Students' Experience in Facing the TOAFL Test: An Analysis of Learning Strategies, Anxiety, and Motivation in Arabic Learning

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ABSTRACT

Arabic language proficiency is a strategic academic competency in Islamic universities, particularly in supporting the understanding of Islamic literature, academic activities, and the development of knowledge. This study aims to analyze students' experiences in taking the Test of Arabic as a Foreign Language (TOAFL), focusing on learning strategies, anxiety, motivation, challenges, and perceptions of the test format. This research method uses a descriptive qualitative approach supported by quantitative data. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews involving 30 undergraduate students from various semesters who had taken the TOAFL. The results showed that the most effective learning strategy reported by students was regular practice focused on TOAFL question types, particularly the listening and reading sections. Most students experienced anxiety before and during the exam, primarily due to time pressure and question difficulty. However, this anxiety can be reduced through adequate preparation and support from the learning environment. A combination of internal factors, such as personal interest, and external factors, including academic requirements and graduation eligibility, fostered students' learning motivation. The study concluded that the interaction between language proficiency, learning strategies, psychological factors, and learning support systems influenced students' success in the TOAFL.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mastery of Arabic is an academic competence that has a strategic position in Islamic universities, especially in supporting the understanding of Islamic literature, academic activities, and scientific development. To objectively measure and standardize students' Arabic language proficiency, many higher education institutions use the Test of Arabic as a Foreign Language (TOAFL). TOAFL is designed as an instrument for evaluating Arabic language skills for non-Arabic speakers by testing istimā'

(listening), qirā'ah (reading), and mastery of language structure and vocabulary. In academic studies, TOAFL is positioned as a gauge of students' linguistic competence that is relevant to academic and institutional needs in Islamic universities.

In practice, the implementation of TOAFL serves not only as a measurement tool for Arabic language proficiency but also as part of academic administrative requirements, such as graduation, judicial proceedings, and academic recommendations. Several studies have demonstrated that standardized Arabic language tests, such as TOAFL, play a crucial role in maintaining the quality of students' language competence; however, they also have the potential to cause psychological stress for test-takers. This pressure generally arises when the minimum TOAFL score is made a mandatory requirement that must be met within a certain period of time. This condition shows that TOAFL is not only related to linguistic ability, but also to the mental readiness of students in facing academic evaluations.

In addition to the language ability factor, students' experience in dealing with TOAFL is greatly influenced by the learning strategies they apply during the preparation period. These strategies include practicing understanding the qirā'ah text, getting used to listening to istimā' material, and strengthening mastery of tarkīb and Arabic vocabulary. The differences in learning strategies used by students often affect the test results obtained, especially when the strategies are not adjusted to the characteristics of the TOAFL questions and the individual needs of the participants.

On the other hand, the aspect of anxiety and motivation to learn is also an important factor in students' experience of facing TOAFL. Academic anxiety can arise due to limited preparation time, difficulty understanding Arabic material, and the institutional pressures inherent in taking the test. Meanwhile, motivation to learn Arabic can stem from internal factors, such as an interest in Arabic and an understanding of Islam, as well as external factors, including academic demands and graduation requirements. The interaction between learning strategies, anxiety, and learning motivation shows that students' experiences with TOAFL are complex and need to be studied in depth.

Based on this background, this research was conducted at the Language Center Institute of UIN Kiai Ageng Muhammad Besari Ponorogo from July to December 2025, to examine students' experiences with Arabic TOAFL. This research focuses on the learning strategies employed by students, the level of anxiety they experience, and their motivation to learn Arabic during the process of preparing for and implementing the test. The results of this research are expected to make an academic contribution to the development of Arabic language learning as well as the evaluation of the implementation of TOAFL in the Islamic university environment.

2. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to understand students' experiences with the TOAFL Test (Test of Arabic as a Foreign Language). The qualitative approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring the meaning of experiences, learning strategies, emotional responses, and student motivation based on text data obtained from respondents. This approach has been widely used in educational and language studies to investigate phenomena that occur in the natural context of research participants.

This study uses a qualitative research design with thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic qualitative data analysis method to identify, evaluate, and report patterns (themes) in data. This method enables researchers to organize raw data into meaningful themes, thereby answering research questions. In thematic analysis, data are read repeatedly, coded, grouped into themes, and then interpreted in the context of the research objectives.

The subjects of the study were 30 students who had taken the TOAFL Test. Data were obtained through an open questionnaire distributed online via Google Forms. Respondents were selected based on the criterion of having taken the test, allowing them to provide direct experience information. Purposive sampling techniques are used to ensure that the data collected is relevant to the focus of the research.

Data were collected using questionnaires that contained open-ended questions. The questions are designed to explore students' experiences, ranging from preparation and study strategies to anxiety and

motivation in facing the TOAFL Test. Respondents' answers are recorded in text form so that they are in accordance with the needs of qualitative analysis. In addition to questionnaires, if necessary, short online interviews can be conducted to provide supporting data to enrich the context of respondents' answers.

Data analysis is carried out through the following steps: 1) Data Familiarization; The researcher read the answers of all respondents in depth multiple times to understand the overall content of the data and the contextual experiences. 2) Initial Coding; Researchers label or code sections of text that contain important information according to the fostudy'socussuch as learning strategies, anxiety, and motivation. 3) Identify Themes; Similar codes are grouped to form themes that reflect patterns of student experience. 4) Theme Review and Refinement; The identified themes are re-reviewed to ensure their relevance and consistency with the overall data. 5) Data Interpretation; The themes that have been prepared are then interpreted within the framework of relevant theories and associated with the research context.

These measures align with the general guidelines of thematic analysis, a widely used approach in qualitative research across education and the social sciences. To improve validity, the data were carefully analyzed by comparing findings from various respondents (internal triangulation) and, if necessary, cross-checking key answers through brief interviews. The researcher ensured that the themes that emerged were actually derived from the respondents' data and not the researchers' assumptions.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

This study involved 30 students who had taken the TOAFL Test. Respondents consisted of 10 males (33.3%) and 20 females (66.7%), with an age range of 21–25 years and semesters 6–13. The respondents' GPAs ranged from 3.00 to 3.75, indicating a fairly wide variation in academic background that could potentially affect readiness for foreign language tests. This condition is relevant because various studies have shown that variations in academic backgrounds can impact learning strategies and performance for foreign language tests (Zhen and Cheng, 2018).

Most of the students had formal experience learning Arabic before college, either in madrasas (Islamic boarding schools) or through language-through-use courses. Courses. The experience is thought to increase their readiness to face test components such as listening and reading. In the context of foreign language learning experiences, being able to tabulate an index of significant predictors of overall skill achievement (11).

Student Learning Strategies Affect Test Readiness

The findings showed that 70% of respondents stated that the TOAFL question-type routine practice strategy was the most effective. This data indicates that students who engage in repetitive question practice and structured strategies tend to be better prepared for the test, especially in the listening and reading sections.

These results align with findings from the study "*Reading Comprehension and Test-Taking Strategies of Different Achievement Levels,*" which showed that *test-taking* strategies and structured reading skills are strongly associated with success in foreign language tests, particularly in text comprehension and time management. Systematic practice questions and strategies help students not only understand the language but also learn how to manage time and approach test questions more effectively (Irawan and Ahmad, 2024).

Student Anxiety as a Psychological Factor in Tests

About 60% of respondents admitted to feeling anxiety before and during the TOAFL Test, mainly due to time pressure and difficult vocabulary on the test. This suggests that anxiety is not just a language inability, but is affected by the pressure of evaluation and the conditions of the test itself.

In the context of test-taking anxiety, the study '*Take language assessment easy: The mediator impacts of self-assessment, test-taking skills...*' It was found that students' ability in *test-taking skills* was closely related to the level of evaluation tension (*student evaluation apprehension*) and language achievement.

This means that students who employ a more effective test-taking strategy tend to experience lower anxiety and achieve better academic performance.

Diverse and Dynamic Learning Motivation

The findings indicate that the respondents' learning motivation is evenly divided between internal motivation (50%, personal interest) and external motivation (50%, academic demands). During the preparation process, they found that motivation generally increased when learning goals began to be achieved, but decreased when individuals became bored or felt short on time.

Language learning motivation is often a reinforcer for the use of effective strategies. Studies focusing on foreign language learning strategies have shown that the use of metacognitive and planned learning strategies is positively correlated with higher test scores, as these strategies enable students to monitor and evaluate their learning process independently. This means that internally or externally motivated students tend to be more consistent in implementing learning strategies, although this motivation can fluctuate throughout their preparation for the Language test (Zhang and Liu, 2018).

Comprehensive Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Constraints

Your data shows that students face both linguistic (e.g., limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties) and non-linguistic (e.g., limited study time, inadequate learning resources). This suggests that language learning problems when facing tests are not only linguistic, but also a consequence of learning environment conditions.

In many studies of foreign languages, particularly those examining reading strategies and the use of metacognitive strategies, it has been found that the use of a combination of metacognitive and cognitive strategies significantly impacts test performance, especially in reading comprehension. When learners face linguistic constraints, employing strategies such as planning the sequence of understanding the text, monitoring comprehension, and reassessing answers can significantly improve their test performance. This suggests that linguistic barriers can be reduced functionally through appropriate learning strategies (Zhang et al., 2014).

Use of Diverse Learning Resources to Improve Test Readiness

The resources that students use the most are books and online materials (40%), followed by study friends (35%), and lecturers or tutors (25%). Students who utilize more than one resource tend to report better readiness and lower anxiety. This suggests that the variety of learning resources provides greater psychological and practical support.

Studies on the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in foreign language education demonstrate that learners who actively implemevariousustrategiesies and resources are more likely to increase their self-awareness in the learning process (e.g., planning and evaluating the learning process). Learners who actively use these strategies tend to be more adaptive in dealing with test tasks and minimize the anxiety associated with the task (Zhang et al., 2014).

Perception of Test Format as a Measure of Language Ability

As many as 80% of respondents found the format of the TOAFL Test relevant to their language skills, although the questions were still challenging. This shows that students recognize the test format as a legitimate tool for assessing language skills, but they still feel real challenges in answering certain questions.

Research on the ability of test-taking strategies also revealed that skills in dealing with test formats, such as understanding question patterns and time management, have a positive effect on the evaluatof ion the indication. This shows that the indication is the head with *t-tak g P Theygies ey*gies that they use (Pr ad et.). Visualization a e. 1 Visualizaton: of Research Results
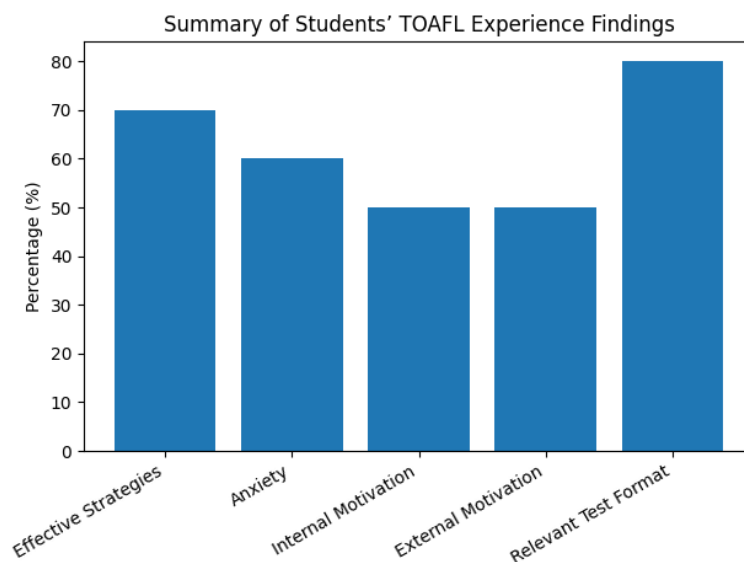
Figure 1. Summary of TOAFL student experience findings

4.   CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research and discussions about e-experience facing the challenges, success is determined solely by the Arabic language and influenced by strategies, psychological factors, and consistent learning strategies, especially regular practice based on the type of TOAFL questions, which proved to be the most effective approach for most students. This strategy helps students understand question patterns, increase confidence, and optimize time management during the test. This indicates that mastery of testing plays a crucial role in enhancing readiness, as anxiety is a common experience for students before and during the TOAFL Test. The anxiety is mainly related to time pressure and the level of difficulty of the questions, especially in the listening and reading sections. However, anxiety levels tend to decrease in students who prepare carefully and receive support from the learning environment, such as peers and lecturers. These findings indicate that anxiety is situational and can be managed through proper learning strategies. Third, student learning motivation is dynamic and comes from a combination of internal and external factors. Internal motivation encourages students to master Arabic more deeply, while external motivation plays a role in driving the sustainability of learning, particularly in meeting academic demands. Both contribute to the consistency of the use of learning strategies to saturation; however, on the other hand, time constraints. Fourth, the obstacles faced by students are not only linguistic, such as limited vocabulary and grammatical understanding, but also non-linguistic, such as limited time and access to exercise materials. These obstacles can be minimized through the use of diverse learning resources, including books, online materials, study groups, and the guidance of lecturers or tutors. Fifth, the majority of students view the format of the TOAFL Test as a reminder tool for their Arabic language skills. Alrelevant the test is considered challenging, students recognize that the format and components of the test reflect the language competencies required in an academic context.

Overall, this study emphasizes that students' experiences in facing the TOAFL test are an interaction between language skills, learning strategies, psychological factors, and learning environment support. Thereforesupport from the efforts to improve the TOAFL Test needs to be carried out comprehensively, not only through strengthening language abilities, but also through the development of leadership developing management, and managing anxiety, providing.

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