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VSTEP Test Anxiety among Public University Students in the Central Highlands: Levels and Stressors

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Abstract

High-stakes English assessments such as the VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency) pose significant challenges for non-English major undergraduates, particularly as the exam functions as a crucial graduation requirement. While the policy intends to improve overall language proficiency, it often generates considerable anxiety, especially among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This study investigated the degree and sources of VSTEP-related test anxiety among 240 non-English majors at a public university in Vietnam's Central Highlands. Data were collected through a 28-item adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Test, administered both online and in paper form. Results indicated high levels of anxiety, characterized by low self-confidence in language ability, fear of failure, and negative evaluation. Limited exposure to English and strict time constraints further intensified students' stress, particularly among the final-year ones nearing their graduation. The findings highlight the psychological burdens of uniform high-stakes testing policies and underscore the need for institutional support, anxiety-reducing pedagogy, and policy adjustments to promote fairness.

1. INTRODUCTION

High-stakes exams have long defined academic life for students across Asia, where test scores determine children's prospects and few other factors - not how creative they are, how energetic they might be in the classroom, or how well they work with others - are taken into consideration. In Vietnam, the significance of English is increasingly recognized as a point of academic entry and social advancement. In line with the Ministry of Education and Training's policy for graduation, non-English major undergraduates in Vietnam are required to attain Level 3 in the six-level Vietnamese Foreign Language Proficiency Framework, which corresponds to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). To meet this graduation requirement, many universities have adopted the Vietnam Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) as an officially recognized assessment. Consequently, achieving the prescribed proficiency level through the VSTEP has become a mandatory condition for graduation for a large number of non-English major students nationwide. The policy, while aimed at raising English education standards and improving graduates' job competitiveness, has also brought new pressures. For most students, especially in remote regions like the Central Highlands, the VSTEP is not merely an academic challenge but a deeply psychological and emotional strain.

Previous research in educational psychology has long demonstrated that high-stakes assessments tend to generate elevated levels of test-related anxiety. Test anxiety is generally defined as a reaction involving cognitive worry, emotional distress, behavioral responses, and physiological arousal, which together disrupt effective performance. On foreign language testing, however, a clear and comprehensive definition of Foreign Language Test Anxiety (FLTA) is still lacking, and measurement instruments must adequately capture its multidimensional nature (Weng & Liu, 2024). Identifying FLTA requires documenting novel patterns of responses, distinguishing it from general test anxiety. Evidence from various educational systems shows that test anxiety is not an isolated or rare phenomenon but rather a widespread issue among students (French et al., 2024). Moreover, its effects extend beyond individual test performance, as anxiety has been shown to undermine learners' motivation and hinder long-term engagement in the language learning process.

In Vietnam, many scholars are examining the problems caused by high-stakes English tests. The test-driven nature of the Vietnamese curriculum, together with the social expectations for good academic performance, has been found to increase learners' anxiety (Phuong et al., 2025). While it is thought that English is the "key course," which is both a necessary condition for off-campus employment and one graduation requirement, many people-in particular, non-English majors-are not confident in their English level. Earlier studies also had few practical uses for it in their major fields (Alharbi, 2021). This leads to feelings of inferiority and a degree of stress unhelpful to any exertion on their part. Yet existing studies have tended to focus on urban centers such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where universities generally have better infrastructure, more experienced teaching staff, and access to additional resources: language centers, private tutoring, and test-preparation materials.

On the other hand, non-English-major students in the Vietnamese Central Highlands face a set of challenges of their own, which made them feel worse during the VSTEP tests. The area is characterized by a variety of ethnic minorities, and students who have the chance to learn effective English are few in number compared with those from urban areas. Moreover, there are limited opportunities for using spoken or written language here. For many students, learning English is confined chiefly to the classroom, and teaching styles tend towards an examination-oriented, grammar-translated approach. Structural disadvantages like these help explain higher anxiety levels during tests, as students are in fact being asked to meet two entirely distinct skill sets: one they have already mastered and know well (paraphrased),

and another entirely new to them (original passage from source). On the other hand, cultural dynamics within the region, such as tight-knit communities and pressure from families intensify the already heavy feeling of taking high-stakes tests and make it even worse to achieve academic success. Although these special factors exist, research on test anxiety in the Central Highlands is a scarce commodity.

Understanding VSTEP test anxiety in this context is important for several reasons. *First*, it offers a more nuanced picture of educational equity in Vietnam. If students in disadvantaged regions face disproportionately high psychological barriers, this raises questions about whether standardized testing truly serves its intended purpose of fair assessment. *Second*, examining test anxiety among non-English majors can shed light on a group that is often overlooked in language education research. Unlike English majors, who receive extensive training and practice, non-English majors frequently view English as peripheral to their core studies. However, the consequences of underperforming in English tests are equally, if not more, significant for them, as failure to meet graduation requirements directly impacts their academic and career prospects. *Finally*, identifying the sources of anxiety-whether they stem from linguistic difficulties, test design, time pressure, or broader socio-cultural factors-can inform interventions at both the institutional and policy levels.

International literature provides useful theoretical frameworks for examining test anxiety. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982, Chapter 2, Section 5, 29-31) suggests that anxiety acts as a barrier to language acquisition and performance by limiting the learner's ability to process input effectively. Eysenck and Calvo's Processing Efficiency Theory (1992) further emphasizes that anxiety consumes cognitive resources, particularly working memory, thereby reducing performance. Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1978) also offers insights into how learners' beliefs about their abilities interact with contextual pressures to shape anxiety responses. Together, these perspectives highlight that test anxiety is not merely a matter of individual disposition but the outcome of complex interactions between cognitive, emotional, and social factors. Applying these frameworks to the Vietnamese Central Highlands context to shape students' exam experiences.

Despite these theoretical insights, empirical research specific to VSTEP remains limited. While studies on test anxiety in Vietnam have identified fear of failure, lack of preparation, and cultural concerns about "losing face" as significant contributors, few have systematically examined how these factors play out in less-studied regions. Moreover, little is known about the extent to which students in the Central Highlands differ from their peers in more advantaged contexts in terms of anxiety levels and stressors. This gap underscores the need for regionally grounded research that not only documents prevalence but also investigates underlying causes.

The present study seeks to address the following questions:

1. *What are the levels of test-related anxiety experienced by non-English major students when preparing for and taking the VSTEP?*
2. *What factors contribute to test anxiety among these students?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Perspectives on Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is widely defined as a situation-specific form of anxiety characterized by cognitive worry, emotional distress, and physiological arousal that interferes with performance in evaluative settings (Sarason & Sarason, 1990). In foreign language contexts, FLTA is considered a subset of foreign language anxiety, involving not only typical test-related concerns but also linguistic challenges, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension (Selami & Ozgehan, 2020).

Several theoretical frameworks shed light on how anxiety affects learning and performance. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982, Chapter 2, Section 5, 29-31) suggests that high anxiety obstructs language acquisition by filtering out comprehensible input. Eysenck and Calvo's Processing Efficiency Theory (1992) argues that worry consumes limited working memory, thus reducing task efficiency. Similarly, the Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007) emphasizes that anxiety impairs executive control by diverting attention to threat-related stimuli, thereby undermining focus on test content. Finally, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (2001) highlights the role of self-efficacy, showing that learners with low self-efficacy are more vulnerable to test-related stress. Together, these frameworks underscore the multifaceted and interactional nature of FLTA, involving cognitive, affective, and social dimensions.

2.2. Research on FLTA in Vietnam

In Vietnam, English is viewed as a gateway to academic and professional opportunities, and thus functions as a high-stakes subject (Phuong et al., 2025). The strong emphasis on standardized exams, such as the VSTEP, intensifies pressure on students, particularly non-English majors who often perceive English as peripheral to their main field of study but still face it as a graduation requirement. Existing studies highlight common anxiety triggers among Vietnamese learners, including fear of failure, cultural concerns about "losing face," and low self-efficacy stemming from limited exposure to English (Nguyen et al., 2022; Quach & Zhou, 2025).

Empirical findings suggest regional disparities. Urban students may suffer anxiety due to competition and performance expectations. In contrast, learners in disadvantaged regions—such as the Central Highlands—experience heightened anxiety linked to weaker language foundations, resource scarcity, and limited opportunities to practice English outside classrooms. This context-sensitive difference suggests that test anxiety is not merely a universal trait but is shaped by structural and cultural conditions.

2.3. VSTEP and Challenges for Non-English Majors

VSTEP is a nationwide high-stakes exam aligned with CEFR levels. It is used as a graduation requirement for non-English majors at many universities. While intended to raise English standards, it has inadvertently placed heavy psychological burdens on students who are underprepared. Research indicates that non-English majors often report stress in listening and speaking due to limited authentic exposure, struggle with academic vocabulary in reading and writing, and feel heightened time pressure during test completion (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Unlike English majors, who receive systematic training, non-English majors have fewer resources, less instructional support, and weaker self-confidence. This gap exacerbates their vulnerability to anxiety, particularly in under-resourced contexts such as the Central Highlands.

2.4. Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing interest in FLTA in Vietnam, most studies have concentrated on urban contexts or general classroom anxiety. Research specifically addressing VSTEP-related test anxiety among non-English majors in disadvantaged regions remains scarce. Few empirical investigations have compared anxiety levels across regions or systematically analyzed the unique stressors students face in rural areas. Moreover, limited attention has been given to the interplay of cultural expectations, self-efficacy, and structural inequalities in shaping anxiety experiences.

Addressing these gaps is crucial for ensuring educational equity. A deeper understanding of how VSTEP test anxiety manifests among non-English majors in the Central Highlands can inform more effective pedagogical support, institutional interventions, and policy reforms.

3. DATA (OR MATERIALS) AND RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey design to investigate levels of VSTEP-related test anxiety and its contributing factors among non-English major undergraduates in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. A questionnaire was used as the sole data collection instrument, as it provides an efficient and reliable way to gather information from a large sample.

3.2. Participants and Samplings

A total of approximately 240 non-English-majored undergraduates from a public university in Vietnam were recruited for the study. Eligibility criteria required that participants (a) were currently preparing for, registered for, or had recently taken the VSTEP exam, and (b) were not enrolled in English language majors or bilingual/advanced programs. Students below 18 years of age or those not required to take this exam for graduation were excluded.

To ensure representativeness and statistical power for subgroup analyses, a stratified cluster sampling strategy was employed. First, students were stratified by year of study (second, third, and final year) and field of study (Social Sciences & Humanities, Natural Sciences & Engineering, and Economics & Business). Within each stratum, intact classes of English or VSTEP-preparation courses were randomly selected, and all eligible students were invited to participate. Quotas were set to achieve a balanced distribution by academic year (approximately 80 students per year group), gender (around 40% male and 60% female, reflecting the institution's demographics), and discipline (roughly 80 from Social Sciences & Humanities, 100 from Natural Sciences & Engineering, and 60 from Economics & Business).

Additional stratification accounted for prior English learning experience (≤ 6 years, 7-9 years, ≥ 10 years), exposure to standardized English tests (approximately 20% with prior IELTS/TOEIC, 80% without), and VSTEP status (preparing, registered, or retaken). This design provided adequate variation across subgroups while maintaining sufficient sample size within each category.

Recruitment combined both online and paper-based surveys to maximize participation and reduce access-related bias. Prior to the main study, a pilot study with 20-30 students was conducted to test the clarity of wording and to estimate the internal consistency of the adapted questionnaire.

3.3. Instrument

The instrument used was an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), originally developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). The original 33-item scale measures communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. For this study, the scale was modified to focus specifically on test-related anxiety in the VSTEP context. After review by three applied linguistics experts, items were refined for cultural and contextual appropriateness. The final instrument contained 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Higher scores indicated greater levels of test anxiety. A pilot test with 20 students confirmed the clarity of wording and the internal consistency of the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

3.4. Procedure

The survey was conducted during the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. Questionnaires were distributed both in online format (via Google Forms) and paper-based format in classrooms to maximize participation and accessibility. Students were given clear instructions and reassured about the confidentiality of their responses. On average, each participant required 15-20 minutes to complete the survey.

3.5. Data Analysis

Completed questionnaires were coded and entered into SPSS 26.0 for analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions) were used to assess the overall levels of test anxiety among participants. To explore differences in anxiety across sub-groups, independent-sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA were employed. Correlation analyses were further conducted to examine relationships between anxiety levels and selected background variables, including gender, year of study, and prior English learning experience.

3.6. Reliability and Validity

Reliability of the adapted scale was assessed through Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients exceeding 0.85, indicating high internal consistency. Content validity was ensured by expert review and pilot testing, while the use of both online and offline administration reduced sampling bias.

Category	Description	Number of Items	Sample Item
Test Anxiety	Cognitive and physiological reactions during exam situations (e.g., nervousness, difficulty concentrating).	10	"I feel my heart pounding when I think about the VSTEP exam."
Fear of Failure	Concern about poor performance and its academic or social consequences.	6	"The thought of failing the VSTEP makes me very worried."
Negative Evaluation	Anxiety about being judged or evaluated unfavorably by teachers, peers, or others.	5	"I am afraid that others will notice my mistakes in the VSTEP test."
Self-Confidence in English	Beliefs about one's own language proficiency and ability to succeed in the exam.	4	"I doubt my English skills are good enough for the VSTEP exam."
Time Pressure	Stress caused by the limited time to complete tasks in different test sections.	3	"I feel anxious because the VSTEP test has strict time limits."

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Levels of VSTEP Test Anxiety

The results indicate that VSTEP-related test anxiety among non-English major students is not uniformly distributed but can be meaningfully grouped into distinct levels. Based on the overall anxiety scores, participants were categorized into three clusters-low, moderate, and high anxiety-allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of students' psychological experiences during VSTEP preparation and test-taking.

Overall, the mean anxiety score for the entire sample was 3.78 (SD = 0.66), suggesting a generally high level of test-related anxiety. When examined by clusters, 21% of the students were classified into the low-anxiety group. Learners in this cluster reported relatively stable emotional states and fewer anxiety symptoms. Although they recognized the importance of the VSTEP as a graduation requirement, their responses suggested greater confidence in their English ability and a stronger sense of control during exam preparation.

The moderate-anxiety cluster comprised 37% of the participants. Students in this group experienced noticeable but manageable levels of anxiety. Their concerns were mainly associated with specific aspects of the test, such as time pressure, listening comprehension, and speaking performance. However, anxiety in this cluster appeared situational rather than pervasive, as many students believed that adequate preparation could mitigate their stress and improve their performance.

The largest proportion of participants (42%) fell into the high-anxiety cluster, indicating a substantial level of psychological strain. Students in this group reported persistent worry about failing the VSTEP and the potential consequences for graduation. Anxiety was accompanied by strong emotional and physiological reactions, including difficulty concentrating and heightened nervousness during both preparation and test-taking stages.

These results are consistent with previous findings that students with weaker language foundations are more susceptible to anxiety in high-stakes testing situations (Embse & Hasson, 2012). Compared with studies conducted in better-resourced Vietnamese cities, the higher proportion of students reporting severe anxiety underscores how regional inequalities contribute to psychological burdens.

4.2. Factors Contributing to Test Anxiety

Several interrelated factors emerged as significant contributors to students' test anxiety. A large proportion of participants reported low linguistic competence and confidence, with nearly three-quarters doubting their ability to reach the required VSTEP level, particularly in listening and speaking. This lack of confidence, rooted in limited exposure to English, reflects the central role of self-efficacy in shaping test-related anxiety (Bandura, 1978). Another primary source of concern was the fear of failure, as more than two-thirds of respondents worried that failing the VSTEP would delay their graduation. This finding underscores the high-stakes nature of the exam, echoing the "high-stakes effect" described in prior research (Dong et al., 2023). In addition, about 60% of students expressed anxiety about negative evaluation and social pressure, fearing that poor performance would disappoint teachers, peers, or family members. In collectivist contexts such as Vietnam, where academic success is closely tied to social reputation, such concerns appear to intensify students' apprehension. Finally, time pressure was also identified as a prominent stressor, with more than half of the participants reporting difficulties coping with strict time constraints, especially in reading and writing sections. This aligns with Eysenck and Calvo's (1992) Processing Efficiency Theory, which suggests that anxiety consumes cognitive resources and reduces task performance under time-limited conditions. Taken together, these findings indicate that test anxiety is not merely an individual psychological trait but rather a phenomenon shaped by linguistic preparation, cultural expectations, and broader structural conditions in education.

4.3. Discussion

The high levels of anxiety found in this study are broadly consistent with international literature on test anxiety in disadvantaged educational settings (King et al., 2024; Claes et al., 2024). However, the dominant factor here—low confidence in English proficiency due to limited exposure—differs somewhat from urban contexts, where communication apprehension and competitiveness are often reported as primary sources of anxiety.

This suggests that context plays a central role in shaping test anxiety. While students in major cities may experience stress from competition and performance expectations, those in the Central Highlands are more likely to struggle with fundamental linguistic readiness. The results support Chari (2024), who emphasized that unequal access to learning resources deepens the psychological costs of standardized assessments.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights the psychological challenges faced by non-English majored university students in the Central Highlands of Vietnam when preparing for and taking the VSTEP exam. Beyond its role as a language proficiency requirement, the VSTEP functions as a high-stakes barrier with significant consequences for graduation and future opportunities. The findings underline that test anxiety in this context is not a peripheral issue but a central concern that reflects the intersection of language proficiency, self-confidence, and broader structural inequalities in education.

The implications of this study are twofold. At the institutional level, universities should provide targeted support, such as test-preparation workshops, counseling services, and more accessible opportunities for English practice, especially in listening and speaking. At the policy level, educational authorities may need to reconsider the uniform application of high-stakes language exit requirements, ensuring that students from under-resourced regions are not disproportionately disadvantaged. Equitable support structures are essential if the intended goal of raising English proficiency standards is to be achieved without exacerbating inequality.

The study's reliance on self-reported survey data may limit the accuracy of anxiety levels, as participants might under- or overstate their experiences. Furthermore, the sample was restricted to 100 non-English majored students from the Central Highlands, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other Vietnamese regions or student groups. The study was also cross-sectional, capturing anxiety at one point in time rather than tracking changes over the course of preparation. Future research could employ longitudinal designs or incorporate qualitative interviews for more profound insight.

Future research should expand beyond the Central Highlands to include comparative studies across different regions of Vietnam, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how context shapes test anxiety. Longitudinal studies could also track changes in students' anxiety over time, especially during different stages of exam preparation. Moreover, integrating qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, would enrich the understanding of personal experiences and coping strategies. Such work would not only strengthen the empirical base on test anxiety but also provide actionable insights for designing fairer and more supportive educational policies.

DECLARATIONS

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Transparency: The manuscript presents an accurate and transparent account of the research conducted, and all essential aspects of the study have been reported.

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Authors' Contributions: Truong Binh An was responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, questionnaire adaptation, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation. The author reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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