

Test Anxiety in Pre-service English Teachers at Universidad Técnica del Norte

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ABSTRACT

This research was aimed to describe test anxiety experienced by English Major students from Universidad Técnica del Norte. This study was conducted during the academic period of October 2021 – February 2022. It applied a qualitative approach whose main instrument was the Westside Test Anxiety Scale to gather the required data to identify the anxiety levels experienced during English tests. For this purpose, 250 students were the participants, the whole population of the undergraduate English program. The data was collected using an online questionnaire. The main findings evidence that anxiety before a test ranges between Moderate and High, regardless of the level, which disregard the incidence of age. Besides the existing anxiety before tests, the anxiety levels evidenced during and after them, report to be High and Extremely High for students. In conclusion, teachers must be trained in strategies to teach students how to cope appropriately with test anxiety. Therefore, pre-service English teachers were selected as the target population for this study.

Keywords: Test Anxiety, Anxiety Scale, Pre-Service English Teachers, Strategies

Ansiedad durante Pruebas en Futuros Profesores de Inglés de la Universidad Técnica del Norte

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo de investigación tuvo como objetivo describir la ansiedad ante las pruebas que experimentan los estudiantes de la carrera de Inglés de la Universidad Técnica del Norte. Este estudio se realizó durante el período académico octubre 2021 – febrero 2022. Se aplicó un enfoque cualitativo cuyo principal instrumento fue la Westside Test Anxiety Scale para recopilar los datos requeridos con el objetivo de identificar los niveles de ansiedad experimentados durante las pruebas de inglés. Con este propósito, 250 estudiantes fueron los participantes, que es toda la población del programa de inglés. Los datos se recogieron por medio de un cuestionario en línea. Los principales hallazgos evidencian que la ansiedad ante un examen oscila entre Moderada y Alta, independientemente del nivel, aspecto que descarta la incidencia de la edad en la ansiedad. Además de la ansiedad existente antes de las pruebas, los niveles de ansiedad evidenciados durante y después reportan ser Alto y Extremadamente Alto para los estudiantes. Como conclusión, los profesores deben estar capacitados en estrategias para enseñar a los estudiantes cómo manejar adecuadamente la ansiedad ante los exámenes, por esta razón, los futuros profesores de inglés fueron seleccionados como la población meta de este estudio.

Palabras clave: Ansiedad Ante Los Exámenes, Escala De Ansiedad, Profesores De Inglés En Formación, Estrategias

INTRODUCTION

Dealing with tests may trigger various feelings and emotions that interfere with learners' skills to demonstrate how much they have learned. The scenario becomes even more complex when learners are tested in a foreign language. Aydin et al. (2020) remark that test anxiety significantly affects learning a foreign language; therefore, more research is necessary on this issue because there is no consensus yet on language proficiency and test anxiety. This is a still debatable issue that started in the 1950s, when test anxiety was identified as an academic phenomenon first recognized as independent of general anxiety, leading from that time to another field of research (Buck, 2017).

It is relevant to highlight that foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been studied since the early 1970s. It has emerged as a significant affective element impacting second/foreign language (SL/FL) learning results. Numerous empirical studies on FLA in acquiring different SL/FL abilities have shown that fear negatively impairs language learning outcomes (Meihua & Xiangming, 2019). Then in the late 1980s, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) noted that test anxiety goes beyond physical demonstrations because it evidenced adverse incidence in the cognitive performance of

learners. In this vein, Gkonou (2020) asserts that language classrooms are inherently stressful, and higher anxiety levels are likely to appear, consequently debilitating and affecting language academic performance (Stephenson, 2006).

Aydin (2009) suggests that pre-service and in-service education programs train on the methods or strategies to appropriately cope with test anxiety because evidence from some studies has revealed that test anxiety considerably affects students' performance and achievement regarding language skills. Regarding academic performance, Tambaya (2019) refers to the importance of time management strategies to reduce test anxiety because learners' reactions to such a demanding task range from discomfort (physical) to anxiety (affective) and even cause a temporary inability to remember (cognitive) what they already know.

Evaluation and testing are integral to any educational program, particularly in the EFL context. Testing reveals the benefits and drawbacks of strategies, resources, tools, personnel, and the test itself. Every test or testing session in EFL contexts may be affected by various factors, including test takers' attitudes toward the second language and second culture and the anxiety that the exam session and its different components may produce for them. Therefore, this research aims to determine the anxiety levels experienced by the English Major students at Universidad Técnica del Norte when dealing with tests.

Review of Literature

Although there is an increased awareness that the foreign language class is a space in which a diversity of emotions interacts, the affective sphere has been ignored in applied linguistics (Dörnyei, 2009). Previous experiences, relevance attributed to the study of the Second Language (L2), feelings associated with this learning, implicit feelings of exposure, and even discreditation with language classmates at being corrected, constitute aspects that, to

a greater or lesser extent, affect the quality of the learning outcomes.

Only a few years ago, university students in Ecuador were required to learn a foreign language as a requirement for graduation without any mention of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001). This requirement does not apply to undergraduates majoring in language pedagogy because they must finish with a grade of at least a B2. The B1 is now a requirement for graduation for all majors, according to recently adopted regulations. Every semester, however, placement exams reveal that most students in this province who are set to begin a university degree have evolved below B1 of the CEFR and that the lowest performance scores correspond to productive skills. One is admitted to the English Major program without further language study. However, from the start of a student's academic program at the University, most disciplines are taught in English (Universidad Técnica del Norte, 2022).

In this new context, future English teachers attempt to integrate new knowledge while also learning a foreign language, in this case, English, at a higher level than often advised. Furthermore, they must deal with different tests from the beginning of their study program without a solid command of the foreign language. Understanding the relationships between anxiety and tests is particularly important when training foreign language teachers. This will help them develop the skills to effectively manage the emotion-learning interactions that unavoidably occur in their periodic test-taking, as asserted by Aydin (2009).

Aydin et al. (2020) claim that physical, exam-related, and emotional issues are all experienced by EFL learners. In other words, students with test anxiety, eating, and sleeping disorders perform poorly on exams, lose focus while taking tests, worry about failing, struggle to handle tests, and have trouble recalling answers. Additionally, they stop being motivated and

self-assured. However, Putwain and Daly (2014) mention the implications of gender differences in test anxiety prevalence. Their study outcomes revealed that female students reported a higher level of anxiety than male students. In this line, Denizli (2004) presents relevant findings of a study where test anxiety is examined concerning age, gender, socioeconomic status, and even parental attitudes where all the variables proved to have an incident, except by age.

A similar study carried out in 2018 by Zheng and Cheng described that most students did not perceive themselves as extremely worried in their university settings, either in English courses or in English test scenarios. These learners also believed that they were skilled test-takers and experienced test-takers. They did, however, show concern about speaking in oral English, particularly in the classroom, which is consistent with earlier studies on the impact of students' anxiety on oral test performance (Hewitt & Stephenson 2012; Phillips 1992). This research revealed that students with higher levels of language anxiety typically performed worse on the test than their less worried peers.

According to some studies, language learners have evidenced not only anxiety during the test but before and post examinations (Aydin et al., 2020; Gkonou, 2020; Azimi, 2016; Gursoy & Arman, 2016), therefore, this is an academic topic in the languages field that still demands further research. Cakici (2016) demonstrates that students who are more worried when learning a foreign language tend to perform significantly worse than those who are less anxious. Consequently, it is strongly advised that EFL teachers establish efficient anxiety reduction strategies to deal with anxiety-provoking circumstances. This, aligned with Tambaya's (2019) suggestion of teaching students about strategies to deal appropriately with test anxiety, being time management during test taking as an alternative to decrease the students' anxiety level.

It is pivotal to highlight that students with high levels of self-efficacy set higher goals, anticipate better outcomes, are less anxious during tests, and do better on exams. The findings suggest that learners with high motivation for success are less likely to quit when faced with challenges. Students with substantial levels of self-efficacy also do well while solving difficulties (Titrek et al., 2018). A sense of self-efficacy can be built by introducing tasks challenging enough for the learners' current skill development, thus, self-efficacy might be influential in the anxiety level students experience during different language learning stages but specifically while taking tests.

Anxiety, based on the aforementioned, is connected to emotional factors which have incidence on cognitive processes. In this line, Yang and Wang (2022) state a correlation between academic resilience and academic success, being mental resilience a dynamic process in which a person demonstrates positive adaptability or the ability to preserve and restore their mental health and balance through difficult and unpleasant circumstances, using their skills and readily available support systems. The ability to endure stress is especially beneficial in high-stress situations, such as before or during tests (Sakka et al., 2020). Then, social support—which includes peer, community, school, and family support—is crucial for academic resilience and can lead to academic success. Therefore, teachers must build an environment where students feel safe to make mistakes, self-correct, and be open to receiving feedback; relevant aspects to be considered before, during and after test-taking.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted at Universidad Técnica del Norte, an accredited public Ecuadorian university in Ibarra, with around 14,000 students. The target population was English major students

who were pre-service English teachers. This study was descriptive and applied the qualitative method. This method is basically oriented to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions which is the underpinning purpose of this study. The information to be gathered was aimed at answering the research question: What are the anxiety levels experienced by English Major students at Universidad Técnica del Norte when dealing with tests? To this effect, an online questionnaire was created in Microsoft Forms, which contained nine questions based on a scale, the main instrument, detailed below. This scale has been validated by experts in the languages and linguistics teaching field and applied in some other research works by Aliakbari and Gheitasi (2017), Tugan (2015), Behnam, Jenami and Ahahgari (2014), Revina, Marslin, and Sheeba (2014), among others.

Participants

The target population consisted of all the English major students who were part of the Pedagogy Program for Teaching English at the Faculty of Education, Science, and Technology from Universidad Técnica del Norte, Ecuador during the academic semester October 2021 – February 2022. The whole number of participants was two hundred fifty students from the first to eighth English Major levels, as detailed below in Table 1.

Table 1
English Major students participating in the study per level

Academic period	Level	Number of students
October 2021-February 2022	First	37
	Second	34
	Third	25
	Fourth	29
	Fifth	35
	Sixth	33
	Seventh	36
	Eight	21

These English major students who are pre-service English teachers range from A1 up to B2, international standards aligned to the Common European Framework

of Reference (CEFR) for languages, regarding their English language proficiency level. The undergraduate English major students were informed about this study, and their participation consent was received before the questionnaire application. It is pivotal to clarify that the English major participation was voluntary.

INSTRUMENTS

This study applied only one instrument for data collection. The Anxiety Scale developed by Westside Test (WTAS: Driscoll, 2007) was used as the primary research instrument. The WTAS consists of 10 items, each of which is graded on a Likert scale from “very, always true” to “not at all, never true” by the participants; however, the tenth-question scale was not applied to the effect of responding to the research question in this specific Ecuadorian EFL context. Then, the WTAS scale used was made of nine questions. The first five items tested Incapacity (memory loss and poor cognitive processing), and the last four measured Worry and dread (i.e., catastrophizing), which interferes with focus, producing an overall anxiety score that evaluates anxiety impairments.

Procedure

Once the questionnaire was elaborated, a pilot test was applied to minimize

the bias of the results and report valid findings. The participants received the link to the questionnaire and responded online. Afterward, the Westside Test Anxiety Scale responses were analyzed descriptively based on the scoring methodology for the WTAS. Data was used to drawing this study’s main conclusions about test anxiety in English major students within the Ecuadorian context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results evidence that the anxiety students experience before a test generally ranges between Moderately, Highly, and Extremely accurate. Consequently, fear is evident in significant English students from the first to the eighth level. It is relevant to point out that the percentage of anxiety is present in students regardless of the story; for instance, the first level revealed 35% and seventh-level students 36,10% in Highly True. Thus, if the most experienced learners become, the anxiety level may decrease disregarded. This aligns with Azimi (2016), who asserts that people often experience worry or fear before confronting a challenge such as a test. However, anxiety is considered a problem when the symptoms interfere with a person’s sleep and concentration.

Figure 1

Q1. The closer I am to a major test, the harder it is for me to concentrate on the material



Source: The authors

Azimi (2016) asserts that anxiety becomes a problem when it causes mental or physical difficulties. Thus, English majors are aware that instead of entirely concentrating on studying, they burn out their energy by worrying beforehand about

forgetting the contents. The results show a proportion significantly higher of participants from all the levels that assert this statement is true for them, as depicted in Figure 2, where the two highest percentages lie on 33,17% of students from all levels

Figure 2

Q2. When I study, I worry that I will not remember the material on the test



Source: The authors

who affirm as Highly True and 32,38% as Extremely True.

Results from Figure 2 illustrate that English learners are aware of their anticipated failure feeling. Hence, those results might be connected to the findings of Figure 3 because, during the tests, they think they are doing poorly with a sense of failure as Moderately True in an overall percentage of 28,22 % while Highly True

25,96%, both imply the highest proportion of participants. The high rates are indistinctively spread along the different levels, so age incidence is disregarded to influence anxiety. This aligned with Denizli (2004), who refers to a study where test anxiety is examined of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and parental attitudes; all variables were significantly related to the anxiety level of students except the age variable.

Figure 3

Q3. During necessary tests, I think that I am doing awful or that I may fail



Source: The authors

Tambaya (2019) highlights, as a central conclusion of his study, the positive correlation between examination anxiety and time management. To lose focus and be unable to remember material being studied for the test is Moderately True with 33,43% in an overall percentage for all the participants, followed by Highly True 24,32%. It evidences to be in the middle line with a frequency of sometimes. Since Figure 4 depicts a tendency for a Moderately True answer, aspects such as time

management may influence positively or negatively students' concentration because it might provide a sense of control in knowing how to assign time for a certain number of questions, leaving aside some moment to review, rethink, and correct answers. If students manage time appropriately, their stress levels may be lower, and concentration is less likely to be affected by concern about unexpected time issues.

Figure 4
 Q4. I lose focus on actual tests and need help remembering material I knew before the test

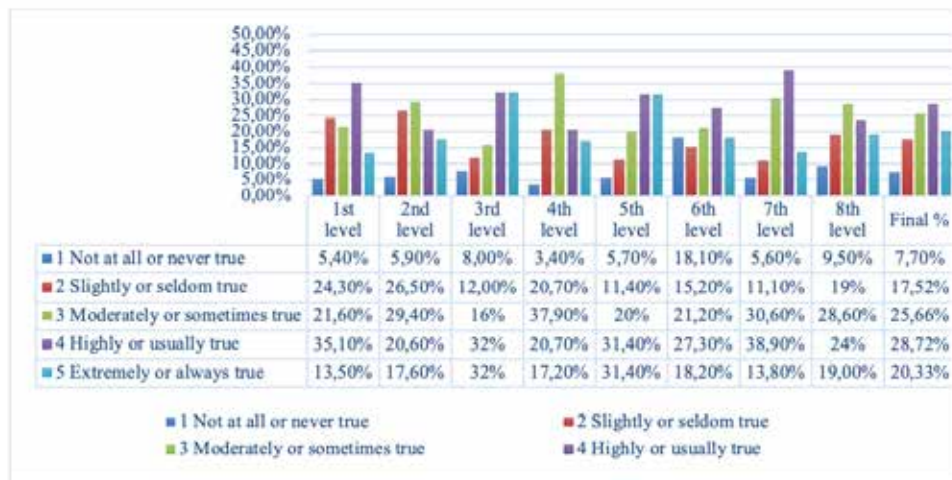


Source: The authors

After determining that students sometimes cannot remember the material they studied before the test, Figure 5 depicts that remembering the tests answers after they are already over is Highly True in significant English students with 28,72%, followed by Moderately True 25,66% and Extremely True 20,33%; three highest percentages that indicate negative

implications of anxiety regarding academic performance, particularly in tests. In this vein, Aydin et al. (2020), among the relevant conclusions presented from a study on Test Anxiety among Foreign Language Learners, highlight that due to test anxiety, students experience difficulties in test management and in remembering answers during the test.

Figure 5
 Q5. I finally remember the answer to the test after the test is over before the test

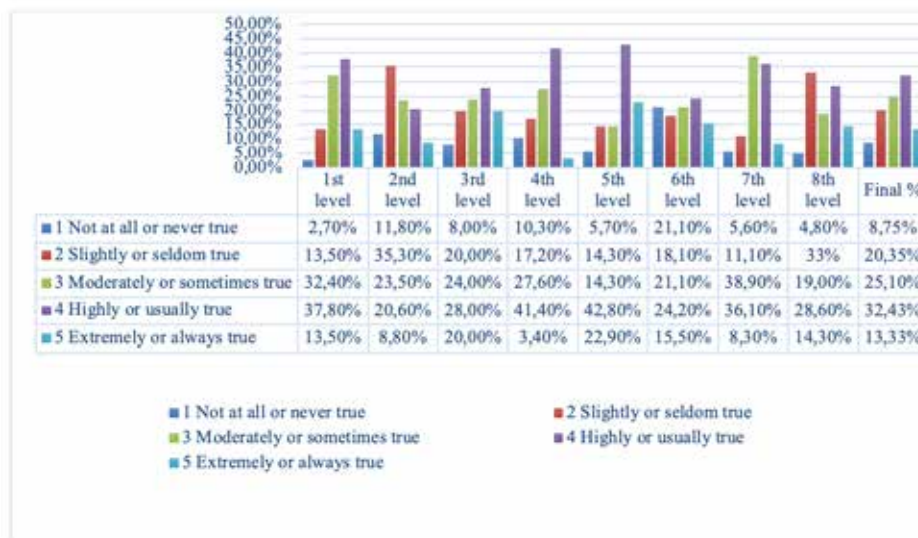


Source: The authors

Throughout the Test Anxiety Scale analysis, Question 6 is the first that evidence a Slightly True result within the highest three percentages of the scale. Thus, participants presented 20,35% as Slightly True, 25,11% as Moderately True, and 32,43% as Highly True who assert that they worry so much before a test that they are worn out to invest more energy in the trial. Then, test anxiety goes beyond

feelings and physical demonstrations because its implications also affect cognitive aspects. Hence, this research results align with the cornerstone study on Foreign Languages by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who noted how learners experienced apprehension, worry, dread, difficulty concentrating, becoming forgetful, going blank, sweat, and palpitations.

Figure 6
 Q6. I worry so much before a significant test that I am too worn out to do my best on the test before the test

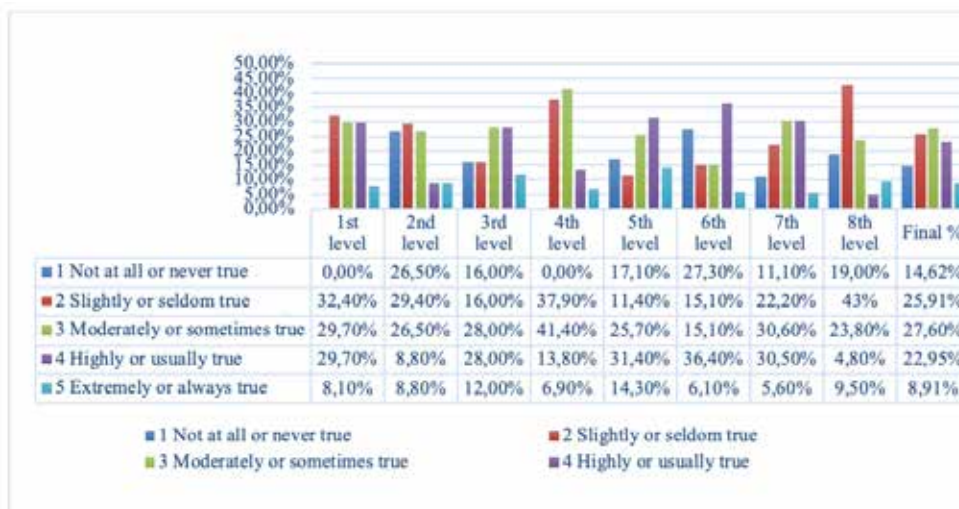


Source: The authors

When taking an important test and not feeling oneself showed the highest percentage of Moderately True responses in a proportion of 27,60%, the second with Slightly True 25,91%, and the less with Highly True 22,95%. The majority of English major still accepts this statement,

a fact that might be due to, as Gkonou (2020) emphasizes, language classrooms are per se stressful with high levels of anxiety, which based on studies, has an adverse incidence on academic performance (Aydin et al., 2020; Cakici, 2016; Hewitt & Stephenson 2012; Stephenson, 2006).

Figure 7
Q7. I feel out of sorts or not myself when I take required tests

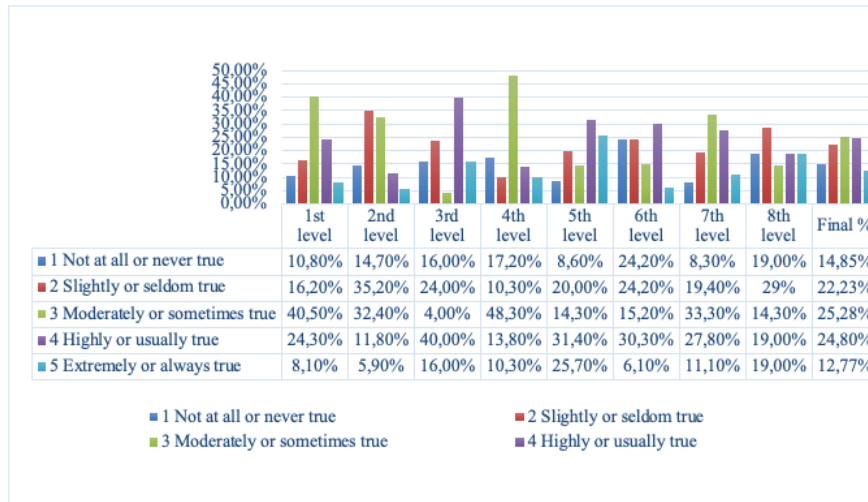


Source: The authors

Figure 8 reports that participants in a 14,85% never find their minds sometimes wondering during tests, which might be attributed to the fact that they strive for concentration when taking a test. In this regard, the highest proportion of students asserted this statement as Moderately True 25,28% and Highly True 24,80%. Putwain and Daly (2014) point out that some students report themselves as highly test anxious and differ in proportion by gender. Their study results showed a ratio significantly higher of highly test-anxious

students where female students (22,5%) than male students (10,3%). Then, these data provide essential views on gender differences aligned with Denizli's (2004) research results which evidence the close relationship between the anxiety level of students and their gender. In this sense, this research did not discriminate gender in participants to corroborate if male or female students find their minds wandering while taking tests in the highest or lowest proportion.

Figure 8
 Q8. My mind sometimes wonders when I am taking important tests before the test



Source: The authors

Question 9 has obtained both extremes of the whole Test Anxiety Scale, the lowest percentage from the scale so far with 1,9% in Not at All True and the highest rate of 38,48% Extremely True, which is an indicator that students feel worried about how they performed after the test, followed by this most increased tendency with participants who reported 36,33% as

Highly True, results that can lead to a generalized feeling of concern after the test is over. In a study conducted within an EFL context, Gursoy and Arman (2016) also assert that more than half of the participants, 53,6% indicated that after taking the test, they believed they could have done better, in this way, corroborating post-anxiety after tests.

Figure 9
 Q9. After a test, I wondered whether I did well enough before the test



Source: The authors

Then, after analyzing the nine questions part of the WTAS scale applied to gather the information, the existence of highly considerable prior and post-anxiety was identified, apart from the high and moderate anxiety report during the test. Consequently, memory loss and poor concentration were evidenced, as well, present in students before, during, and after tests.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study report moderate and high existence of test anxiety before, during, and after the tests in all pre-service English teachers from Universidad Técnica del Norte. A sense of awareness is reported by participants when they recognize that their anxiety before the test prevents them from investing all their energy and concentration in studying the material for the test.

Feelings cause uncertainty and hesitations in academic performance, test administration included, since anxiety impairs, to varying degrees, learners' ability to deal with assessment. Anxiety is a solid and anticipated failure feeling in English majors, connected to prior test anxiety and further linked to the high pressure during the test. This blocks thoughts in language learners and provokes negative ideas of failure.

Even though learners are well prepared to deal with a test successfully, anxiety affects their capacity to recall the information studied. English learners, with the highest percent of all the scale, report that they can remember it after finishing a test, only when anxiety levels have lowered.

Concentration is lost during tests due to the anticipated anxiety. Thus, strategies on time management might be helpful to lower the level of anxiety at providing a sense of control over the test. Besides that, teachers ought to be trained on appropriate strategies to cope with anxiety in students, a primary reason why the target population was pre-service English teachers.

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