Exploring students' perceptions of the mandatory TOEFL ITP test and its relationship with academic anxiety: A study on final-year students at Hamzanwadi University

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Abstract: In Indonesia, many universities have implemented the TOEFL ITP test as a mandatory graduation requirement to ensure students' English proficiency meets academic and professional standards. This study aimed to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of the mandatory TOEFL ITP policy and their academic anxiety. Using a quantitative correlational design, data were collected from 25 final-year students of the English Education Study Program at Hamzanwadi University through an online questionnaire consisting of two parts: perceptions of the TOEFL ITP policy (8 items) and academic anxiety (10 items), both measured on a four-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. The results showed that students' perceptions were moderate (M = 22.32, SD = 3.22), and their academic anxiety was also moderate (M = 27.64, SD = 5.45). The Pearson correlation analysis revealed no significant relationship between students' perceptions and their academic anxiety (r = 0.023, p = 0.911, p > 0.05). This finding indicates that students' perceptions of the TOEFL ITP policy do not have a direct effect on their academic anxiety levels, rather, anxiety is influenced by factors such as readiness, confidence, and coping strategies. Theoretically, this study provides new insights into the link between language testing policies and psychological responses, while practically, it suggests that universities should offer preparatory programs, counseling services, and institutional support to help students manage anxiety and perform better in the TOEFL ITP test. Overall, the study highlights the need to integrate assessment policies with student well-being strategies in higher education.

Keywords: TOEFL ITP, Perception, Academic Anxiety, Graduation Requirement.

Introduction

Currently, students are required to have English language skills to support academic success, especially in Indonesia. With diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, having English language skills is an important skill to achieve academic success (Budiman et al., 2023). Although Indonesia has various languages, English adds value for students. Utami and Wahyudin (2022) stated that to keep up with global progress, English is widely used in various fields such as education, research, and technology. For that, mastering a foreign language is very important for everyone, especially for undergraduate and postgraduate students for the smooth running of their studies. According to Oktaviani and Mandasari (2020), students who study English are able to master negotiation skills, communicate with others, and have better qualifications to find work. In higher education, learning English as a foreign language is essential for communicating with foreigners, using the internet, doing academic research, getting scholarships or jobs, and boosting self-worth (Hendrawaty et al., 2023). With all the benefits above, there is no reason for students not to learn English to get a better education.

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To help students have good English skills, many universities require students to take a language test, especially when they are about to graduate. With good English skills, it will make it easier for them to get scholarships to continue their studies or to find work. According to Arsyad et al. (2024), the language test that is widely used by universities in Indonesia as a graduation exam is TOEFL ITP under the direction of the Educational Testing Service (ETS), USA. This test is a test that aims to measure students' English language skills in the aspects of listening comprehension, structure, and written expression, and reading comprehension. Currently, TOEFL ITP scores and certificates are used by more than 200 Indonesian universities as graduation requirements and as certificates that go with diplomas (Dalimunte et al., 2023). With the TOEFL ITP being required as a graduation requirement, students are expected to be encouraged to have better English language skills so they can compete both academically and professionally.

The campus policy that requires students to take the TOEFL ITP test to improve the quality of their English is a form of the campus' commitment to producing quality and globally competitive graduates. Being an international language, proficiency in English is required to boost each graduate's competitiveness (Pranawengtias, 2022). But on the other hand, this policy also has the potential to cause pressure or even academic anxiety for students, especially students who feel they do not have adequate English skills. Therefore, assessing students' perceptions of the obligation to take the TOEFL ITP test and its correlation with academic anxiety is important. So that the campus can design the right assistance strategy to help students get ready to take the test.

The requirement to take the TOEFL ITP test as part of the graduation process puts significant psychological pressure on students, particularly those in their final year. Where students are busy compiling their thesis, preparing for the defense, and taking care of other administrative obligations, they are then added to the obligation to take the TOEFL ITP test. With the many burdens at the end of the semester, it often triggers feelings of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty about graduation. Conditions like this can affect the focus of learning, motivation, and overall mental health of students. Research consistently demonstrates that anxiety leads to adverse outcomes in teaching and learning activities and poor student performance (Habibah et al., 2021). Thus, considering the potential psychological impact, it is necessary for academic institutions to evaluate and manage the implementation of graduation requirements such as the TOEFL ITP to minimize negative effects on students' academic performance and well-being.

In addition, universities in the regions with limited budgets do not provide guidance or intensive training for students. So, students are confused about the system and how to answer the TOEFL ITP test properly. However, many applicants struggle to achieve the required score due to a variety of circumstances, such as a lack of practice time and suitable guidance (Soetjipta, 2023). With this uncertainty, it can cause fear of failing the TOEFL ITP test, which can cause academic anxiety, which leads to impaired concentration and decreased academic performance. Therefore, institutions must understand the psychological impacts that can arise due to this policy and find solutions to prevent it.

Signs of people experiencing academic anxiety are feelings of anxiety, fear, and excessive worry in academic contexts such as exams, final assignments, or other academic obligations. Anxiety typically begins with extreme nervousness and is followed by negative thoughts like "Can I answer all of the questions?" and "Will I fail this test?" (Muliawati et al., 2020). This condition can have a bad impact on students' learning performance, concentration, and mental well-being. According to Bukhari et al. (2024), academic anxiety negatively affects students' motivation, engagement, and overall academic outcomes. Morever, they tend to feel insecure, easily panic, and have difficulty managing time effectively, which of course can have a bad impact on the learning outcomes of students (Habibah et al., 2021). The policy of taking the TOEFL ITP test as a graduation requirement is one of the triggers for academic anxiety that is commonly found in universities.

Several previous studies have discussed students' perceptions of the mandatory TOEFL test policy as a graduation requirement in higher education. Wahyuni (2024) found that most students had positive perceptions of the policy, as it motivated them to improve their English skills and provided career benefits, although some faced difficulties such as limited grammar skills and test-related technical issues. Similarly, Husna (2022) reported generally positive student perceptions, yet noted concerns over high score requirements, limited preparation time, and costly test fees. Both studies emphasized students' attitudes toward the policy but did not examine its psychological impacts. However, limited attention has been given to how such policy-related requirements may influence students' psychological states, particularly academic anxiety.

Unlike those studies, the present research not only explores students' perceptions of the TOEFL ITP policy but also investigates its relationship with academic anxiety among final-year students at Universitas Hamzanwadi. The novelty lies in combining perception analysis with the psychological dimension of academic anx-

iety, especially in the context of students who are simultaneously dealing with thesis work, administrative responsibilities, and graduation requirements. This study is expected to offer comprehensive insights into the institution in developing policies that support both students' academic performance and emotional well-being.

At Universitas Hamzanwadi, the TOEFL ITP test is one of the official graduation requirements, particularly for students enrolled in the English education program. The policy was implemented to realize the campus vision of producing graduates who are globally competitive with strong academic and professional qualifications. However, this requirement also has the potential to induce academic anxiety, especially among students with varied English proficiency, learning experiences, and psychological conditions. Therefore, this study aims to examine how final-year students perceive the TOEFL ITP policy at Universitas Hamzanwadi, whether it motivates them to enhance their English skills or contributes to additional academic pressure, and to analyze the extent of its correlation with academic anxiety levels.

Method

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of the mandatory TOEFL ITP policy and their academic anxiety. The participants were 25 final-year students of the English Language Education Study Program at Hamzanwadi University in the 2024–2025 academic year, selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were students who had officially taken the TOEFL ITP test as a graduation requirement and were in their final semester. Although the sample size was relatively small, it was considered representative since all participants experienced the same academic policy and learning context.

Data were collected through two structured questionnaires distributed via Google Form. The first measured students' perceptions of the TOEFL ITP policy, consisting of eight items on a four-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). Example statements included "TOEFL ITP helps me improve my English skills" and "I agree with the campus policy requiring the TOEFL ITP as a graduation requirement." The second measured students' academic anxiety related to the TOEFL ITP, comprising ten items on the same scale, such as "I feel very nervous before the TOEFL ITP starts" and "The TOEFL ITP adds pressure while I am working on my final project." Reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha indicated that both instruments were reliable, with $\alpha = 0.765$ for the perception scale and $\alpha = 0.884$ for the academic anxiety scale.

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential and be used solely for research purposes. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 31. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while normality and homogeneity were tested using the Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests. The Pearson Product–Moment Correlation was then applied to determine the relationship between students' perceptions and academic anxiety, with the significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented along with their interpretation. The results are organized to provide descriptive information about the data, followed by statistical tests including normality, homogeneity, and correlation analysis. The study involved 25 final-year students from the English Education Study Program at Hamzanwadi University, consisting of 23 females and 2 males. Data collection was carried out through an online questionnaire divided into two sections, namely perception toward the TOEFL ITP policy (8 items using a Likert scale of one to four) and academic anxiety related to TOEFL ITP (10 items using a Likert scale of one to four). The descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the perception variable (X) ranged from a minimum score of 15 to a maximum score of 29, with a mean of 22.32 and a standard deviation of 3.22, which placed it in the moderately positive category. The academic anxiety variable (Y) ranged from 16 to 38, with a mean of 27.64 and a standard deviation of 5.45, indicating a moderate level of anxiety.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Deviation
Perception (X)	25	15	29	22.32	3.224
Academic Anxiety (Y)	25	16	38	27.64	5.446

As shown in Table 1, students generally had moderate perceptions of the TOEFL ITP policy and moderate levels of academic anxiety. The relatively low standard deviation values suggested that the responses among students were fairly homogeneous.

To provide a clearer understanding of the data, the following table categorizes students' perceptions and anxiety levels into three interpretive categories-low, moderate, and high-based on score distribution.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Perception and Academic Anxiety

Category	Range	Frequency(Perception)	Percentage	Frequency(Anxiety)	Percentage
Low	8-16	4	16%	3	12%
Moderate	17-24	15	60%	14	56%
High	25-32	6	24%	8	32%
Total	-	25	100%	25	100%

The Table 2 indicates that most students had moderate perceptions (60%) and moderate levels of academic anxiety (56%), confirming that students generally view the TOEFL ITP policy neutrally and experience an average level of test-related anxiety.

Before conducting correlation analysis, the data were tested for normality and homogeneity to ensure compliance with parametric assumptions. The Shapiro-Wilk Test was used because it is considered more appropriate for small samples (n < 50), as it has higher power in detecting deviations from normality compared to Kolmogorov-Smirnov. The Levene's Test was employed to verify that the variances of the two variables were equal across groups, which is essential for accurate interpretation of correlation results.

Table 3. Tests of Normality (Shapiro-Wilk)

Variable	Kolmogorov-Smirnova			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Perception (X)	0.141	25	.200*	0.973	25	0.725
Academic Anxiety (Y)	0.114	25	.200*	0.961	25	0.425

The Shapiro-Wilk test results indicated that both variables had significant values greater than 0.05. The perception variable had a value of 0.725, and the academic anxiety variable had a value of 0.425. This means that the data for both variables are normally distributed and the assumption of normality for parametric analysis is fulfilled.

Table 4. Homogeneity of Variances (Levene's Test)

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			
Variable		**F**	**Sig.**
Perception (X)	Equal variances assumed	0.17	0.684
Academic Anxiety (Y)	Equal variances assumed	2.014	0.169

Levene's Test results confirmed that both variables had significant values greater than 0.05. Specifically, the perception variable obtained a value of 0.684, while the academic anxiety variable obtained a value of 0.169. This indicates that the variances are homogeneous across groups, and therefore the assumption required for correlation analysis is fulfilled.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Test

Variable		X	Y
Perception (X)	Pearson Correlation	1	0.023
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.911
	N	25	25
Academic Anxiety (Y)	Pearson Correlation	0.023	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.911	
	N	25	25

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a coefficient of r = 0.023 with a significant value of p = 0.911 (p > 0.05). This means there was no significant correlation between students' perceptions of the TOEFL ITP policy and their academic anxiety. In other words, students' views on the TOEFL ITP test do not directly influence the level of anxiety they experience.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that students' perceptions of the mandatory TOEFL ITP test were generally moderate, while their academic anxiety levels also fell into the moderate category. The correlation analysis confirmed that no significant relationship existed between these two variables. This indicates that students' perceptions and their levels of academic anxiety are independent from one another. Thus, the first research question is answered: students' perceptions and their academic anxiety exist independently. Acceptance of the TOEFL ITP policy does not guarantee lower levels of test-related stress.

Taken together, these results suggest that while students may recognize the TOEFL ITP as useful for academic and professional growth, their anxiety is influenced more by personal factors such as readiness, confidence, and coping strategies. The findings indicate that academic anxiety stems mainly from internal emotional and cognitive responses rather than external policies. Thus, the absence of correlation does not contradict previous studies but reinforces that anxiety is multifaceted, often arising from fear of failure, performance pressure, or financial concerns regardless of students' perceptions of the TOEFL requirement.

A comparison with previous research shows that the results both converge and diverge. Wahyuni (2024) and Husna (2022) found that students often perceive the TOEFL ITP requirement positively and regard it as motivation to improve English proficiency. However, those studies did not investigate whether such perceptions influenced levels of anxiety. In contrast, this study shows that although perceptions may indeed be moderately

positive, they do not translate into reduced anxiety. Muliawati et al. (2020) further explain that the TOEFL test itself is a source of stress because of its high-stakes nature, meaning that regardless of how the policy is viewed, students still experience nervousness and emotional strain during the test. Therefore, the finding that no significant correlation exists is not surprising, as anxiety is more likely linked to test-taking conditions than to attitudes toward institutional requirements.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings align closely with Test Anxiety Theory (Sarason, 1984; Zeidner, 1998), which explains that anxiety during evaluative situations such as tests arises from internal cognitive and emotional processes rather than external factors. According to this theory, anxiety consists of worry (cognitive concerns about failure) and emotionality (physiological arousal such as tension or nervousness). Students may, therefore, feel anxious not because of their perception of the TOEFL policy itself, but because of self-focused thoughts such as fear of poor performance or the consequences of failing. This helps explain why the correlation between perception and anxiety is insignificant, as test anxiety operates internally, driven by one's confidence and perceived competence rather than institutional attitudes (Zeidner, 1998).

Furthermore, the results also resonate with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress Appraisal Theory, which posits that stress arises from individuals' cognitive appraisal of a situation as a threat or challenge and their perceived ability to cope with it. In this study, students may have appraised the TOEFL ITP test as a threat to graduation, leading to anxiety even if they perceived the policy as necessary or beneficial. Conversely, students who appraised the situation as a challenge and felt capable of managing it likely experienced lower anxiety levels. Thus, the independence between perception and anxiety reflects that while the policy is externally the same for all, the internal appraisal and coping responses vary among individuals.

Several internal and external factors may explain why perceptions and anxiety remain unrelated. Internally, aspects such as self-efficacy, motivation, and perfectionism may strongly affect anxiety. Students who are confident in their English ability may remain calm even if they disagree with the policy, while those who doubt their skills may feel anxious despite supporting the policy. Shengyao et al. (2024) highlighted that students with high self-efficacy demonstrate resilience in facing academic challenges, showing that internal attributes are powerful predictors of psychological responses. Externally, limited preparation opportunities, insufficient institutional support, and the financial burden of repeated tests can also generate anxiety regardless of how students perceive the policy. These combined influences illustrate that academic anxiety is multidimensional and shaped by broader contexts rather than a single factor.

Another important consideration is the small sample size used in this study (n = 25). Although it included all final-year students in the English Education Study Program, this limited number may reduce the generalizability of the findings. The results, therefore, should be interpreted cautiously and viewed as an initial exploration rather than a definitive conclusion. A larger and more diverse sample across multiple universities would provide stronger statistical power and more representative results.

For future research, it is recommended that scholars adopt a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative techniques such as interviews or focus group discussions. This would allow deeper insights into how students emotionally and cognitively respond to the TOEFL ITP policy and reveal factors that quantitative data alone may not capture. Future studies may also include additional variables such as test preparation strategies, academic motivation, or institutional support to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological effects of mandatory language testing policies.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that students' perceptions of the mandatory TOEFL ITP policy were moderate, and their academic anxiety levels were also moderate. The statistical analysis using the Pearson Product–Moment Correlation indicated that there was no significant relationship between students' perceptions of the TOEFL ITP policy and their academic anxiety (r = 0.023, p = 0.911). This suggests that students' anxiety levels are influenced more by internal factors such as readiness, confidence, and self-efficacy rather than by their perception of the policy itself.

From a practical perspective, universities should take more strategic actions to support students academically and psychologically in preparing for the TOEFL ITP test. Institutions are encouraged to provide structured TOEFL preparation programs or intensive English training to help students become familiar with the test format. In addition, universities should offer counseling or mentoring services to help students manage test-related anxiety and build self-confidence. Financial support or fee subsidies are also recommended to reduce the financial burden of the TOEFL ITP test, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. By implementing these strategies, universities can ensure

that the TOEFL ITP graduation policy contributes positively to students' language development without causing unnecessary psychological pressure.

This study also acknowledges several limitations. The sample size was relatively small (n = 25) and limited to one study program, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the correlational design used in this research cannot determine causal relationships between students' perceptions and their academic anxiety. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to employ larger and more diverse samples and adopt mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into how students perceive and emotionally respond to mandatory English testing policies.

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