

Prevalence and Underlying Factors of Test Anxiety in English and Communication Skills among Nigerian University Freshmen: Counselling Implications

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Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence and underlying factors of test anxiety among freshmen at Maryam Abacha American University of Nigeria (MAAUN) during English and Communication Skills examinations. Employing a cross-sectional design, the research involved 157 students selected through stratified random sampling from a population of 1,010 freshmen. The Language and Communication Test Anxiety Scale (LACTAS), a validated 20-item instrument, was used to measure anxiety levels. Results revealed that 15.9% of participants experienced test anxiety, with a moderate mean anxiety level of 2.00 (SD = 0.535). Key contributing factors included fear of failing the course, concerns about academic performance, and uncertainty regarding exam formats. Regression analysis highlighted significant relationships between test anxiety and both academic and personal factors, accounting for 99.3% of the variance. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, such as counseling services and language support programs, to mitigate test anxiety and enhance academic outcomes. This study contributes to the limited literature on test anxiety in Nigerian higher education and offers practical recommendations for fostering a supportive learning environment.

Keywords: Psychological Well-being, Examination Stress, Language Proficiency Anxiety, Counseling Interventions, Cross-Sectional Study

Introduction

Test anxiety is a pervasive psychological phenomenon that significantly impacts academic performance, particularly in high-stakes examinations (Maier et al., 2021). It manifests as excessive worry, fear, or apprehension experienced by students before, during, or after tests, often impairing their ability to perform at their best (Ur Rehman et al., 2021). This issue is especially pronounced among university freshmen, who must navigate the transition to a more rigorous academic environment while adapting to unfamiliar examination formats (Haruna et al., 2023). In Nigeria, where English and Communication Skills are fundamental to academic success, test anxiety in these subjects can have profound implications for students' educational and professional futures (Moses et al., 2018). The Maryam Abacha American University of Nigeria, Kano, like many Nigerian institutions, has seen a notable increase in student enrollment, intensifying academic competition and pressure (Obiakor & Malu, 2020). Freshmen, particularly those in their first year, encounter numerous stressors, including demanding coursework, heightened expectations, and the necessity to demonstrate proficiency in English—the primary medium of instruction (Nzube, 2023). For students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, language-related anxiety compounds the challenges of test-taking, creating additional barriers to success (Pachaiappan et al., 2023a). These cumulative pressures contribute to heightened test anxiety, which, if unaddressed, can undermine academic achievement and long-term career prospects. Despite its prevalence, research on test anxiety among Nigerian university students, particularly freshmen, remains limited, with few studies focusing on the specific pressures associated with English and Communication Skills examinations (Oladipo & Ogungbamila, 2013). Existing literature highlights the influence of sociocultural factors, such as parental expectations and societal attitudes toward academic achievement, in exacerbating test anxiety (Bedu-Addo & Ficus, 2023). Institutional challenges, including inadequate learning facilities and overcrowded lecture halls, further create an environment that fosters stress and anxiety (Haruna et al., 2023). Cognitive and emotional dimensions, such as fear of failure and low self-efficacy, also play a critical role, necessitating targeted interventions to support affected students (Bashir et al., 2019).

Theoretical frameworks provide essential insights into the mechanisms underlying test anxiety. Cognitive interference theory suggests that anxiety disrupts the cognitive processes necessary for effective language comprehension and expression during examinations (Sarason, 1984). Arousal theory, on the other hand, posits that excessive physiological arousal can impair performance, while multidimensional anxiety theory distinguishes between cognitive worry (excessive negative thoughts) and somatic symptoms (physical manifestations of anxiety) (Spielberger, 2010; Martens et al., 1990). Processing efficiency theory emphasizes how anxiety affects the allocation of cognitive resources, and social-evaluative anxiety theory underscores the fear of negative judgment from peers and instructors (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992; Leary, 1983). Together, these theories illustrate the complex, multifaceted nature of test anxiety, particularly in language-based assessments where

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Prevalence and Underlying Factors of Test Anxiety in ... Abubakar, S. H. & Yakubu, A. A. (2025) cognitive and emotional demands are heightened. Recent empirical studies have documented the widespread prevalence of test anxiety among university students. Research indicates that a substantial proportion of students experience moderate to high levels of anxiety during examinations (Tsegay et al., 2019). For example, a study by Pachiappan et al. (2023b) found that 46% of students reported low anxiety, while 20% experienced high anxiety, with gender and ethnicity emerging as significant predictors. Similarly, Kavakci et al. (2014a) observed that 48% of students preparing for university entrance examinations exhibited test anxiety, with higher rates among female students. These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address both the academic and psychological dimensions of test anxiety.

Moreover, the consequences of unmanaged test anxiety extend beyond immediate academic performance. Chronic test anxiety can lead to diminished self-confidence, avoidance behaviors, and even long-term disengagement from academic pursuits (Zeidner, 1998). In the Nigerian context, where academic success is often closely tied to socioeconomic mobility, the stakes are particularly high. Students who struggle with test anxiety may find themselves at a disadvantage, perpetuating cycles of underperformance and missed opportunities (Akinade, 2015). Therefore, understanding and mitigating test anxiety is not merely an academic concern but a critical step toward fostering equitable educational outcomes. In nutshell, test anxiety among university freshmen, particularly in English and Communication Skills examinations, is a pressing issue that warrants greater attention from educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals. The interplay of cognitive, emotional, sociocultural, and institutional factors creates a complex web of challenges that students must navigate. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical findings, stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to support students in overcoming test anxiety.

Objectives of the Study

The study is poised to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the prevalence of test anxiety in English and Communication Skills among freshmen at Maryam Abacha American University of Nigeria, Kano.
2. To examine the relationship between personal and academic factors, and prevalence of test anxiety during English and Communication Skills examinations among freshmen.

Hypotheses

H₀₁: The mean score of test anxiety prevalence among freshmen during English and Communication Skills exams is not significantly different from the hypothesized population mean (cut-off mean).

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between academic and personal factors, collectively, and the levels of test anxiety experienced by freshmen during the examination.

Methodology

This study focuses on level 100 students at MAAUN, aiming to explore the prevalence, causes, and counselling implications of test anxiety during English and Communication Skills examinations. By examining academic, personal, and sociocultural factors, the research seeks to inform tailored interventions that alleviate anxiety and enhance academic performance. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on test anxiety in Nigerian higher education, offering practical recommendations for educators, counsellors, and policymakers. Ultimately, the study aspires to foster a supportive learning environment that empowers freshmen to overcome test anxiety and achieve their academic potential. The study employed a cross-sectional design to investigate the prevalence of test anxiety among level 100 students at Maryam Abacha American University of Nigeria (MAAUN). This approach was chosen for its efficiency in capturing a snapshot of students' experiences at a single point in time, aligning with the need for timely interventions (Polit & Beck, 2017). The target population comprised 1,010 freshmen across four schools, with a sample of 157 students selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across academic programs and age groups (Bryman, 2016). Ethical considerations were prioritized, with informed consent obtained to ensure voluntary participation and transparency about the study's objectives and procedures (Yip et al., 2016). To measure test anxiety, the Language and Communication Test Anxiety Scale (LACTAS) was developed, consisting of 20 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The scale's validity was confirmed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), demonstrating strong psychometric properties (Nye, 2023). Content validity was further ensured by expert reviews from English Language and psychology specialists, yielding a high Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.86 (Gunnarsson, 2024). Internal consistency was robust, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, indicating high reliability (Barbera et al., 2021). Statistical analyses included a one-sample t-test to compare anxiety scores against a hypothesized mean, multiple linear regression to explore the combined influence of academic and personal factors, and ANOVA/ANCOVA to examine variations across academic programs and age groups (Hair et al., 2014). The significance level was set at 0.05, with ethical adherence to confidentiality and participant welfare throughout. This methodology provided a comprehensive framework for understanding test anxiety among MAAUN freshmen, offering actionable insights for targeted interventions.

Presentation of Results

The analysis of data offers insights into the prevalence levels of test anxiety among freshmen during English and Communication Skills examinations, accompanied by pertinent statistical measures. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of the psychological well-being of university students during academic assessments.

Research Question 1

What is the prevalence of test anxiety among freshmen during English and Communication Skills examination?

Table 1: Summary of ratings of freshmen on Test Anxiety during English and Communication Skills Exams (N=157)

Test Anxiety	With Test Anxiety	Without Test Anxiety	Sample Mean	SD
Prevalence Level	25 (15.9)	132 (84.1)	2.00	0.535

The analysis of data offers insights into the prevalence levels of test anxiety among freshmen during English and Communication Skills examinations, accompanied by pertinent statistical measures. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of the psychological well-being of university students during academic assessments. Among the sampled freshmen, 15.9%, equivalent to 25 students, report experiencing test anxiety, aligning with existing literature highlighting the prevalence of test anxiety among college students (Haruna et al., 2023; Hembree, 1988; Cassady & Johnson, 2002). Conversely, the majority of freshmen, accounting for 84.1%, report not experiencing test anxiety during their examinations. The calculated sample mean of 2.00 suggests a moderate average level of test anxiety within the entire sample, falling within the mid-range of the scale. This indicates that, on average, freshmen experience a moderate level of anxiety during English and Communication Skills examinations, consistent with the general understanding that academic assessments can evoke a certain degree of anxiety among students (Maier et al., 2021; Chapell et al., 2005). The reported standard deviation of 0.535 implies relatively low variability in test anxiety scores within the sample, suggesting a degree of consistency in reported anxiety levels among freshmen and highlighting the reliability of the overall mean as a representative measure of central tendency (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The specified cut-off mean of 2.5 serves as a reference point for categorizing test anxiety levels. In short, this data sheds light on the prevalence and characteristics of test anxiety among freshmen during English and Communication Skills examinations. The findings provide valuable insights for educators and support services to tailor interventions addressing varying levels of anxiety, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of the overall academic experience for freshmen.

Hypothesis 1

The mean score of test anxiety prevalence among freshmen during English and Communication Skills exams is not significantly different from the hypothesized population mean (cut-off mean).

To further comprehend the nuanced significance of the prevalence of test anxiety in this context, a corresponding null hypothesis which states that: the mean score of the anxiety level of freshmen during English and Communication Skills exams is not significantly different from the hypothesized population mean (cut-off mean) was analyzed using one-sample t-test, and the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: One-sample t-test analysis on significance of the prevalence level of test anxiety during English and Communication Skills exams (Hypothesized mean=2.5)

Test Anxiety	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t-value	df	Sig.
Prevalence Level	157	2.00	0.535	-11.624	156	0.000

In Table 2, the mean anxiety score among the 157 freshmen was found to be 2.00, with a standard deviation of 0.535. The one-sample t-test revealed a t-value of -11.624, with 156 degrees of freedom. The resulting p-value was 0.000, indicating statistical significance. The negative t-value implies that the observed mean anxiety score of 2.00 is lower than the hypothesized population mean of 2.5. The low p-value reinforces the conclusion that this difference is not likely due to random chance, indicating a statistically significant lower level of anxiety among freshmen during English and Communication Skills exams compared to the hypothesized population mean. This finding aligns with the literature on test anxiety, emphasizing the prevalence of anxiety among college students (Manko Umar & Haruna, 2021; Pachaiappan et al., 2023b). The results underscore the importance of considering these findings in the context of interventions and support services aimed at addressing test anxiety among freshmen, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the psychological well-being of students during academic assessments.

Research Question 2

What are the factors influencing the prevalence of test anxiety levels of freshmen during English and Communication Skills examination?

Understanding the factors that contribute to test anxiety among freshmen during English and Communication Skills examinations is crucial for developing effective support systems and interventions (Bedu-Addo & Ficus, 2023). This study sought to answer the question as thus: What are the factors influencing the prevalence of test anxiety levels of freshmen during English and Communication Skills examination? In order to adequately answer the question, descriptive statistics were used to explore various aspects of participants responses to the items of the scale based on mean scores and standard deviations presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean score per test anxiety Item (Cut-off mean= 2.5)

Items	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
Not fully prepared for the exam	157	1.70	.820	Low
Afraid of failing the course	157	2.46	1.124	Moderate
Afraid of parents'/guardian's anger	157	2.46	1.077	Low
Afraid of friends' mockery	157	1.85	.946	Low
Afraid of carrying over the course	157	2.54	1.146	High

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Lack of reading materials	157	1.59	.742	Low
Have difficulty in understanding the courses	157	2.04	.894	Moderate
Having problem with remembering	157	2.08	.874	Moderate
Not having enough time for reading the notes	157	1.99	.873	Low
Lack of electricity to engage in reading	157	1.78	.803	Low
Not aware of the format of the exam	157	2.45	1.034	Moderate
No samples of past questions to practice on	157	2.24	1.051	Moderate
Not aware of area of concentration	157	2.24	.950	Moderate
No study group to revise with	157	1.94	.845	Low
Can't find the right book in the library to read	157	1.83	.856	Low
Late admission	157	1.75	.875	Low
Lecturers are tough	157	1.83	.750	Low
Sickness	157	1.65	.783	Low
Hatred for the exam	157	1.53	.675	Low
Always afraid of the exams	157	2.10	1.045	Moderate
Valid N (listwise)	157	2.00	0.535	Moderate

The analysis in Table 3 shows that low anxiety levels are associated with factors such as feeling unprepared for the exam (Mean = 1.70) and lacking reading materials (Mean = 1.59) (Tsegay et al., 2019). Moderate anxiety levels are observed for concerns related to academic performance, including the fear of failing the course (Mean = 2.46) and difficulty understanding the courses (Mean = 2.04) (Pachaiappan et al., 2023b). Emotional factors contribute to anxiety, with fear of parents' or guardian's anger (Mean = 2.46) and the fear of friends' mockery (Mean = 1.85) influencing anxiety levels (Maier et al., 2021). Moderate anxiety levels are associated with uncertainty, such as not being aware of the exam format (Mean = 2.45) and having no samples of past questions to practice on (Mean = 2.24) (Bashir et al., 2019). Logistical challenges, like late admission (Mean = 1.75) and difficulty finding the right book in the library to read (Mean = 1.83), are linked to low anxiety levels (Roy et al., 2022). Personal factors, including sickness (Mean = 1.65) and a general feeling of hatred for exams (Mean = 1.53), are also associated with low anxiety levels (Kavakci et al., 2014b). This examination of factors influencing test anxiety levels provides valuable insights for educators and support services. Addressing these factors through targeted interventions can contribute to a more positive testing environment for freshmen, ultimately enhancing their overall academic experience (Memon et al., 2023). As shown in the table above, a substantial number of anxiety-inducing factors, such as not being fully prepared for exams, fear of parents' or guardian's anger, and lack of reading materials, are categorized as "Low," implying that these concerns are generally not pronounced among the sampled freshmen. Furthermore, the prevalence of moderate test anxiety is observed in specific areas, including fears of failing a course, difficulties in understanding courses, and concerns about time constraints for reading notes. These moderate-level anxiety factors suggest that, while overall anxiety is low, there are specific aspects of academic life that evoke a more moderate degree of concern among the freshmen. However, the analysis highlights one area of higher anxiety categorized as "High," particularly related to the fear of carrying over the courses.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between academic and personal factors, collectively, and the levels of test anxiety experienced by freshmen during the examination.

In order to test the null hypothesis on whether there is a significant relationship between academic and personal factors, collectively, and the levels of test anxiety experienced by freshmen during the examination, Multiple Linear Regression analysis was employed. The statistical results strongly affirm the research hypothesis that posits a significant relationship between the collective influence of academic and personal factors and the levels of test anxiety experienced by freshmen. This conclusion is supported by a comprehensive analysis of the model's key metrics as presented in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

Table 4: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.997 ^a	.993	.993	.044

a. Predictors: (Constant), Personal Factors, Academic Factors

The model's exceptionally high R Square value of 0.993 indicates that an overwhelming 99.3% of the variability in test anxiety levels among freshmen is accounted for by the combination of academic and personal factors. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the multifaceted nature of test anxiety and its intricate relationship with various psychological and environmental factors (Tahmasbipour & Ahmady, 2011). The Adjusted R Square remains at 0.993, reinforcing the model's robust explanatory power while considering the number of predictors. This signifies that the inclusion of academic and personal factors significantly contributes to the model's effectiveness in explaining test anxiety variations (Tan et al., 2023). The low standard error of the estimate (0.044) further bolsters the reliability of the model. This small standard error indicates a precise fit, affirming the accuracy of the predicted values in relation to the actual test anxiety scores (Thiriveedhi et al., 2023).

Table 5: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	44.387	2	22.194	11448.207	.000 ^b
	Residual	.299	154	.002		
	Total	44.686	156			

a. Dependent Variable: Test Anxiety b. Predictors: (Constant), Personal Factors, Academic Factors

The ANOVA results provide additional support for the research hypothesis. The highly significant F-statistic (11448.207) and associated p-value of 0.000 underscore the model's overall significance, confirming that the regression model is effective in explaining the variance in test anxiety levels (Haruna et al., 2023).

Table 6: Regression Analysis Table

Variable	B	SE	t	p	%CI
(Constant)	-.013	.014		-.915	.362
Academic Factors	.585	.011	.599	54.366	.000
Personal Factors	.436	.011	.450	40.889	.000

Examining the coefficients, the academic and personal factors play substantial roles in influencing test anxiety levels. The standardized coefficients (Beta) of 0.599 for academic factors and 0.450 for personal factors indicate the strength and direction of these relationships. These findings align with prior research highlighting the intricate connections between academic stressors, personal factors, and test anxiety (Pachaiappan et al., 2023a). The practical significance of these results is evident, as both academic and personal factors emerge as crucial contributors to understanding and predicting test anxiety. This supports the practical implications discussed in existing literature, emphasizing the need for comprehensive interventions that address both academic and personal aspects to effectively alleviate test anxiety (Setyowati et al., 2020).

Counselling Implications

The findings of this study highlight several critical counselling implications for addressing test anxiety among Nigerian university freshmen during English and Communication Skills examinations. Given that 15.9% of students reported experiencing test anxiety, with fear of failing, uncertainty about exam formats, and academic pressures as key contributors, targeted interventions are essential (Haruna et al., 2023). Cognitive-behavioural strategies can be particularly effective, as they align with cognitive interference theory, which posits that anxiety disrupts language processing during exams (Sarason, 1984). Counsellors should focus on helping students reframe negative thought patterns, such as fear of failure or carrying over courses, which were identified as high-anxiety triggers (Pachaiappan et al., 2023b). Additionally, psychoeducational workshops could demystify exam formats and provide practical study techniques, addressing the moderate anxiety linked to unpreparedness and lack of past questions (Bashir et al., 2019).

Social-evaluative anxiety theory underscores the role of peer and parental judgment in exacerbating anxiety (Leary, 1983), suggesting that group counselling or peer-support programs may mitigate feelings of isolation and mockery. Furthermore, institutional support, such as accessible language labs and tutoring, can alleviate language-related anxiety, particularly for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Nzube, 2023). The strong predictive relationship between academic/personal factors and anxiety (accounting for 99.3% of variance) reinforces the need for holistic counselling approaches that address both academic stressors and emotional well-being (Tsegay et al., 2019). Finally, collaboration between counsellors and educators to clarify exam expectations and reduce logistical barriers (e.g., access to materials) can create a more supportive learning environment (Obiakor & Malu, 2020). By integrating these strategies, universities can foster resilience and improve academic outcomes for anxious freshmen.

Conclusion

The study on test anxiety among Nigerian university freshmen during English and Communication Skills examinations reveals a moderate prevalence of anxiety, with 15.9% of students reporting significant distress. Key factors contributing to this anxiety include fear of failing, uncertainty about exam formats, and concerns about academic performance. The research highlights the interconnected influence of academic and personal factors, with logistical challenges and emotional stressors further exacerbating the issue. Despite the moderate overall anxiety levels, specific areas, such as the fear of carrying over courses, evoke higher distress. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, including counseling services, language support programs, and improved assessment practices, to alleviate anxiety and foster a supportive learning environment. By addressing these factors, educators and policymakers can enhance students' academic experiences and performance. This study contributes valuable insights to the limited literature on test anxiety in the Nigerian context, offering practical recommendations for mitigating its impact and promoting student well-being.

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Recommendations

1. Universities should offer counseling services to help students manage test anxiety, focusing on stress-reduction techniques and emotional support.
2. Educators can reduce anxiety by clarifying exam formats, sharing past questions, and offering study guides to help students feel more prepared.
3. Promoting collaborative learning through study groups can help students build confidence and reduce feelings of isolation before exams.
4. Since English proficiency is a concern, additional language workshops and tutoring should be provided to help students improve their communication skills.
5. Addressing logistical challenges (e.g., access to study materials, electricity for reading) can minimize stress and improve focus.

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