



Test Anxiety Among EFL Undergraduate Students in Translation and ELT Programs: A Comparative Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

Test anxiety can affect students' academic achievement, cognitive functions and emotional states, especially in EFL settings where students are tested on language knowledge and performance in English. The purpose of this study was to examine and contrast the level of test anxiety of English Translation and English Language Teaching undergraduate students at Zand Institute of Higher Education in Shiraz, Iran. The study also aimed to discover the most significant causes of students' test anxiety and how each of these causes was manifested in each academic discipline because of the unique academic demands and assessment procedures of these two programs. To get both quantitative as well as qualitative approaches to this phenomenon, a mixed methods research design was used. The quantitative data was derived from Sarason's Test Anxiety Questionnaire (TAQ) and the qualitative data was gained from semi-structured interviews with students. Descriptive and inferential statistical procedures were utilized to compare the anxiety level between the two groups. Further, thematic analysis was used to reveal a pattern of ideas in the experiences reported by the students. The results showed that test anxiety was a problem in both academic programs, with the degree and sources of test anxiety depending on the type of demands made and the assessment practices. Translation students reported higher levels of anxiety about written accuracy and linguistic precision, while the ELT students' higher levels of anxiety were reported in oral presentations, classroom performance, and teaching demonstrations. The results of the study underscored the field-specific character of test anxiety in Translation as well as English as a Foreign Language programs. It offered implications for how teaching and assessment should be designed to meet the unique academic and performance demands of the various English-related disciplines. The study also provided implications for instructors, curriculum developers, and university administrators seeking to develop supportive, student-centered, and less anxiety-inducing assessment environments.

Keywords: *Test Anxiety, EFL, English Translation Studies, English Language Teaching, Sarason Test Anxiety Questionnaire Mixed-Methods Research.*

1. Introduction

Assessment is a vital part of educational institutions, as it serves as a measure to evaluate and monitor students' learning, skills, and knowledge. But exams are not purely cognitive affairs. Evaluative situations for many students at university are associated with psychological responses like worry, fear of failure, tension, physiological arousal, and concerns about negative evaluation. Test anxiety is one of the most widely studied affective factors in educational psychology, and these reactions are typically conceptualized in this way. Test anxiety can be considered broadly as a type of anxiety that is related to evaluative situations, especially tests, and can manifest itself in cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioral ways (Sarason, 1980; Zeidner, 1998).

The definition of test anxiety has changed significantly in the last few decades. Early work by Mandler and Sarason (1952) laid the groundwork for a relationship between anxiety, learning, and performance, and later, cognitive and affective dimensions of anxiety were differentiated. For instance, Liebert and Morris (1967) identified worry as task-unrelated thoughts or concerns with performance and emotionality as the physiological and affective reactions to evaluative situations. Later, Sarason (1980) made significant contributions to the conceptualization and assessment of test anxiety, drawing a distinction between the intrusive cognitive processes that can interfere with effective performance and the anxiety that has a more prominent affective or emotional component. These theoretical developments have led to the conceptualization of test anxiety as a multifactorial construct, and not as a reflection of students' preparation.

Further, the effects of test anxiety on academic achievement have been reported in many studies. For example, a meta-analysis by Hembree (1988) showed

that test anxiety was significantly linked to a variety of educational outcomes and that academic performance, self-esteem, and other psychological factors were important correlates of test anxiety. In a more recent study, von der Embse et al. (2018) conducted a 30-year meta-analysis of 238 studies and concluded that test anxiety had a negative correlation with a number of educational performance outcomes. They also found that perceived test difficulty and the high stakes associated with tests were associated with higher test anxiety. The results indicated that anxiety should not be considered without taking into account the nature and outcomes of the assessment situation.

The explanation on the relationship between anxiety and performance has been provided by cognitive models of anxiety. Processing Efficiency Theory suggests that anxiety can impair the efficiency of the use of the cognitive resources, in this case, by diverting attentional resources from the task itself towards worrying (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992). Attentional Control Theory also suggests that anxiety may increase the imbalance between the goal-directed and stimulus-driven attentional systems, which can negatively affect attentional control in cognitively challenging tasks (Eysenck et al., 2007). Therefore, while a student may have sufficient academic knowledge, they may struggle to access and recall, organize and apply, this information when under increased stress or anxiety. This point may be especially important when considering language-based assessments, such as language-based tests, in which students have to process language, formulate answers, check accuracy, and govern time simultaneously.

Anxiety and performance are more complicated in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. EFL learners might feel anxious during the academic assessment. Foreign language anxiety has thus been

defined as a foreign language learning-use related situation-specific anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2010). Horwitz et al. (1986) found that three factors, namely communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety formed very closely related aspects of foreign language classroom anxiety. Research has also focused on the role that language anxiety can play in learners' involvement, perceptions of competence and performance in various language-learning tasks (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991).

The difference between general test anxiety and foreign language anxiety is significant. Test anxiety is not only associated with evaluative situations but also foreign language anxiety can happen in formal or informal language-learning settings. However, when EFL learners are asked to perform the language when they are being examined, the two constructs can combine with each other. Phillips (1992), for example, studied the impact of language anxiety on oral test performance and showed the importance of anxiety in language assessment. Likewise, language-processing studies indicated that anxious learners might have problems processing language efficiently when attentional resources were engaged by anxiety-related thoughts (Djigunovic, 2006). This indicated that the evaluation of language learners could be a very complex interaction among academic knowledge, linguistic competence, and affective processes.

Also, students' experience of assessment-related anxiety may also be affected by the type of academic subject being assessed. This is especially true for comparisons with English Translation students and English Language Teaching (ELT) students. Both programs work in the context of English studies but have a significant amount of content in common, but are not exactly the same in terms of academic tasks and assessment practices. Translation students are often expected to produce a product that is linguistically correct, term-by-term accurate, faithful to source texts

and offers an explanatory interpretation of their meaning. ELT students, on the other hand, can experience more communicative and performance-oriented activities such as oral presentation, demonstration in class, micro-teaching, and performance related to teaching. As a result, there may be some evaluative pressure differences between the two programs.

Moreover, the Iranian research evidence is an important basis for the consideration of this disciplinary dimension. Writing anxiety in Iranian university students in English Translation, English Teaching and English Literature was directly compared by Olanezhad (2015). The study employed the English Writing Apprehension Test for 150 students and showed that there were significant differences in writing apprehension between the three groups of students and that the sources of writing apprehension included evaluation, confidence, past educational experiences and a concern with teachers' evaluations. This study is relevant to the present research because they showed that the language-related assessment process may be different across different English-related programs.

Further, one of the more relevant studies in Iran is the comparative study on test anxiety of students of the biological sciences and humanities in a private university conducted by Mahboudi (2019). In the present study it has been revealed that humanities students are more anxious to test than any other students, and that language students are more anxious to test than humanities students. The study offered a much-needed disciplinary insight as it suggested that varying examination structures and perceived objectivity can help to explain students' anxiety. This is especially important for the current research as Mahboudi's study offers a comparative picture to analyze anxiety across academic disciplines and allows for an examination of whether there are meaningful differences within the disciplines of English-related research.

Other Iranian studies have found cognitive, emotional

and sociocultural factors pertaining to test anxiety. For instance, in the study by Heydari et al. (2010), emotional regulation, metacognition, optimism and test anxiety of students were studied. The results presented in the thesis suggest that the relationship between emotional regulation and metacognitive knowledge and debilitating test anxiety are negative, which means that student's capacity to regulate emotions and monitor their cognitive processes may have a protective function. Likewise, Lashkaripour, Bakhshani and Soleimani (2005) investigated test anxiety and academic achievement of students in Zahedan and emphasized the significance of the family expectations and social pressure. The results of these studies are especially relevant when educational outcomes are important to the family and/or social circle of the student. Thus, it appears that test anxiety is not just a personal psychological trait, according to the Iranian literature. It can manifest as a result of a combination of students' thinking, emotional control and management skills, self-assessment of academic skills, evaluation of the configuration of the examination and the social context. The educational importance of examination anxiety was stressed by Biyabangard (2007) who is also reviewed in the present thesis. Previous research conducted in Iran with an intervention focus also indicates that test anxiety is not a fixed characteristic of students and can be modified. Cross-curricular studies in foreign language education have recently confirmed the significance of studying foreign language anxiety in its context. In a systematic review of classroom interventions for foreign language anxiety, Toyama and Yamazaki (2021) studied 40 intervention studies and found that a variety of classroom intervention techniques were employed, such as student–student interaction, student–teacher interaction, self-management, and mood enhancing activities. Their review corroborates the perspective that classroom and instructional environment play a role in the development of foreign language anxiety and that the anxiety can be

shaped by tailored pedagogical strategies. Further, evidence was found that foreign language anxiety was related to cultural individualism–collectivism at the higher-education level with students in more collectivistic contexts reporting higher levels of foreign language anxiety (Toyama and Yamazaki 2022). This is of special importance when anxiety is explored in cultural and institutional settings such as higher education in Iran.

While a significant amount of research has been conducted on test anxiety and foreign language anxiety, there are still some issues that have not been explored. First, while some studies have investigated the anxiety that students experience in broad academic areas, and others have studied writing anxiety within the students of Translation and Teaching of English as a foreign language (TFL), comparatively few studies have investigated test anxiety as a broader construct among students of Translation and ELT students. This distinction is relevant because feelings of writing anxiety do not necessarily imply students' general feeling of anxiety when taking exams. The present study has focused on writing anxiety, while Olanezhad (2015) had done the same but at a different level of investigation, i.e., examining the writing anxiety of the broader groups of disciplines rather than the internal distinction between Translation and ELT as investigated by Mahboudi (2019).

Second, many of the current studies have used only a single point-in-time measure. One assessment point may be helpful to understand students' anxiety level, but it will not give information on the impact of anxiety on students in more important academic assessments. The problem of test anxiety is discussed herein under the assumption of mid-semester and pre-final test anxiety; thus, the test anxiety experiences of Translation and ELT students can be studied throughout the various stages of test. The two-stage methodology is one of the methodological contributions of the thesis identified.

Thirdly, test anxiety may not be fully expressed quantitatively. Anxiety can manifest in students' thoughts, physiological reactions, fear of punishment, disciplinary perceptions, and coping. Qualitative investigation can thus be used in conjunction with standardized measurement, and can give students a chance to express their anxiety in their own words, including causes and effects. In the present study, this dimension is covered by conducting semi-structured interviews that will examine students' cognitive, physiological, disciplinary, and coping experiences. Last but not least, institutional context is another gap. The present thesis was the first study that has been published that studied test anxiety among students of Zand Institute of Higher Education in particular. Therefore, the current study presents institution-specific evidence, but one should not be misled into thinking that it will necessarily be replicated in all settings of higher education within Iran.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine and contrast the test anxiety of the undergraduate English Translation and English Language Teaching students at Zand Institute of Higher Education in Shiraz, Iran. The study is based on a design combining the Sarason Test Anxiety Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to explore both objective aspects of test anxiety and students' subjective feelings of anxiety. The quantitative part examines the differences between test anxiety for the two academic programs and the various assessment conditions, while the qualitative part examines the cognitive, physiological, disciplinary, and coping dimensions of students' test anxiety experiences.

Finally, the study thus aims to add to the body of research that has been conducted on test anxiety as such, and to identify how anxiety might be affected by the nature of subject matter and demands in translating and Assessment for ELT programs. To this end, it is a contribution to a little-explored facet of Iranian EFL higher education and may offer support in making

assessment decisions, supporting students, and designing pedagogical procedures. More generally, the psychology of student anxiety in other subject areas of the English language curriculum might be taken into account when identifying the importance of the psychological and situational contexts within which students are expected to evidence their achievement.

2. Literature review

Test anxiety has been known to educational researchers and researchers in psychology for a long time. It is a constellation of thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and actions that occur when people feel like they are being assessed in testing environments (Sarason, 1980; Zeidner, 1998). Test anxiety is not a simple thing, but rather a group of related aspects that involve too much stress on the test, fear of failure, negative evaluations, intrusive thoughts and physiological reactions.

The concept of test anxiety has its foundations in early work by Mandler and Sarason (1952) on the correlation of anxiety and learning under evaluative conditions. Their research led to the idea that anxiety affects performance by disrupting learning and responding to exams. Later Liebert and Morris (1967) separated test anxiety into two principal parts, worry and emotionality. Worry is primarily cognitive and is related to fear of failure and its potential consequences, while emotionality is physiological and affective (tension, nervousness, heightened arousal etc.).

Sarason (1980) expanded the theory and measures of test anxiety to focus on self-preoccupation and task-irrelevant cognition that occur during test taking. This tradition is coupled with a test anxiety questionnaire (TAQ) which has been used for measuring students' anxiety in evaluative situations. The present study relies on this conceptualization as it allows test anxiety to be investigated as a multidimensional psychological experience, and not just as the anticipation of a test.

Also, there is much literature that has been

investigated and studied about the relationship between test anxiety and academic achievement. In a large meta-analysis, Hembree (1988) examined data that related to the correlates, causes, effects, and treatment of test anxiety. His results showed that there were several psychological and behavioral variables, as well as lower academic performance, that were correlated with test anxiety. The study was to become a foundational study that was to impact future research in the area of the impact of anxiety in educational environments.

Moreover, the relationship between anxiety and performance has then been explained in terms of cognitive-interference theory. The Processing Efficiency Theory of Eysenck and Calvo (1992) offers one explanation: When anxiety interferes with the use of cognitive resources, which are potentially useful for task performance. This places anxious students in the position of knowing and/or worrying about failure or the consequences of failure, as well as being evaluated. As a result, there will be less resources to process exam content. Additionally, this was extended to the idea that anxiety may interfere with the balance of goal-directed attentional processes and stimulus-driven attention (Attentional Control Theory; Eysenck et al., 2007). An anxious learner can therefore get distracted in an examination situation by thoughts such as failure and external thoughts relating to the process of assessment. This theoretical framework is especially significant for the study of language tests, as language tasks may involve the integration of meaning, form, accuracy and formulation.

However, recent studies have questioned the conclusions made about the anxiety–performance relationship, and von der Embse et al. (2018) in a 30-year meta-analytic review found that the anxiety–performance relationship is impacted by numerous factors, both contextual and individual. More recent research has also indicated that the "cognitive impairment" caused by anxiety is not necessarily the

direct cause. For example, after controlling for prior knowledge, test anxiety was found to not predict examination performance (Theobald et al., 2022) which poses very interesting questions regarding the mechanisms linking anxiety and achievement.

Schillinger et al (2021) also rethought the worry as a mediator for the relationship between test anxiety and test performance. The results suggest worry is a significant factor in test anxiety, but that the connection between worry, anxiety, and achievement is not as straightforward as a causal model suggests. The results of such an investigation suggest that test anxiety needs to be investigated on a context-specific basis and not assume that test anxiety affects all learners in the same manner.

Another significant aspect of test anxiety is the environment in which the test is taken. Not every exam is equal! Students might feel somewhat less anxious when they are subject to routine or low-stakes tests, but significantly more anxious when tests are high-stakes for grades, school advancement or graduation.

Also, Jerrim (2022) discussed test anxiety and the high stakes of assessments and stressed the implications of assessment. Likewise, recent scholarship on higher education has focused both on the pros and cons of high-stakes final exams. French et al. (2024), for instance, provided a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of high-stakes final exams and underscored the significance of the role of assessment design on students' learning experiences.

This distinction is of particular importance for the present study since students were assessed at two points: mid-semester assessment and pre-final examination period. These stages can be compared to see if students' anxiety is comparatively stable or if it increases as they progress to more consequential assessments.

Test anxiety becomes more important in foreign language teaching and learning with students who are assessed using a language that can be a source of anxiety

for them. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) systematically conceptualized foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety that is related to foreign language learning. They pointed out three important aspects of the affective aspects of the learners, which are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety in their Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety framework.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) also investigated L2 anxiety and second language acquisition, concluding that L2 anxiety may disrupt L2 learning processes. They subsequently showed that anxiety had been studied with respect to various stages of language learning and processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Also, Horwitz (2010) reviewed the research literature on foreign and second-language anxiety, and stressed the need for conceptual clarity in making the distinction between FLA and SLA. This is important for the present study because there may be some students who feel anxious not just because they are sitting an examination, but because they have to demonstrate competency in English in an examination.

Further, language anxiety-performance correlation has also been recorded in tests. Phillips (1992) was one such researcher who explored the relationship between language anxiety and oral test performance as well as attitudes and showed the importance of anxiety for language assessment. Jiménez Ivars and Pinazo (2001) also investigated the relationship between anxiety and performance of interpreting trainees, demonstrating the importance of anxiety in language performance and professional activities. The results of this study have special significance for Translation students who are likely to be required to perform translation and interpretation tasks of a demanding nature in their academic studies.

Concern about failure, intrusive thoughts, worry, and negative expectations are all considered to be part of the cognitive aspect of test anxiety. These processes can be

competing processes with the cognitive processes needed to perform examination tasks. Theoretically, these effects are explained by the Processing Efficiency Theory (Eysenck and Calvo, 1992), and the Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007). Although, test anxiety also has emotional and physiological components. Students might feel stressed, have a fast heart rate, be sweating, feel restless, struggle to focus or feel extremely uncomfortable with the examination environment. This can make it difficult to compare two students with the same academic qualifications and background in the context of examinations.

Studies in the Iranian context have also emphasized emotional regulation and metacognitive skills. Heydari et al. (2010) investigated emotional regulation, metacognition, optimism and test anxiety, and found that emotional regulation and optimism were correlated with students' anxiety, while metacognition was not related to anxiety. They have concluded that students' skills in controlling emotions and monitoring their thoughts may impact the severity of examination anxiety.

Additionally, in Iran, Lashkaripour et al., (2005) examined the associations between test anxiety and academic achievement and emphasized the importance of family expectations and social pressures. These factors can have a special significance, especially when academic success is linked to the future school and career pathway. Psychological interventions to manage examination anxiety have also been examined in Iran. For instance, Biyabangard (2002) investigated the effectiveness of multimodal therapy, rational-emotive and relaxation on test anxiety of students. Cheragh Cheshma (2007) also studied psychological immunization as a solution to examination anxiety. The results of these studies confirm that test anxiety is an educational and psychological problem that might need a systematic intervention. Khosravi & Bigdeli (2008) also studied the relationship between personality traits and test anxiety among secondary school students,

revealing the importance of the individual differences in students' response to test situations. The authors of these Iranian studies suggest that test anxiety can be interpreted as a function of interaction between cognitive, emotional, personality and sociocultural factors.

The literature tends to assume that the students in universities are a fairly homogeneous population, however, student experiences of assessment may vary by academic discipline. Each program has its own set of academic requirements, means of assessment, and success criteria. Moreover, Mahboudi (2019) made a contribution in this aspect by comparing students of biological sciences and humanities. The study indicated that humanities students' test anxiety was greater than those in other subjects, and especially examined the effects of language-related tests. The results indicate that the type of discipline can affect students' experience of examination anxiety during their university studies. When programs related to English are included, the meaning of the differences in disciplines becomes even more evident. In the case of translation and ELT students, there is a common foundation.

While there is some consistency in the development of English language skills, the academic skills that are stressed in the two programs are not the same. It is generally expected that, as a translation student, you will be accurate in your written and translated texts, make suitable lexical and terminological decisions, interpret the texts and remain faithful to the meaning of the source. Assessment, however, for ELT students can be in the form of oral presentation, class interaction, pedagogical performance such as a teaching demonstration, lesson planning, and other pedagogical performance assessments. Hence, it could be claimed that academic anxiety may have various sources and expressions for both groups as they are all students learning English as a foreign language.

Translation is one of the most difficult modes of

language performance, in which the successful performance demands more than just general language proficiency. Students need to handle both the meaning of the source text and find the equivalents, as well as pay attention to both the lexical level and the register of the source text and the target text, and write the target text in a way that meets the requirements.

Moreover, directly examining students' anxiety in different programs in Iran, Olanezhad (2015) investigated the difference between writing anxiety of students majoring in English Translation, English Language Teaching, and English Literature. The study revealed that there were differences among the groups, and showed that the disciplinary demands were relevant to students' anxiety related to writing. The study conducted by Olanezhad (2015) is important as it has indicated that the Translation students could be experiencing some anxiety with regard to linguistic precision and evaluation. Writing anxiety is conceptually more limited than general test anxiety, however. Thus, additional research is required to establish if there are differences in discipline in writing that also extend beyond the context of a broader examination.

Moreover, research into gap analysis regarding interpreting trainees further backs up the need to take the unique requirements of translation related education into account. Jiménez Ivars and Pinazo (2001) studied anxiety and performance in interpreting trainees and found that it is possible that nervousness will be intricately linked to performance in challenging language-mediated activities. These findings suggest that translation and interpreting can bring about unique psychological pressures.

Also, the situation of academic pressure can be different for ELT students since their program includes the development and demonstration of teaching competence in addition to the knowledge of the language. The assessment may include but not be

restricted to the following: Conventional written exams, oral presentation, classroom activity, teaching demonstration, micro teaching. So, these types of evaluation could be through direct observation and immediate evaluation by the instructor and peers. Thus, concerns about teaching performance and communication apprehension, along with the fear of negative evaluation, may be especially relevant. Horwitz et al. (1986) found fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension to be major components of foreign language classroom anxiety, and Phillips (1992) showed the importance of anxiety in oral language assessment. Hence, ELT students' academic anxiety can be a mixture of the traditional test anxiety and language anxiety associated with performance. This gives a compelling reason for not treating all English-major students as a homogeneous group, but instead comparing ELT students with Translation students.

In addition, the study of test anxiety in the Iranian context is especially important due to the fact that English is a key language in professional development and education in university and assessment serves as an important tool for academic advancement.

Also, there have been some studies on various aspects of test and language anxiety in the past in Iran. Biyabangard (2002, 2007) explored the educational implications of examinee, as well as intervention methods. Moreover, Cheragh Cheshma (2007) investigated the effect of psychological immunization on decreasing examination anxiety. Khosravi and Bigdeli (2008) explored personality characteristics and test anxiety, and Heydari et al. (2010) looked at four factors of emotional regulation, metacognition, optimism and anxiety. Lashkaripour et al. (2005) studied the relationship between test anxiety and academic achievement of students in Iran's educational context and Olanezhad (2015) studied writing anxiety among various university majors in the field of English. Mahboudi (2019) then broadened the comparison by

looking at the differences between students in the humanities and students in the biological sciences.

While these studies collectively offer valuable evidence, none has been able to cover all aspects of the comparison between undergraduate Translation students and ELT students in relation to general test anxiety. In this regard, some studies usually address either general discipline groups, writing anxiety or psychological variables or intervention methods. However, the question of how test anxiety manifests for students in the Translation and ELT program and whether there are varying degrees and forms of test anxiety in this population is still under-researched.

A growing body of research in recent years has focused on the multi-dimensional and contextuality of anxiety. Aydin et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study of test anxiety in the context of foreign language learning and showed that test anxiety experiences of foreign language learners have cognitive, emotional, behavioral and physiological aspects. It is important that this type of qualitative evidence is included as numerical scores do not adequately reflect students' perceptions and experiences of examination pressure. Additionally, Botes, Dewaele and Greiff (2020) compiled the literature on foreign language classroom anxiety and academic achievement and added more evidence for the importance of affective factors for language learning achievement. Recent meta-analyses also have established the impact of foreign language anxiety on language performance, with the degree of impact depending on the context and methodology. Also, Toyama and Yamazaki (2021) reviewed classroom interventions to address foreign language anxiety, and showed pedagogical and classroom-based approaches can address anxiety. This literature moves beyond mere identification of anxious learners to the understanding of how educational environments can decrease unnecessary anxieties.

Widely, there have been studies that have increased

investigation of anxiety in online and alternative assessment contexts. For instance, Dikmen (2023) studied test anxiety in online assessments and highlighted the significance of the format of the assessment in the understanding of test anxiety. Similarly, Jirjees et al. (2024) investigated test anxiety and coping strategies among students at the university level and pointed out the importance of coping strategies in students' reactions to the pressure of the test. The present research developments indicate that the study of test anxiety in today's context needs to be explored from several angles such as the assessment conditions, academic discipline, cognitive aspects, emotional control, coping strategies etc.

Based on the literature reviewed above, there are several gaps that are observed. First, the phenomenon of test anxiety has received a great deal of research, but little research has been conducted on differences between English Translation students and ELT students as two separate academic populations. Olanezhad (2015) examined writing anxiety among English-related majors only, and Mahboudi (2019) compared the level of writing anxiety in broad academic field.

Both studies do not directly discuss the general construct of test anxiety for students in the field of Translation and ELT in various examination situations. Secondly, most of the past research has focused on just a single point in time. Such designs cannot give much information about whether anxiety varies with students from one academic assessment to another. Over to more significant tests. Thus, the present study is an attempt to take both the mid-semester and pre-final assessment condition into consideration.

Thirdly, the anxiety experienced by students might not be fully captured by quantitative measure. In the present study this limitation has been overcome by combining the standardized questionnaire with semi-structured interviews. This mixed methods approach can be used to supplement students' descriptions of their cognitive

reactions, physiological symptoms, disciplinary pressures, and coping strategies with numerical differences.

The last thing is that there is no evidence that is institution-specific about test anxiety of students in the Zand Institute of Higher Education. The study is thus concerned to offer contextually relevant evidence, where no generalizations are made outside the population surveyed. To sum up, the literature reviewed shows that test anxiety can be viewed as a multidimensional, context-specific phenomenon. How anxiety is felt can vary depending on the academic discipline, the importance of the assessment, the language demands, the psychological resources and the coping strategies of the students. To extend previous studies, the present study aims to compare the quantitative and qualitative aspects of students' test anxiety in order to get a more differentiated view of the phenomenon in Iranian higher education in the field of English language teaching.

3. Research objectives

The first aim of the present study is to explore and compare the level of test anxiety of the undergraduate students of English Translation and English Language Teaching (ELT) in Zand Institute of Higher Education, Shiraz, Iran. Specifically, it is hoped that the study will find out if there is a difference between the test anxiety of students in these two academic disciplines in different assessment situations, especially in mid-semester and pre-final exams. Apart from this, the study aims at determining the most important cognitive, emotional, physiological and disciplinary factors that affect students' test anxiety experience and how students perceive and cope with test anxiety pressure. The purpose of the study is to gain an overall view of similarities and differences between the students of translation and ELT by examining quantitative and qualitative data of test anxiety. In the end, the study aims to make a contribution to the current research on test anxiety in the field of EFL higher education by

discussing the possible influence of academic discipline and assessment situation on students' test anxiety. The results will also have implications for university educators and managers in the development of assessment and student support policies and procedures that can help alleviate exam stress and enhance learning outcomes.

3.1 Research questions and hypotheses

The present study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the primary factors contributing to test anxiety among undergraduate students in Translation and ELT, and how do they influence their academic performance?

RQ2. Is there any significant difference between the level of test anxiety in undergraduate students of Translation and ELT?

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H0. There is no significant level of test anxiety of undergraduate students taking English major at the Zand Institute of Higher Education.

H1. There is a high level of test anxiety of undergraduate students taking English major at the Zand Institute of Higher Education.

H2. There is low level of test anxiety of undergraduate students taking English major at the Zand Institute of Higher Education.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods research design where quantitative and qualitative methods were combined with quantitative analysis conducted first and followed by qualitative study to give more in-depth understanding of the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative study was descriptive-comparative while the qualitative component was exploratory.

4.2 Participants

The study population comprised 100 final year (eighth semester) students (50 Translation students and 50 ELT students) at Zand Institute of Higher Education Shiraz Iran, in academic year 2025-2026. Final year students were purposefully selected because they were at greatest stress due to the academic commitments and challenges of the last year of studies and had adopted disciplinary identities. Equal number of participants were selected for each group to maximize statistical power for independent samples comparison. From the target population a subsample of ten students (five from each academic specialization) were selected for in-depth qualitative interview from the three levels of anxiety severity namely; mild, moderate and severe.

4.3 Instruments

4.3.1. Questionnaire

The quantitative component of the study utilized Sarason's Test Anxiety Questionnaire (TAQ; Sarason, 1957) as the research instrument. TAQ contained thirty-seven

(37) dichotomous items (Yes/No) with scores ranging from 0 to 37. The cut-off scores were determined as mild anxiety (≤ 12), moderate anxiety (13-20), and severe anxiety (≥ 21).

4.3.2. Interview Protocol

The qualitative component comprised of semi-structured interview with ten (10) questions with three domains namely; descriptions of symptoms, performance relevance and coping strategies. The interviews were conducted after obtaining informed consents from the participants and lasted 20-35 minutes each with recordings on audio.

4.4 Procedure

The TAQ questionnaire was administered two times; the first time during mid-semester (weeks 8-9), referred to as low stakes and the second time was a day before final examinations

(high stakes). Upon completion of final examinations, a semi-structured interview was conducted among the subsample of participants and their verbatim transcripts were analyzed thematically.

4.5 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Product for Social Sciences (SPSS). First descriptive statistics for the entire sample were generated and means compared. Reliability of the instrument was evaluated using Cronbach’s Alpha. Independent Samples t-Tests were performed to compare the differences of the means of the two independent samples at a time point and Paired Samples t-Tests were conducted to determine the within group differences. The qualitative data were analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis procedure which followed open coding, axial coding and selective coding stages.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The participants provided informed consents to participate in the study and questionnaires were administered and collected confidentially. The interview transcripts were anonymized and stored in a password protected computer. The participants were also provided with contact information of the researcher for further information and were requested to provide feedback on the results of the study.

5. Results

5.1 Instrument reliability

Before proceeding to test hypotheses, an item analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the TAQ. The Cronbach’s Alpha value for the 37 items TAQ composite is $\alpha = .88$, which confirms good reliability of the instrument.

5.2 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for the TAQ scores for both

groups are provided in Table 1 below. Both groups’ means increased from the mid-semester to the pre-final condition, and ELT students’ scores were consistently higher than those of Translation students at all measurement points.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of TAQ Scores by Group and Time.*

Group	Time	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Translation	Mid-Semester	12.86	4.12	5	24	50
Translation	Pre-Final Exam	17.52	5.89	8	33	50
ELT	Mid-Semester	14.34	4.90	6	29	50
ELT	Pre-Final Exam	21.60	6.75	11	37	50

The ELT group's mean pre-final score (M = 21.60) falls into the Severe Anxiety category (≥ 21), while the Translation group's pre-final mean (M = 17.52) remains in the Moderate range. Figure 1 below illustrates these differences visually, with the dashed horizontal lines marking the thresholds between anxiety categories.

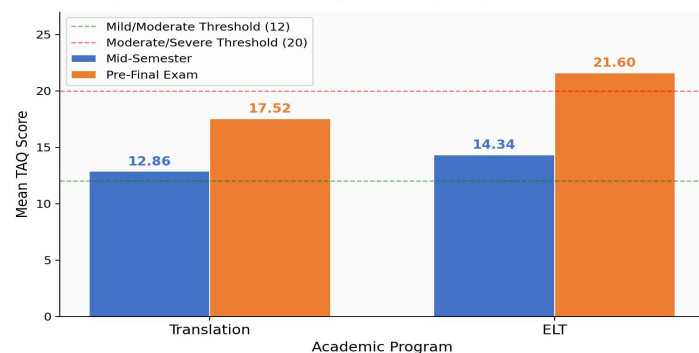


Figure 1. Mean Test Anxiety (TAQ) Scores by Program and Time Point. Dashed lines indicate Mild/Moderate threshold (score = 12) and Moderate/Severe threshold (score = 20).

Table 2. *Frequency Distribution of Anxiety Levels — Pre-Final Exam Condition.*

Anxiety Level	Score Range	Translation (N=50)	ELT (N=50)	Total (N=100)
Mild	≤ 12	16 (32%)	7 (14%)	23 (23%)
Moderate	13–20	23 (46%)	17 (34%)	40 (40%)
Severe	≥ 21	11 (22%)	26 (52%)	37 (37%)

The frequency data underscore the disparity in severe anxiety rates: 52% of ELT students registered Severe Anxiety during the pre-final period compared to 22% of Translation students, while 32% of Translation students fell into the Mild Anxiety category versus only 14% of ELT students.

5.3 Inferential Statistics

5.3.1 Baseline Comparison (Mid-Semester)

An independent samples t-test found no significant difference between groups at mid-semester (Table 3), indicating comparable trait-like baseline anxiety dispositions when evaluative pressure is low.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test — Mid-Semester Condition.

Group	M	SD	Mean Diff.	t	df	p	Result
Translation	12.86	4.12	-1.48	-1.60	98	.113	Not Sig.
ELT	14.34	4.90					

The non-significant result ($t(98) = -1.60, p = .113$) confirms that the two programs share similar general anxiety levels during low-stakes academic periods.

5.3.2 High-Stakes Comparison (Pre-Final Exam)

A second independent samples t-test comparing the two groups immediately prior to final examinations yielded a statistically significant result (Table 4), constituting the study's central finding.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-Test — Pre-Final Exam Condition.

Group	M	SD	Mean Diff.	t	df	p	Result
Translation	17.52	5.89	-4.08	-3.45	98	.001**	Sig.
ELT	21.60	6.75					

ELT students experienced significantly higher test anxiety than Translation students under high-stakes conditions ($t(98) = -3.45, p = .001$), with a mean difference of 4.08 points.

5.3.3 Within-Group Change Across Time Points

Paired samples t-tests confirmed statistically significant anxiety increases for both groups approaching final examinations (Table 5). The magnitude of increase was substantially greater for ELT students (Mean Difference = 7.26) than Translation students (Mean Difference = 4.66).

Table 5. Paired Samples t-Tests — Within-Group Change Across Time Points.

Group	Time Comparison	Mean Diff.	SE	t	df	p
Translation	Pre-final vs. Mid-sem.	4.66	0.575	8.10	49	<.001
ELT	Pre-final vs. Mid-sem.	7.26	0.691	10.50	49	<.001

5.4 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

Thematic content analysis of interview transcripts yielded three overarching themes providing contextual depth for the quantitative results.

Theme 1: The Dual Manifestation of Anxiety

All participants described anxiety in terms mapping closely onto Sarason's (1980) two-factor model. Students reporting higher anxiety—predominantly from the ELT group—described intense physiological arousal (racing heart, sweating, chest tightness) and cognitive interference (inability to retrieve information despite adequate preparation). Students with lower or moderate anxiety more frequently described their pre-examination

tension as motivationally useful rather than debilitating.

Theme 2: Disciplinary Assessment Pressures

ELT students consistently identified the live, public character of performance-based assessments—particularly oral examinations and micro-teaching—as a primary anxiety amplifier. The irreversibility of spoken performance and absence of revision opportunity were experienced as sources of acute pressure. Translation students described a qualitatively different relationship with their examinations: written format allowed internal revision and self-monitoring, and the primary stressor was cognitive precision rather than performative exposure.

Theme 3: Coping Strategies and Social Support

Students who employed active cognitive coping—visualization, positive self-affirmation, systematic time management—generally reported lower and less disruptive anxiety. Social support from peer study groups and family emerged as a meaningful protective factor across both groups, reducing feelings of isolation and normalizing the shared experience of examination pressure

6. Discussion

Similarity of Baseline Anxiety Levels: The non-significant finding of the baseline comparison ($p = .113$) suggests that Translation and ELT students possess similar levels of dispositional vulnerability to test anxiety. The results concur with Sarason's (1980) Trait-State model, wherein trait anxiety is an integral element in learners' overall anxiety irrespective of their disciplinary enrolments. Both groups of students were classified into Moderate Anxiety at mid-semester, which resonates with the general tendency of Iranian EFL learners' reported anxieties in the anxiety literature (Biyabangard, 2007; Mahboudi, 2019).

Divergence Under High-Stakes Conditions: The significant finding of the inter-group comparison under high-stakes conditions ($p = .001$) constitutes the main

contribution of the present study. The mean pre-final score of the ELT group breached the cut-off point for Severe Anxiety, whereas the counterpart students remained in Moderate Anxiety. The qualitative descriptions explicate that ELT assessment practice encapsulates the key constituents of high-threat examinations, namely, public performance and irreversible performance. Such assessments are known to trigger the maximum state of anxiety among learners (Jimenez et al., 2001; Phillips, 1992). In contrast to oral assessments, translation assessments permit continuous evaluative self-monitoring and self-correction during the performance; therefore, posing less threat to the learners' self-esteem.

Theoretical Implications

The findings in this research bear a number of implications. The results corroborate Sarason's (1980) Trait-State model as participants displayed comparable levels of trait anxiety. Simultaneously, the results concur with Eysenck's (2007) Attentional Control Theory as both groups of participants described cognitive interference during high-stakes examinations. In addition, the study adds empirical credibility to Horwitz et al.'s (1986) construct of Foreign Language Anxiety by delineating the role of assessment genres in heightening language learners' state anxiety levels. The ELT program instructors should consider providing multiple low-stakes speaking assessments throughout the semester to acclimatize students with the evaluative conditions and minimize the novelty of the high-stakes speaking assessment. A brief psychoeducational module on cognitive restructuring and relaxation techniques would be beneficial, particularly for ELT students, prior to any high-stakes examination. Counseling services and peer support groups should be readily available to both groups of students in the pre-examination period. Translation instructors, on the other hand, should be mindful of the anxiety-provoking potential of high-accuracy assessments, particularly when assessing

specialized or technical texts.

7. Conclusion

This study was the first of its kind to compare the test anxiety levels of the English undergraduate students enrolling in the Translation and ELT programs at an Iranian university. The sequential explanatory mixed-method design elucidated that although both groups of students displayed comparable levels of dispositional anxiety, the ELT students experience significantly heightened test anxiety under high-stakes examination conditions.

This discrepancy was primarily attributed to the unique assessment practices of the ELT program, which incorporates oral assessments conducted under public and irreversible conditions. Thus, it may be concluded

that test anxiety is contingent upon students' trait anxiety, their disciplinary affiliation and the corresponding assessment practices, as well as the coping mechanisms utilized in response to the threatening examination environment.

Future studies are recommended to adopt the same design to investigate the test anxiety among Iranian EFL learners across multiple institutes and at different academic levels. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to ascertain the stability of test anxiety across semesters. Furthermore, future research should focus on delineating the efficacy of specific interventions and resources in diminishing the test anxiety among EFL learners. In particular, the impact of multiple speaking assessments on ELT students' test anxiety levels should be investigated.

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