



**TEST ANXIETY AMONG ESL PRE-SERVICE
TEACHERS: IMPACTS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING
IN GHANAIAN COLLEGES OF EDUCATIONⁱ**

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Abstract:

The current qualitative study seeks to establish the level of test anxiety and its effects on ESL pre-service teachers in the colleges of education, particularly concerning learning methods and their future teaching. As a qualitative research method, incorporating the experiences of twenty purposively selected participants involved semi-structured interviews, where phenomenology was used for a more in-depth analysis of participants' accounts. Despite this, the observations show specific language-related fears, namely, those related to writing and written tests, as well as performance stress, associated with examinations. Different strategies of coping are described, including the use of methods such as relaxation and preparation. One emergent theme is how test anxiety impacts teaching philosophy; several pre-service teachers reported wanting to develop low-stakes classrooms based on their experiences with test anxiety. The paper also suggests that there is a need for an impetus for teacher education programs to address and incorporate strategies for managing test anxiety in the curriculum. Thus, these suggestions will help make the future ESL teachers as efficient and healthy as possible to promote the learning environments they will design later. Suggestions include the inclusion of anxiety-reducing strategies in pre-service teachers' training and the need to reconsider the stance on assessment practices to avoid overburdening ESL pre-service teachers.

Keywords: test anxiety; ESL pre-service teachers; teaching philosophy; learning experiences; colleges of education; language-related fears

ⁱ L'ANXIÉTÉ LIÉE AUX EXAMENS CHEZ LES FUTURS ENSEIGNANTS D'ANGLAIS LANGUE SECONDE: EFFETS SUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT ET L'APPRENTISSAGE DANS LES COLLÈGES D'ÉDUCATION AU GHANA

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1. Introduction

Symptoms of test anxiety are defined as a set of emotional, physiological, and behavioural patterns affecting test performance in learners as a psychological condition prevalent in educational contexts (Adkins-Jablonsky *et al.*, 2021). In the case of ESL pre-service teachers, the phenomenon assumes a slightly different aspect because learners are expected to acquire content knowledge as well as exhibit English language proficiency (Aydin, 2018). The contributions of this study are derived from extending previous research beyond the effects of test anxiety on pre-service teachers' mathematics performance and into the areas of their teaching philosophy and future classroom behaviour. When it comes to Career and Teacher Education, high-stakes examinations are prevalent and affect pre-service teachers' careers; therefore, distinguishing the terms related to test anxiety for ESL pre-service teachers is essential (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018).

This research aims to address the following questions:

- 1) How intense is test anxiety among ESL pre-service teachers in Ghanaian Colleges of Education?
- 2) How does test anxiety contribute to learning approaches and study methods of the students who are enrolled in teacher education programs?
- 3) How could encounters with test anxiety impact future pedagogical practices of pre-service teachers?

In order to answer these questions, this research uses the qualitative research method, which involves the use of survey questionnaires and interviews with deeper explorations into their respondents' reactions and responses to the topic under study.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of test anxiety has been explored throughout the literature within the context of educational psychology and is theorized through various models which explain the presence of test anxiety as well as its effects. The cognitive-attentional theory by Eysenck *et al.* (2007) claims that anxiety impairs the test takers' ability to focus their attention on the relevant task, and they are at the same time worried, self-critical, and concerned with physical symptoms. Such a division of cognitive facilities always leads to deteriorated performance. On the other hand, the skills deficit model (Putwain & Daly, 2014) posits that the anxiety displayed during tests might be a result of poor learning methodologies or a lack of adequate strategies that enable preparation for tests, hence leading to the anxiety. These theories allow us to explain the processes related to the occurrence of test anxiety and its impact on academic achievements. Extending the literature on ESL pre-service teachers, the cognitive-load theory (Paas *et al.*, 2003) provides other useful information stating that surplus cognitive load necessary to process the information presented in the second language may further increase anxiety levels and hinder performance.

Prior research on the test anxiety level of pre-service teachers has focused on discovering the extent and implications. According to the study by Peker and Ertekin (2011), there was a significant difference between the mathematics anxiety of pre-service

teachers and teaching anxiety, regarding that such a transfer of anxiety may occur from learning to the teaching domain. In the ESL context, Horwitz (2016) stated that language anxiety could interact with general test anxiety, meaning different difficulties for the non-English-speaking teacher candidates. With high-stakes testing being a current issue, its effect on teaching and learning has not gone unnoticed. Au (2007) evaluated a metasynthesis of 49 quality qualitative studies and noticed that high-stakes testing was associated with the reduction of curriculum content and efforts towards teacher and student process/product classroom control. ESL preservice teachers understand the pressure on their English language proficiency through tests like TOEFL or IELTS as a stressful factor (Cheng *et al.*, 2014; Caturegli, 2021). Such results point out that there is a coexistence of test anxiety, language proficiency, and the process of teaching skills development in ESL pre-service teachers.

Some of the factors that have been found to cause test anxiety in ESL learners include language proficiency issues, cultural differences that touch on how they are expected to take their tests, and the sheer process of having to process information, in this case, test information, in a language which is not their first language (Zheng & Cheng, 2018; Jin & Dewaele, 2018). Nevertheless, knowledge of the relationships of these factors with teaching practices and pre-service teachers is still scarce. There have been some attempts in the recent past to find a relationship between test anxiety and the analysis of teacher identity formation (Tum, 2015; Gregersen *et al.*, 2014) that requires further exploration. Besides, research is needed to establish long-term impacts of test anxiety on teaching behaviours and students' performances (von der Embse & Witmer, 2014). Such gaps in the literature justify the examination of test anxiety for ESL pre-service teachers in view of their performance not only on their academic profiles but also on their anticipated teacher performance.

2. Literature review

2.1 Intensity of test anxiety

Recent literature has shown that language learners suffer from test anxiety despite Aydın (2018)'s argument that previous studies had failed to reach a consistent conclusion as regards anxiety levels across contexts of language learning. Also, the intensity of reported anxiety varies considerably across learning contexts. Putwain and Daly (2014) reported that about 16% of students experience high test anxiety. It was also discovered that the levels of anxiety in females (22.5%) were significantly higher than in males (10.3%). Similarly, Cheng *et al.* (2014) and Liu and Mo (2014) reported that depending on test purpose, learner characteristics and testing contexts, there are differences in the learners' level of test anxiety. Meanwhile, Zheng and Cheng (2018) highlighted cognitive test anxiety as a prominent dimension of language learning and assessment. Gregersen *et al.* (2014) revealed that language anxiety varies over language tasks as researchers observed various fluctuations of learner anxiety through the completion of English-speaking tasks.

Findings in the context of teacher educators mirror these trends. In fact, non-native pre-service English teachers experienced foreign language anxiety similar to that of novice language learners (Tum 2015). Analogous study like Rasool *et al.* (2023) showed that the majority of pre-service EFL teachers had moderate to high levels of writing anxiety, finding cognitive anxiety as the main dimension and no significant differences between genders. Jin and Dewaele (2018) found that students with a higher positive orientation experienced less anxiety in the classroom context. In summary, the test anxiety among ESL/EFL pre-service teachers has mostly been reported to be at moderate to high levels, albeit with different degrees of intensity across learners, learning environments and assessment contexts.

2.2 Influence of test anxiety on learning and study methods

Many studies have found a favourable relationship between students' learning approaches and study methods in relation to test anxiety, but the reported tendencies are not consistent across educational environments. Gregersen *et al.* (2014) discovered that learners scoring high in anxiety used different preparation behaviours than those scoring low, and the anxiety of learners changed during language tasks. In a similar way, Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) found five general strategies that anxious language learners use – preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation- thus suggesting that students have varied ways of coping with anxiety about learning a foreign language. Studies that focused on pre-service teachers also show a similar pattern. In the case of Rasool *et al.* (2023), teachers who use different writing practices, teachers who demonstrate fear of evaluation, feedback and instructional practices and have cognitive anxiety experience writing anxiety reported anxiety. Akinsola (2014) studied the teaching anxiety experienced by pre-service teachers in Nigeria. The study employed a questionnaire administered to 140 university students and reported that pre-service teachers exhibited anxiety due to fear of supervisors, establishing teacher-learner relations, and knowledge of subject matter. Zheng and Cheng (2018) also highlighted an association between anxiety and student learning behaviour, testing language abilities and learners' ability to express themselves in the English language. Building on Horwitz *et al.* (1989) framework, which identifies three components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, Le *et al.* 2025) studied Vietnamese pre-service English language teachers and reported that speaking test assigned to students revealed their errors to the entire class, leading to apprehension that others would judge them. This suggests that pre-service teachers expressed fear about the implications for the future credibility of their teaching career. This reflects what Hallinger *et al.* (2023) describe as 'cultural idealisation of flawless' English in educational settings, which allows student teachers to agree to an infeasible standard of linguistic perfection. This suggests that a test not only measures their current performance but also an assumed verdict on their future professional viability. On the other hand, a literature review by Aydın (2018) revealed that teaching and learning practices that utilized technology reduced anxiety associated with foreign language, even though the results

were mixed. It is therefore clear from the existing scholarship that anxiety is not tied to a single learning approach, with preparation, coping strategies and instructional practices emerging as recurring themes.

2.3 Influence of test anxiety on future pedagogical practices

The research on pre-service teacher candidates' experiences with test anxiety indicates that their anxiety about testing will shape the way they plan their future teaching. In the studies conducted by Butakor (2024) and Ironsi (2020), it was found that those pre-service teacher candidates who took tests in a stressful environment performed poorer than those who engaged in less stressful environments while taking tests. In addition, they stated that assessment techniques should be developed that will help diminish or lessen the amount of test anxiety and/or stress that pre-service teacher candidates endure. Similarly, in a study conducted by Gorospe (2022), pre-service teacher candidates who experienced test anxiety expressed the desire for clearer guidelines from instructors, organized preparation opportunities, and more support for their students due to their own test anxiety experiences. Furthermore, Sale (2025) stated that experiencing anxiety when conducting teaching practicums and when completing evaluations dramatically impacted the way pre-service teacher candidates viewed classroom assessments and the manner in which they taught. More recently, Saet and Cabansag (2024) reported that pre-service teacher candidates' test anxiety experiences motivated them to concentrate on creating a more positive and supportive environment in their classrooms, as well as increase their knowledge and use of learner-centred instructional techniques.

According to Ningsih (2025), in a study of preservice teachers who experienced classroom anxiety during test (examination) and microteaching practicals, there was a need for preservice teacher educators to provide guided study plans, scaffolded instruction, and prepare adequately for future teachers' classroom experiences. Likewise, Cheng (2023) and Pahmi (2025) found evidence of anxiety leading to avoidance behaviours and negative thoughts toward test-taking causing preservice teachers to exhibit reduced ability when compared with past performance creating a need to provide increased practice opportunities, sequential task design and reduce cognitive overload in developing supportive assessment, structured teaching approaches and classroom environments.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm because its purpose is to gain an in-depth insight into test anxiety among those ESL pre-service teachers. The framework of the study is inspired by phenomenology, which is an epistemological and ontological approach to the study of structural phenomena, adding to the understanding of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2023). This is especially appropriate given that the study has been aimed at exploring test anxiety, which is a personal experience.

The research design adopted in this study consisted of qualitative, semi-structured interviews held with 20 ESL pre-service teachers from colleges of education. The respondents were chosen purposively in the study in order to capture their year of study, language background and anxiety self-reports. This sampling technique is suitable with Patton's (2014) argument of using purposive sampling, especially when the target cases possess the potential of generating an adequate understanding of the research questions. It could be argued that the current participant sample is 20, which falls within the scope of Creswell and Poth's (2016) view on phenomenological research, noting that such studies should not include more than 25 participants.

The study employed an in-depth, semi-structured interviewing system that was administered to each participant for about one and a half to two hours. The interview questions were derived from the literature and tested on two pre-service tutors due to effective and comprehensible research questions. Open-ended response formats were used, and details regarding participants' experiences with test anxiety were sought by addressing their perceptions and feelings about the event, along with their coping mechanisms at the time of being tested. For instance, the participants were offered questions like what happened, what went through the subject's mind, how the subject felt both physically and mentally before, during and after the test and what the subject did. It corresponds to the three-interview administrator series advanced by Seidman (2013) that gives regard to the context and to reflection of qualitative interviewing.

To ensure that the results obtained in the study were credible, the technique of member checking was used. Participants were given an opportunity to review the proposed interview transcripts for accuracy and content clarification purposes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such an approach not only makes the collected data more valid as it eliminates bias in data collection, but also provides participants with an opportunity to share their experiences in a manner that they want them to be shared.

Subsequently, data analysis was undertaken employing the six-step thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke in 2006. This involved:

- a) The review of the transcript several times with the intention of familiarising with the data,
- b) Initial codes' generation,
- c) Themes search,
- d) Themes review,
- e) Themes naming and definition,
- f) Report production.

To increase the reliability of the study, two investigators separately reviewed some of the transcripts and compared the patterns identified for assessment of the inter-observer reliability. The coding was further consistent with any variations, e.g., the way one variable should be coded, being pointed out, and the researchers agreeing on the correct approach. Also, to address the possible bias by the researchers, a reflexive journal was practiced during data collection, together with the analysis process as recommended by Ortlipp (2008). The ethical concerns and considerations were taken into consideration

at each and every level of the research activities. All participants provided their consent, and they were informed about privacy and their freedom to refuse to participate in research investigations at their own discretion (Mertens, 2014). Because the description of experiences of anxiety is potentially sensitive, the interviewees were informed of crisis support or counseling services, which could be offered if they seemed distressed during the actual interview. The collection of all the data was done safely, and the raw data had the identities of the participants eliminated.

By adopting a qualitative research design in the present study, test anxiety among ESL pre-service teachers is presented in a deeper, more diverse manner. It is through the study of several stories and cases that the research seeks to identify its objectives, that involves revealing the extent, manifestations and consequent effects of test anxiety on learning and teaching, beliefs, and future practice in classrooms.

4. Results and Discussion

The interviews offer a rich description of the plight of the ESL pre-service teachers and underpin qualitative themes. Many of the respondents pointed out specific language concerns they had while learning; issues concerning the possible production of language mistakes during examination, especially in writing, were common. We can deduce meaning from this observation in the sense that linguistic aspects appear to be one of the crucial factors contributing to making students apprehensive about taking the required examinations. As the results demonstrate, several of the participants were explicitly preoccupied with the idea of making a mistake while saying something they want to say, and especially while writing. A feeling of such kind may undermine one's self-confidence and make them concentrate on avoiding mistakes and neglecting real communication. Subsequently, they might become uncertain when responding to questions and might check their answers for a long time. According to the results obtained, there is solid evidence to conclude that fear of language mistakes affects the examination experience of many students. This theme corresponds to the framework of writing anxiety in L2 contexts developed by Rasool *et al.* (2023). Work culture was the last major everyday experience theme that emerged from the interview transcripts; many participants reported being under pressure to perform, although they could not fully implement the strategies of the educational programs as documented by von der Embse *et al.* (2018) on high-stakes testing.

Several methods of dealing with anxiety were disclosed, from utilising relaxation and control methods to taking an enormous amount of preparation, as Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) have listed in their classification of language learning coping strategies. The combination of both the use of relaxation methods and extensive preparation on the part of pre-service teachers indicates the awareness of the fact that test anxiety is one of the challenges that need to be handled purposefully instead of pretending they exist. Some students showed their reliance on preparation methods, which was connected to the idea that if you are well prepared, the level of uncertainty decreases. Other students focused

on coping with their emotional feelings and preventing them from interfering with the process. We can find similarities by comparing this result with prior knowledge, where Gregersen *et al.* (2014) argue that reactions of learners to test anxiety can be different in the situations provided that preparation can help to resolve some issues with such language-related activities as the ones involving language tests.

One of the main components to be derived from the analysis of the qualitative data was the influence of test anxiety on teaching philosophy. Some of the pre-service teachers demonstrated a positive attitude toward constructing low-stress learning environments in their future classrooms as a result of year-long test anxiety. This was in line with the belief held in this theme that teachers' beliefs are moulded mostly by their training or experience as learners. While the results point to difficulties in identifying the benefits of test anxiety experiences, this research has revealed one possible benefit: these future teachers may be more perceptive of the affective needs of their students. However, it also calls into question the possibility of anxiety affecting pedagogical decisions, and thus, opens up the possibility that an overcorrection necessary to reduce anxiety might not necessarily correspond to best practice in language teaching (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014).

5. Conclusion

This paper gives an understanding of the levels of test anxiety among the ESL pre-service teachers, focusing on the level of impact it has on current learning and on future teaching practices. Some of the highlights include a high-test anxiety, language proficiency concerns influenced the participant's choice, and one's own anxiety could inform their philosophy on teaching. The findings of this study have important implications for teaching and learning in ESL settings. And this may suggest that there is a necessity to possibly offer teaching on how to deal with test anxiety to teacher education programs since trainers themselves experience it, and in so doing, prepare pre-service teachers to teach their students on the same issue. Also, the study underlines the necessity of reconsidering the current practices concerning assessment in the context of teacher education, perhaps shifting towards more valid and less high-stakes assessment practices, but at the same time providing teachers with meaningful and rigorous preparation for their future profession.

Implications for practice are to teach strategies for reducing anxiety in teacher education courses, examine existing assessment policies and practices and consider how to alleviate anxious pressure, and possibly offer support programs for ESL student teachers to better address language-related anxieties. From a policy perspective, these findings mean a rethink on the measurement of teacher competence, especially in relation to teachers of English who are non-native speakers. In being able to lessen test anxiety in teacher education programs, one can also be able to relieve pre-service teachers from much stress and difficulty, and at the same time positively impact the learning of students

that will be taught by the pre-service teachers in the future, making the academic atmosphere for learning less stressful and more helpful for students.

Study limitations include the cross-sectional, which means we cannot establish causality, and interviewers' self-selection bias. Another important limitation is that the study relied on cross-sectional data and, therefore, future studies should follow the participants from pre-service teachers to their early career stages to compare the patterns of test anxiety on teaching practices in the long term.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no known conflict of interest.

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