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## **ANXIETY AND STRESS BEFORE THE TOEFL TEST IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE BACHELOR STUDENTS AT GERARDO BARRIOS UNIVERSITY, SAN MIGUEL, EL SALVADOR**

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**Abstract:** This research was directed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to 3rd, 4th and 5th year Bachelor's Degree students in English Language at the Gerardo Barrios University during the year 2020. The main objective was to help students increase results in the simulation. TOEFL, after completing the virtual course: Psychoeducational Techniques for the preparation of the TOEFL exam. The Logical Framework methodology was applied and among the most significant results it was found that the level of stress in the participants was reduced by 78.6%, and the level of anxiety by 57.1%, while the TOEFL simulation scores increased by average of 5.0%. The research team evaluates that the study was viable and effective despite the adversities in its implementation. It is recommended that educational entities interested in achieving similar results in standardized tests can adapt this course and implement it.

**Keywords:** TOEFL exam, anxiety, stress, COVID-19, psycho educational techniques.

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, the Ministry of Education of El Salvador has implemented a requirement to achieve a score of 520 and 551 on the TOEFL ITP exam (or its equivalent) to be able to obtain a degree in Teaching in English Language and Bachelor's Degree in English Language. respectively (Barake, 2012, pág. 5).

Since then, Gerardo Barrios University has had the challenge of increasing the number of graduate students. As of 2018, the graduation rate was less than 70% of all graduates in a Bachelor's degree in English Language.

At the national level, 479 students graduated from the English Language Bachelor's degree in 2018; 186 of the male gender and 293 of the female gender (Varela, 2019, page 149). The TOEFL ITP standardized test (ETS, 2020) reports a high rate of graduates from the Bachelor's degree in English Language from

the aforementioned university; however, they have not reached the minimum necessary score (551). As a consequence, these people have not been able to obtain their degree that accredits them as professionals in the area.

This research topic arises from conversations that have been held with some students over the years. In them, young people have commented that they do not understand why some students with good academic performance do not reach the score required to graduate with the rank (551) of the Bachelor's degree in English Language.

In the unpublished research, Perception of the TOEFL standardized test from higher education, carried out with different actors involved in the standardized test, through interviews it was found that some students majoring in English language expressed that the nerves at the time of taking the test could be a factor that prevents them from achieving that desired score (Argueta, 2019). What was stated then and the results of the research Performance differences in a TOEFL test simulation of a longitudinal sample of students of the Bachelor's Degree in English Language at the Gerardo Barrios University (Argueta; Trejo; Villanueva; LaFontaine, 2018, page 68), where the results in the reading comprehension of young people from 4th to 5th grade, is one of the scores closest to not being significant with asymptotic significance of 0.044 unlike 0.001 and 0.002 in grammar and listening comprehension, respectively.

Anxiety and stress are factors to consider in this educational context. Papalia (1994) defines anxiety and stress as a state characterized by the presence of feelings of apprehension, uncertainty and tension that arise as a result of the subject anticipating a threat, real or imagined. Most students experience high anxiety during exam time. This high activation not only has a negative impact on exam performance, but can even unbalance the

health of students in these types of situations (Bausela Herreras, 2005, page 554).

In the present study, it was proposed to study whether stress and anxiety management sessions before undergoing a TOEFL test simulation to increase the score of young people in third, fourth and fifth year to the level necessary at that point of training in the Bachelor's degree in English Language. This was done through surveys with their respective scales and exams to measure the level of anxiety and stress, as well as a simulation of the TOEFL standardized test. By knowing the current COVID-19 pandemic, all contact with the students and the institution involved was carried out virtually.

## **METHODOLOGY AND PROJECT DEVELOPMENT**

The research was carried out under a quantitative approach using a design based on the Sociotechnical Systems Approach, with a methodology based on the Logical Framework (LogFrame) as explained by Ortegón (2005, page 13) and within which a study was applied with intervention where the research team manipulated (intervened) objects or situations and measured the results of their manipulations. In this type of studies, Quasi-Experimental studies are privileged (Bravo, 2001, page 141), using standardized exams and scores on psychological tests for stress and anxiety. The subjects in the group were not selected randomly since they must meet certain characteristics, such as being an active student at the third, fourth and fifth year level of the Bachelor's Degree in English Language at Gerardo Barrios University.

The data collection methods used were: TOEFL Simulation score, Stress Appreciation Scale G (José Luis Fernández Seara, 2017, p. 8), and Beck's Anxiety Inventory (2011). All of them with baseline measurement and end line measurement. Additionally, an opinion

survey about the course was administered. Data processing was carried out using Excel and QuestionPro. The target population was 117 third, fourth and fifth year students of a Bachelor's degree in English Language pre-registered in the course created for this project. The initial distribution by level is detailed below: third year, 81; fourth year, 20 and fifth year 16 students respectively. Finally, these data were reduced based on the completion of all established activities (TOEFL practice, G Stress Appreciation Scale and Beck Anxiety Inventory), with the final data being: third year 8; fourth year 3 and fifth year 3 students, accumulating a total of 14 students who met the three measurements contemplated in the project with complete entry and exit scores.

To obtain the overall results of the TOEFL simulation for each student, the corresponding conversion table for this type of exams was used. The Macmillan TOEFL Preparation book (Mahnke, 1996, page 503) was taken as a reference, where the procedure is specified.

Below is a description of the research design, including its components and a brief review of the activities carried out during its execution.

## **DESIGN OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The research was initially designed at the end of the first half of 2020. During the course of the research, the design evolved until it was carried out completely online due to a context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which no member of the team could imagine. COVID-19 completely paralyzed the world and El Salvador was no exception. Another significant change occurred in the methodology proposed in the Research Protocol, since it was not possible to have two groups as had been initially proposed, considering, under that design, one group would function as a control group and another as an experimental group, which which was only adapted to one

group due to the uncertain circumstances under which the study was carried out. Inlet and outlet measurements were taken. All face-to-face components originally proposed in the Logical Framework Matrix were adapted:

- **Component 1:** TOEFL ITP standardized test simulation, which was used in the active online Course within the CANVAS UGB platform. This component did not undergo changes since the TOEFL simulation was always considered digitally within the original study.
- **Component 2:** Instructional content on the macro skills evaluated within the TOEFL ITP that contains the units with instructional content and their corresponding structure within the exam. Adapted to virtual mode.
- **Component 3:** Instructional content on the management of anxiety and stress that contains the units with instructional content and their corresponding techniques or advice for each macro-skill included in the TOEFL ITP exam. Adapted to virtual mode.

Components 2 and 3 underwent some modifications since instead of being in-person sessions, it was decided to record the videos in advance, send them for editing and later upload them to the CANVAS platform. Therefore, the original plan did not contemplate recording videos or requesting their editing.

## RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

### DATA BY YEAR OF ACADEMIC STUDY

#### Third year

When taking initial and final third-year measurements on anxiety, stress, and the TOEFL simulation, we found that 8 people had all measurements. In the initial phase, 45 participants managed to complete their TOEFL simulation, 54 completed the anxiety inventory and 47 completed the stress appreciation scale. In the final measurement, 20 students completed the TOEFL simulation, 15 took the anxiety inventory and 14 completed the stress appreciation scale.

#### Fourth year

Subsequently, the initial and final results of the fourth year of the degree were processed. In week 1, there were 13 participants who completed the exam simulation, 15 completed the stress assessment scale and 14 took the survey to measure the level of anxiety. In the departure week, 6 participants completed the simulation of the TOEFL exam, 5 the stress assessment measurement, and 5 the anxiety measurement. Of the aforementioned total, only 3 participants managed to complete the three measurements in both the line and output measurements.

#### Fifth year

Finally, considering the data obtained at the fifth year level regarding anxiety, stress and TOEFL simulation, only 3 people managed to develop all the measurements. As a starting point, in the first phase, 17 participants completed the TOEFL simulation, 21 completed the anxiety inventory and 19 completed the stress assessment scale. In the final phase, 15 participants developed

the TOEFL simulation, 13 took the anxiety inventory and 12 completed the stress appreciation scale.

The research team proposes that the natural events that occurred during the development of this course, Hurricane ETA (November 1), Hurricane IOTA (November 14), and the global pandemic that has been experienced since March 2020 to date, contributed to the fact that the reduction in anxiety was minimal at the level of the 3 years under study, however, there was no increase, which indicates that under different circumstances an even greater reduction could be obtained.

### **Comparative data Anxiety, Stress, TOEFL Simulation**

Below, comparative data on the different components worked on in the study are presented.

#### **ANXIETY LEVELS**

Although anxiety can manifest itself in different ways in humans, the levels are standardized according to the index it presents. In the case of this research, anxiety levels showed a reduction despite the situations that affected the country and the world. For the third year the reduction was 2.7%, the fourth year shows a greater reduction with 15.6% and finally the fifth year with a 4.4% reduction in anxiety levels. These can be seen in greater detail in Table 1 and Illustration 1 attached to this article.

#### **STRESS LEVELS**

The manifestations of stress in humans, like anxiety, can be diverse. However, these can be measured on a scale according to the amount that the individual may be experiencing or is going through at that time. In this case, the research showed a notable reduction in the stress scale of the participants: third year showed a reduction of 32%, fourth year with

the highest percentage of stress reduction with 37.5% and finally fifth year with 23.8%. It can be seen in more details in Table 2 and Illustration 2 attached to the article.

### **TOEFL ITP SIMULATION**

Regarding the TOEFL ITP simulation, there is an increase between the application phases, being 5.4% for the third year, 6.6% for the fourth year, and 3.2% for the fifth year, which is consistent with the increases in the anxiety and stress variables previously described. See Table 3 and Illustration 3 attached to this article.

### **DISCUSSION**

It has been more than evident that the development of the investigative process was strongly influenced by situations beyond the control of human beings. Two natural disasters, Hurricane Eta and Hurricane Iota, in addition to a global health emergency due to COVID-19 changed the actions of human beings, modifying many of their daily activities for which they were not prepared, thus generating feelings of uncertainty and insecurity that led to increased stress and anxiety affecting personal, work and academic areas.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that this study did not have the necessary statistical parameters to perform standard deviations or normalization of data since the dropout rate was high as detailed in the Project Results and therefore it was decided to work with trend measures. central and with the achievement percentages established in the logical framework matrix.

After presenting this context, the research contributed to supporting participants in managing anxiety and stress in the face of the standardized test that they will have to officially undergo at the end of their degree. Resources were presented that can be applied

even in other areas. of your life, as are the different relaxation techniques.

The results show that in the baseline measurement, 7.14% of students are at the low level, while 42.86% are at the medium level and 50% are at the high level. Regarding the final measurements, 0% is determined at the low level, 50% at the medium level and 50% at the high level, where  $n=14$  in both measurements. These results differ from the results found by Zin, Z. M., & Rafik-Galea, S. (2010, p. 49) in their publication *Anxiety and Academic Reading Performance among Malay ESL Learners*. In these results, Rafik-Galea found that 74% of the participants were at a medium level and 24% at a high level,  $n=218$ . These results provide a point of comparison on anxiety levels but not the methodology since their approach was quantitative and not applying the Logical Framework matrix. However, these results are mentioned because they have a variable in common. In this study, initial and final measurements were taken to establish a progress parameter and no other study was found in El Salvador that proposed a similar methodology.

The results of this research help to reflect and contemplate the importance of supporting the emotional reactions that academic activity can exert on students. The implementation of this course has proven to be useful for those who used all available resources and adapted them in their practices.

Although there was not the necessary participation to be able to justify the results specifically, they are shared so that others interested in the topic can replicate the original methodology. In El Salvador, scientific publication on topics of English language acquisition as a foreign language is minimal. This means, therefore, an effort made to close that gap in the production of scientific literature in the country.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

Due to the decline in the level of anxiety and stress at the end of the course, it is concluded that the intervention on the independent variable was effective. Although the percentages of the anxiety level reduced minimally compared to the stress level, in none of them did it increase, even when the study was carried out under adverse circumstances, which is why it is concluded as a successful intervention.

The TOEFL simulations score increased as expected at the end of the course, which also contributes to the conclusion that the information disseminated during the course was effective.

Meanwhile, the assumption of the purpose proposed for the research: the course on anxiety and stress management in standardized tests contributes to the increase in the score obtained in TOEFL simulations in third, fourth and fifth year students of the Bachelor's Degree in English Language, Therefore, it is considered fulfilled since at the end of the course, it was intended that 70% of the participants score within the range established for their year of study and in this research an average of 85.7% of participants achieved it. This being the case, 100% of third year participants, while fourth and fifth years obtained 66.7% respectively.

It is recommended that the course be implemented under more favorable circumstances for the emotional state of the participants and that its content be updated and perfected to the extent possible, so that other young people who reach the third year of the Bachelor's Degree in English Language have access to this information and can benefit.

The Student Welfare Unit of Gerardo Barrios University can be an executing entity of this type of courses, it is recommended that with the collaboration of the Social Projection Unit they carry out synergy in search of

obtaining a greater reach and benefiting the student population not only of the Bachelor's Degree in English Language, but also in other specialty areas.

Finally, it is recommended that the study be repeated with more favorable circumstances

for all participants and that each data be segmented by macro-ability evaluated in the exam to provide more specialized treatments and comply with a control and an experimental group.

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