests.	51	2.88	0.89	Often
2. It is not easy for me to recall information.	51	2.80	0.72	Often
3. I do not score high in tests.	51	2.76	0.68	Often
4. I worry when tests are mentioned.	51	2.65	0.91	Often
5. I do not know how to control my thinking.	51	2.43	0.76	Sometimes
6. I have trouble keeping my mind on the test.	51	2.35	0.77	Sometimes
7. I get flustered and run out of time during tests.	51	2.29	0.78	Sometimes
8. I feel bad about taking tests.	51	2.25	0.67	Sometimes
9. I do not know how to prepare myself for tests.	51	1.76	0.79	Sometimes
10. I feel sick before tests.	51	1.55	0.76	Rarely

It is clear in the above table that the students either often or sometimes experience most of the descriptors of test anxiety. First, they reported that they most often feel nervous before tests (m=2.88)

but rarely feel sick ($m=0.76$) which may still give a clue that they feel anxious about taking a test in English. Moreover, they also often find it difficult to recall information ($m=2.80$) and often worry when tests are mentioned ($m=2.65$).

As a result, they often score low in tests ($m=2.76$). Sometimes, concentration is also their problem especially that they do not know how to control their thinking ($m=2.43$); they have trouble keeping their minds on the test ($m=2.35$); and they do not know how to prepare themselves ($m=1.76$). Time limit is also their problem as they sometimes get flustered and run out of time during tests ($m=2.29$). Thus, they sometimes feel bad about taking tests ($m=2.25$). The next table distributes the respondents according to the level of test anxiety they have.

Table 4: Students' Level of Test Anxiety

Level	Frequency	Percent
Low Anxiety	1	2.0
Moderate Anxiety	34	66.7
High Anxiety	16	31.4
Total	51	100.0

The data above show that majority or 66.7% have a moderate level of anxiety while 16 or 31.4% have high-test anxiety level. Only one has low anxiety level. This signifies that a huge number of respondents have considerably alarming levels of anxiety which could potentially impede their test success. It may imply that pre-university students, who are composed mostly of repeaters, perceived assessments in the English subject as anxiety provoking. This result calls for the creation of interventions to address this issue to help students lessen, if not removed, their anxieties towards taking tests in English.

Table 5: Cross-tabulation of Students' First Major Examination Remark and Test Anxiety Level

		Level			Total
		Low Anxiety	Moderate Anxiety	High Anxiety	
Remarks	Passed	1	11	6	18
	Failed	0	23	10	33
Total		1	34	16	51

The table above shows the cross-tabulation of students' preliminary exam remark and test anxiety level. As reflected, only one student with low anxiety passed in the examination. Among students with moderate anxiety, only 11 passed while 23 failed. In addition, only six students with high anxiety passed but 10 failed. Overall, 18 students passed while 33 failed in the examination. The data insinuates that those with higher test anxiety level have a higher tendency to fail in the test since more than half of the total respondents have moderate and high anxiety levels and did not pass the first major examination in PUC.

Table 6: Cross-tabulation of Students' Status and Test Anxiety Level

		Level			Total
		Low Anxiety	Moderate Anxiety	High Anxiety	
Status	Repeater	1	25	14	40
	New Student	0	7	1	8
Total		1	32	15	48

Another interesting data in this study is the cross-tabulation of respondents' status as enrollee and level of test anxiety. As shown, among repeaters, 25 have moderate anxiety while 14 have high anxiety and

only one has low anxiety. On the other hand, seven among new students have moderate anxiety and only one has high anxiety. The total number of students is lacking because there were three students who did not indicate their status. Thus, majority of the repeaters and new students have moderate as well as high. The data may not be able to give information on the difference between repeaters' and new students' levels of test anxiety, but it can be a preliminary proof that whether or not a PUC student is a repeater, he/she can have anxiety towards tests in English. Therefore, test anxiety does not discriminate and may victimize any kind of student in PUC.

CAUSES OF RESPONDENTS' TEST ANXIETY:

The data reflected in this section are based on what students responded to the second part of the survey questionnaire. When their responses were analyzed, five major reasons were found. These are parents' expectations, worry about results, linguistic incompetence, time pressure, and inadequate preparation.

PARENTS' HIGH EXPECTATIONS:

Students reported one factor causing their test anxiety, which involves parents. As revealed by students:

"I get more nervous when I remember my parents, because what if I fail? I have nothing to be proud of."

"I imagine that what if I fail in English? My parents are going to be disappointed and their trust is going to disappear."

Based on their statements, their parents can be assumed to have influenced students' perception on self-efficacy. Their statements seem to express that their parents are the reasons why they should pass their examinations. This is one of the observations among learners who might be pressured by their parents to pass and to excel. In fact, this finding is supported by McDonald's (2001) study, which states that parental expectations can be a source of test anxiety. Huberty (2009) also stated that anxiety is more triggered by extreme pressure and coercion. However, the case of PUC students may be worse due to the existing prejudice among them that they failed in the MSU admission test. As said by one student:

"My parents want me to pass in PUC so I can immediately go to college. They do not want me to be there. They are ashamed."

Probably, as seen by some parents in MSU, the PUC is an institution of failure students who have deficiencies. Thus, this perception could have affected students' self-efficacy and confidence to take examinations, particularly in English, in a way that parents pressure their children with the expectation that they will pass the exams.

WORRY ABOUT RESULTS:

First reason revealed by students is the existence of worry in their conscious minds that might affect their efficacy in taking tests in English. They reasoned out that their worry is due to their prediction of getting a low grade or failure. Some students responded that:

"I'm always worried about not passing the test... I'm afraid of failure."

"I don't want to see that my test result is failed..."

"I know I can't get a passing score and I get too nervous."

"I don't trust myself..."

"I don't know if I can answer all the questions correctly... I'm afraid to fail the test."

"Maybe I always think of the passing score, that is why I'm afraid of taking a test in English."

It can be noticed that their responses are consistent with their experience in test anxiety. Another observation is that, their anxiety is caused by their presumption of failing. This relates to their affective aspect, particularly to their perception on self-efficacy. Several studies found that students' low self-efficacy is the reason behind their failure and anxieties. Therefore, in PUC students' test anxiety, low self-efficacy plays a significantly negative role and that it is the source of the problem. Deffenbacher (1980) maintains that anxiety related to cognitive interference is due to extreme instances of worry and that it does not have the potential to facilitate learning.

Linguistic Incompetence and Negative Perception on English:

English as subject in the Pre-University Center can also be difficult for the students. At first, several respondents reported that one of the reasons of their test anxieties is the belief that English is a hard subject. Some of their statements are as follow:

"Sometimes English is hard not the same in high school. English in PUC is complicated, harder and challenging."

"The first thing in my mind is it is difficult. English is difficult to understand because of lack of vocabulary."

"The test is hard because English is not easy. I can't identify the words and I can't transform sentences."

"I worry when it is mentioned that the test is hard. English is hard."

"I don't know how to answer the test because it's hard."

Evident in the respondents' statements are aspects of the English language that make tests difficult for them. According to them, Pre-University English is complicated, harder, and difficult to understand because of their lack of vocabulary and no mastery of grammar rules and transformations. Furthermore, they stated:

"I am not that intelligent in making a sentence. I'm afraid if my grammar is incorrect."

"I have poor English and I'm not so intelligent in English. I feel nervous because my grammar is not perfect; my instructor might question me why."

"I'm weak in English."

"Sometimes I don't know what to answer. Oftentimes I feel I can't answer it surely."

It is noticeable in their statements that they perceive themselves as incompetent in English. Most probably based on self-assessment, the respondents' test anxiety is driven by their perception that they do not possess sufficient skills and knowledge about the language. This is a manifestation that they have low self-efficacy. They cited grammar as the main aspect of English that they have not mastered yet. Since they lack knowledge, it would be possible that they will find English tests difficult. Thus, due to low self-efficacy and insufficient knowledge resulting in negative perception on the subject, PUC students tend to develop anxiety towards tests in English.

As mentioned by Pappamihel (2002), students sometimes criticize themselves by saying "I'm stupid", "I can't do this" and other thoughts that make self-efficacy deteriorate. Thus, these thoughts negatively hinder learners to experience the advantages of learning by limiting their chances to become successful learners (Hass & Eisenstadt, 1991; Sarason, 1972). Bandura's (1991) theory of self-efficacy explains that anxiety depends on a learner's perception of his/her own capability to overcome the threat posed by the situation. This is the reason why boosting one's self-esteem and positive self-perception is a need for students to face their challenges.

TIME PRESSURE:

In every examination, time limitation is always imposed. In the case of Pre-University Center, major examinations in English are to be completed within one hour and thirty minutes. Based on the

respondents' statements, time is involved in triggering their test anxiety. Some of them indicated:

"...because of the time pressure."

"I'm running out of time and it's easy for me to forget the information than to recall it."

"The limitation of time hinders my mind to focus."

"Sometimes I feel my time is short while answering."

With these statements, it can be posited that time limitation is a contributor to the existence of test anxiety among pre-university students. In relation to this finding, Batiha, et al. (2014) mentioned during tests, it is possible that student feel anxious caused by "... time constrains..." It can be possible that the time allotted to the tests in English does not fit to the difficulty and length of the tests. Although setting a time limit is part of assessing students' competence, it should still be carefully thought of, considering students' incapacity and vulnerable thinking ability.

Inadequate Preparation:

It is imperative that before a student takes a test, preparations should have been made. However, there are still some students in PUC who find it hard to prepare for their English examinations and that would cause their test anxiety. They expressed:

"...when I'm not ready or did not prepare for the test."

"...when I didn't study."

"...especially when I did not study and review the lesson."

"...when I forget to study."

It is clear that not studying before the examination is one of the causes of their test anxiety. This is consistent to their response in Table 2 that they sometimes have no idea how to prepare for an examination. In fact, Batiha, et al. (2014) also mentioned poor learning habits as a major cause of test anxiety, together with time constrains and lack of organization. Hence, the respondents are aware of the importance of sufficient preparation for examinations, which, if otherwise happens, would greatly affect their performance. Based on their statements, the worst-case scenario with inadequate preparation is that students would experience double debilitation. First is, they will not be able to answer the test due to lack of knowledge; second is, they can barely concentrate on the test because they are already anxious due to insufficient preparation.

DISCUSSION:

This study sought to explore the English language test anxiety among the students enrolled in the Mindanao State University's Pre-University Center. In their extent of experience with test anxiety, the data, as a whole, may seem to prove that the students have anxieties towards taking tests in English and that the existence of these anxieties may affect their performance in English. Based on the data, the respondents' anxiety toward taking tests in English is manifested mentally and emotionally. As they reported, students' study habit is disturbed since they cannot prepare themselves for tests due to anxiety.

Another serious psychological problem caused by anxiety, according to the respondents, is the difficulty to retrieve information from memory and to concentrate on tests. When these happen, students' chances to pass in a test are less which might place them at the brink to failure. Emotionally, students are worried and nervous whenever they hear the word 'test' or before a test and this can potentially debilitate students when taking tests. Accordingly, anxiety can be created by conditioning. Learners associate undesirable consequences with activities that caused them to have negative feelings. This is the reason why experience matters most when it comes to anxiety especially in taking tests because if students, for example, always get low scores and fail in tests, they may develop anxiety towards tests. Because of these emotional disturbances, students may tend to run out of time and experience confusion. Moreover, it is important to note that most of the repeaters and first-timers in PUC have moderate to high-test anxiety level, which is similar to the findings of other researches (Syokwaa et al., 2014; Roy, 2013; Tooranposhti,

2011; Yousefi et al., 2010). This should be taken into account since it is a proof that test anxiety can exist regardless of the students' status as enrollee in PUC.

Some reasons behind students' test anxiety found in this study are quite similar with what other studies discovered. Many researchers (Bonaccio & Reeve, 2010; Putwain, Woods, & Symes, 2010; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2008) found that students' unpreparedness, perceived incompetence, and low self-efficacy can cause test anxiety. Fear of failure was also found to trigger test anxiety among students (Putwain & Daniels, 2010; Zeidner & Mathews, 2005). However, parents' high expectations have not been highly emphasized in previous researches. While parents' expectations may help their children strive harder in academics especially if these expectations are accompanied by motivation and encouragement, these may also work in another way which is anxiety-provoking to children. Most probably, expectations become pressures to children to the extent that they feel anxious when they are tested since tests are the times when parents' expectations would be confirmed or not. Hence, in the construct of test anxiety in English, the contribution of parents by means of setting too high expectations should be considered as a factor. Another important reason identified in this study is the students' disability to prepare themselves for tests. This is one proof that pre-university students are still unprepared to go to higher education because they are yet to discover how to study and take English tests.

CONCLUSION:

Test anxiety has been seen as a problem among students and its causes are surprisingly many. Based on the findings, all problems found to grow out from pre-university students' test anxiety seem to prove that the existence of the Pre-University Center, offering a bridging program to unprepared and problematic students, is practically important. Being a melting pot of the Southern Philippines, Mindanao State University stands not only as an institution of higher education, but also as a preparatory institution for students in need of academic assistance with the help of the Pre-University Center.

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