

# THE CAUSES OF EFL STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN PREPARING FOR THE ENGLISH TEST IN THE NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION EXAM

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**Abstract:** It is evident that a considerable number of test takers are experiencing test anxiety. The current study aims to investigate the main causes of anxiety among the students in preparing for the English test in the national high school graduation exam. Data were collected by means of questionnaires delivered to 84 students of 12<sup>th</sup> grade at a high school and then semi-structured interviews with 10 among these 84 students. The causes of anxiety being investigated were relevant to three main themes, including learners' perceived threat of tests, learners' research and learning skills, and learners' test performance attributions. The data was analyzed, synthesized and interpreted both quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings identified possible causes of anxiety in preparing for the English test in the national high school graduation exam, among which the students' fear for the difficult contents of the test and pressure of time to prepare for the test, the students' difficulties in selecting the right materials and identifying the appropriate methods to study efficiently, and the students' reliance on only the textbook when preparing for the test were found to be prominent. The study also proposed a variety of methods to alleviate the anxiety in order for the students to perform better in the English test.

**Keywords:** The national high school graduation exam, English test, test anxiety, causes

## 1. Introduction

The English test in the national high school graduation exam has become increasingly critical in the past few years in Vietnam. With English being a compulsory subject in the curriculum, it is expected that high school students would receive high marks in the English test in the high school graduation exam and would be admitted to a university subsequently. Nevertheless, a large number of Vietnamese students have been performing worst in English in the exam, that is, they obtained below-average scores in English, 78.22% in 2018, 68.74 % in 2019, and 63.1% in 2020. Accordingly, it is advised that students should be able to identify the causes of their own anxiety, and equipped with learning skills as well as strategies to alleviate test anxiety in order to achieve better academic outcomes (Ansi-Danso, Amissah, & Effrim, 2015).

Research on foreign language test anxiety has therefore attracted much attention from scholars, both in Vietnam and worldwide. Foreign language test anxiety has been explored in a number of previous studies, most of which indicate that foreign language test anxiety has certain effects on learners' learning process, especially learners' academic achievements (e.g., Çakici,

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2016; Mohamadi et al., 2014; Salehi & Marefat, 2014). In addition, Ohata (2005) identified two sources of test anxiety, including the students' fear of getting low grades and the limited time provided for students to prepare for the test. Research in Vietnam in the area of foreign language test anxiety has been very minimal although a number of studies on foreign language anxiety have been identified (e.g., Tran, Moni, & Baldauf, 2012; Tran, Moni, & Baldauf, 2013; Tran & Moni, 2015; Le, 2016). Moreover, most of the available studies have placed focus on college and university students, while studies involving high school students' foreign language test anxiety have been even more limited. Given that high school students are struggling to deal with the English test in the national high school graduation exam, the current study aims to investigate the causes of EFL students' anxiety in preparing for the English test. It endeavours to address the following question:

What are the causes of anxiety among the students in preparing for the English test in the national high school graduation exam?

The causes of the students' test anxiety would be explored in different aspects in the hope that they will help provide suggestions to minimise the students' anxiety.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Foreign language anxiety**

Anxiety is unavoidable when you learn a foreign language. It is believed that when learning to speak a foreign language, anxiety is a main challenge to be solved or overcome. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) defined language learning anxiety as the anxiety and negative emotional reaction produced when learning or using a second language. Khattak, Jamshed, Ahmad and Baig (2011) noted that the sense of stress, anxiety or nervousness of learners may slow down or trigger problems for their language learning and performance abilities to be achieved. In addition, anxiety may impede good performance and achievement in language learning since a large number of foreign language learners are frequently impaired by anxiety (Andrade & Williams, 2009).

There are three main types of foreign language anxiety, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Communication apprehension refers to the fear of getting involved in real communication with others, whereas fear of negative evaluation is an apprehension towards evaluations by others and avoidance of evaluative situations. Test anxiety is described as a fear of failing in tests and an unpleasant experience held either consciously or unconsciously by learners in various evaluative situations.

### **2.2. Foreign language test anxiety**

Test anxiety arises from a fear of failure and evaluative situations, especially when students have poor results in previous exams (Horwitz et al., 1986). Learners with test anxiety are afraid of negative judgement and doubt their ability to make a proper impression (McIntyre & Gardner, 1991). In a foreign language setting, negative judgement comes primarily from both teachers and their peers. Students who are afraid of negative evaluation may adopt the avoidance action. According to Aida (1994), students who are afraid of negative evaluation

might “sit passively in the classroom, withdrawing from classroom activities that might otherwise improve their language skills. In severe cases, students may think of cutting class to escape situations of distress, causing them to be left behind” (p. 162). These components are considered to have a deleterious impact on foreign language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986).

### **2.3. Causes of foreign language test anxiety**

Test anxiety has been extensively examined in terms of its connection to the test performance of foreign language learners as well as the way it influences their performance. The factors responsible for it have been explored in a growing body of studies.

Young (1991) has, for example, established test validity as one of the most important factors in generating test anxiety. Young (1991) noted that if a test contains material not taught in the curriculum or types of questions for which students had no experience, they felt nervous. Two other causes of test anxiety including fear of having bad grades and limited time for the test are established by Ohata (2005). Moreover, Bachman and Palmer (1996) found that test anxiety can be triggered by insufficient test-taker characteristics such as topical awareness, language expertise, personal characteristics, and strategic competence; test anxiety can also be related to the ability of learners, task complexity and lack of preparation for a test. In the same line, language proficiency and language history were found to have an effect on students' test anxiety (Rotenberg, 2002). Specifically, learners' lower research skills, have been described as the best predictor of test anxiety by Rasor and Rasor (1998), while Horwitz (2001) indicated that inadequate language learning is a cause rather than a consequence of test anxiety.

A number of other causes of test anxiety have also been discussed. A relationship between the level of test anxiety and the situational variables such as environments, form of exam halls, and sitting arrangements was concluded by Lee (1988) and Bushnell (1978). Moreover, Shohamy (1992) and Oh (1992) discovered various test methods such as oral interview, cloze tests, and think aloud processes increased test anxiety and reactions. The idea of teachers being strict in assessment also presents problems with anxiety (Horwitz & Young, 1991). In addition, Aydin (2008) reported the factors responsible for arousing test anxiety as low competence level, negative attitudes of learners and teachers, poor test encounters, time limits, complexity of course content, test invalidity and parental expectations. Finally, some other possible causes of test anxiety were identified by Salend (2011). These include students' learned helplessness, unreasonable expectations, peer comparisons, low level of self-esteem and trust, negative attribution and criticism, pressure related to teacher and school, highly competitive classes, high-stake testing and grading, distracting testing environment, poorly designed or timed tests.

It can be seen that there are a wide range of causes of test anxiety. In general, these causes can be summarized as being relevant to three main themes, including *learners' perceived threat of tests, learners' research and learning skills and learners' test performance attributions*.

### *Learners' perceived threat of tests*

Several researchers (e.g., Lay, Edwards, Parker & Endler, 1989; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1992) found that students with high-test anxiety appeared to view exams as threatening experiences when they saw a traumatic occurrence in the next evaluative circumstances. Students' reasons for this perceived danger were that they have some personal barriers for learning or that the particular subject matter is complex and difficult (Bandalos, Yates, & Thorndike-Christ, 1995; Schutz & Davis, 2000).

### *Learners' research and learning skills*

Everson, Smoldlaka, and Tobias (1995) revealed that when students had deficiencies in finding, collecting and storing materials during test planning, they exhibited high-test anxiety. Furthermore, students with test anxiety were prevented from cognitive processes by the inability to employ successful study skills. It was found that students with high-test anxiety studied far more than their peers with low anxiety, but the methods of study were highly repetitive and less efficient (Culler & Holohan, 1980).

### *Learners' test performance attributions*

Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1992) stated that as students encountered circumstances involving internally based failure attributions, it ensured that the upcoming tests were likely to be dangerous. In other words, students can pass past the "Challenge Level" of motivation and proceed to a level where danger is dominant. The development of a "Loss of Influence" viewpoint is promoted in cases where students develop attributions that have externalized the locus of control.

These three main themes relevant to the causes of test anxiety would be employed in the current study exploring the causes of anxiety in preparing for the national high school graduation English test.

## **3. Research methodology**

### **3.1. Participants**

Participants in this study included 84 12-grade students selected randomly at an upper-secondary school. These students began learning English at the age of 8. Data collection was conducted while 12-grade students were preparing for the national high school graduation exam. During the exam preparation time, in addition to having four textbook-based English hours a week, these students were asked to do sample English tests.

Concerning the sample size for a study, Fowler (2009) stated that increasing the sample size is one way to ensure the reliability of the data. However, it is difficult to determine how large the sample size is for particular studies. Fowler (2009) also suggested other factors affecting data reliability, such as response rates, question design or data collection quality. With a population of 500 12-grade students at the school, the sample size of 84 students together with the carefully designed data collection instruments were expected to contribute to the reliability of the data.

Ten out of the 84 surveyed students were selected to take part in a subsequent interview session. These 10 students had the most specific ideas about the causes of anxiety, and were therefore chosen to further explain their opinions as well as provide a variety of information about the students' attitudes and reactions toward their own anxiety.

### 3.2. Data collection

Questionnaire and interview were employed to collect data for the current study. These data collection instruments have their own strengths and weaknesses (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008); however, they work well for research on language anxiety. Both the questionnaire and the interview questions were in Vietnamese to facilitate the participants' provision of information. Participants' responses were then translated into English to be analyzed and interpreted.

The questionnaire consists of three parts with 22 statements being designed in 3 themes relevant to the causes of anxiety, including learners' perceived threat of tests, learners' research and learning skills and learners's test performance attributions. Participants responded to statements in a five-point Likert type scale, with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

The interview protocol included questions to further elaborate on students' responses in the questions, assisting the interviewees to feel free to express themselves. The questions asked if the students did experience test anxiety and then focused on the main causes of students' anxiety when preparing for the test. The interview also explored how students responded to their own anxiety by proposing ways to alleviate it.

### 3.4. Data analysis

As Rao and Woolcock (2003) stated, a mix of qualitative and quantitative data is typically used to create an understanding of both measured impact and process. The current study combined both quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire and interview. While the data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively, the data from the interview were interpreted qualitatively. Specifically, the data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics; the data were presented in tables with numbers and percentages and then discussed in relation to the available literature on learners' foreign language anxiety. Students' interviews were transcribed, and coded using thematic analysis (Dorney, 2007).

**Table 1.** Causes related to learners' perceived threat of tests

No	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree partly	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I feel anxious when doing the pronunciation part relevant to sounds (e.g.: how to pronounce "s" sound or vowels).	12 14.3%	49 58.3%	17 20.2%	5 6.0%	1 1.2%
2	I feel anxious when doing the pronunciation part relevant to stressed patterns.	9 10.7%	37 44.0%	22 26.2%	13 15.5%	3 3.6%
3	I feel anxious when I do sample tests with difficult collocations, idioms and phrases.	0 0.0%	2 2.4%	18 21.4%	42 50.0%	22 26.2%

4	I feel anxious when I do communication part.	3 3.6%	18 21.4%	10 11.9%	47 60.0%	6 7.1%
5	I feel anxious when I do reading comprehension containing advanced vocabulary.	0 0.0%	2 2.4%	10 11.9%	54 64.3%	18 21.4%
6	I feel anxious when I do reading comprehension containing inference questions.	0 0.0%	4 4.8%	11 13.1%	48 57.1%	21 25.0%
7	I feel anxious when doing the mock test before the real test.	0 0.0%	2 2.4%	16 19.0%	58 69.1%	8 9.5%
8	I feel anxious when there are only 4 English hours at school per week.	0 0.0%	5 5.9%	13 15.5%	44 52.4%	22 26.2%
9	I feel anxious when I am not able to concentrate much on the English test.	0 0.0%	7 8.3%	26 31.0%	33 39.3%	18 21.4%
10	I feel anxious when I do not have much time left to prepare for the English test.	0 0.0%	1 1.2%	13 15.5%	41 48.8%	29 34.5%

#### 4. Findings and discussion

##### 4.1. Causes related to learners’ perceived threat of tests

Statements 1 to 6 involve the causes related to the content being tested. The data in Table 1 indicates that the majority of the students believed that the difficult content of the test made them anxious, for example, collocations and idioms (76.2%), expressions serving communication purposes (67.1%), vocabulary at advanced level (85.7%), or difficult types of questions in the reading passages such as inference questions (82.1%). Nonetheless, only 7.2% and 19.1% of the students felt nervous about the sound and stress patterns, respectively, in the questions about pronunciation.

Statements 7 to 10 refer to the causes related to personal barriers, including the pressure of time to prepare for the examination, limited ability of concentration and lack of confidence when facing the mock tests. Of all the causes, the students felt most nervous when they did not have enough time to prepare for an actual examination (83.3%). They also found that having only four English hours a week is not enough to acquire the essential knowledge for the examination (78.6%).

The findings from the questionnaire show that the difficult contents of the test and the pressure of time to prepare for the test were the two major causes of the students’ fear for the test. Data from the interview further supported the questionnaire findings. The interviewed students claimed that they were nervous when the preparation time was limited in addition to the complex contents in the English sample tests. In particular, they shared the ideas that they had never known some structures and vocabulary in the sample tests before and they were desperately looking for help from both teachers and their peers. The complicated content together with the lack of time made them anxious, thus preventing them from identifying the correct answer effectively. As student C said, “Finding too many tough questions in the English tests leaves me tired. I could only complete 3 reading questions”, or student G complained “I seem to have never understood structures and some new words. Moreover, there are so many compulsory subjects in the national exam, so I had to split the amount of time for each subject. So I found that there was not much time for English.”

Literature has indicated that anxious students can show self-deprecating rumination about tests held during the test preparation. For test-anxious students, self-deprecating thoughts are a widely cited phenomenon (Sarason et al., 1996; Schutz & Davis, 2000; Segal, 1996), but the event has previously been reported alone during the testing period. Perceived threatening assessments are likely to make the preparation stage of test one of confusion and discomfort for students with high-cognitive anxiety problems. The pattern of failures encountered by these students tends to create a condition in which they see the coming examination as another possible occurrence that decreases appreciation, maybe one in which they do not have the skills or resources required to address the perceived danger (Bandura, 1989; Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1996; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1992).

#### 4.2. Causes related to learners' research and learning skills

**Table 2.** Causes related to learners' research and learning skills

No	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree partly	Agree	Strongly agree
11	I feel anxious when I cannot collect more sample tests to prepare for the English test.	0 0%	3 3.6%	18 21.4%	35 41.7%	28 33.3%
12	I feel anxious when I cannot select appropriate English exercises from the Internet.	2 2.4%	2 2.4%	14 16.7%	37 44.0%	29 34.5%
13	I feel anxious when I have trouble collecting English books to have more practice in vocabulary and structures.	0 0%	6 7.1%	15 17.9%	41 48.8%	22 26.2%
14	I feel anxious when I do not study efficiently for the English test.	0 0%	3 3.6%	16 19.0%	41 48.8%	24 28.6%
15	I feel anxious because I did not review all the required components and skills for the test.	0 0%	5 6.0%	20 23.8%	31 36.9%	28 33.3%
16	I feel anxious when I learn English vocabulary and structures by heart, but do not know how to use them in the test.	0 0%	6 7.2%	19 22.6%	31 36.9%	28 33.3%

Statements 11, 12, and 13 involve the causes associated with learners' research skill, that is, the skill of finding and collecting related materials to prepare for the test. Learning materials were either sample tests or English exercises from books or the Internet. Among these types of materials, the students felt most anxious (78.5%) when they could not identify appropriate English materials from the Internet. Furthermore, being unable to find relevant exercises from English books for grammar and vocabulary practice and not having access to more sample tests both made up to 75% of the students suffer stress.

Statements 14, 15, and 16 refer to the causes related to learners' study skills. It can also be seen that a large number of the students (77.4%) expressed their agreement with the opinion that being unable to study efficiently for the English test made them worried. What is more, 70.2% of the students believed that their study methods were not appropriate. For example, they did not review all the required components and skills for the test or they just memorized the

vocabulary and structures but did not really know how to answer the questions about these language components.

The findings of the questionnaire indicate that students faced difficulties in both research and learning skills, among which they felt worried most about how to select the right materials from the massive sources from the Internet as well as how to study efficiently for the test. Data from the interviews also illustrated these dominant opinions. The interviewed students claimed that they felt lost in the abundant materials from the Internet and therefore could not identify which ones were most relevant and appropriate. Moreover, the students emphasized their getting stuck in trying to study effectively for the test. As student A exclaimed, “What should I do to prepare for the test? How much time should I spend for English practice? I also need to be equipped with some strategies to deal with multiple choice questions.”

Students with weak study skills have also been found to be deficient during the test preparation process of self-monitoring (Covington, 1992). Poor study orientation and poor comprehension and selection of learning materials are attributed to students’ fear of test (Desiderato & Koskein, 1969). In addition, the data of the current study confirms Meichenbaum and Butler’s (1980) view, that is, many variables are correlated with test anxiety, such as learners’ awareness about their study conditions and learners’ study skills.

### **4.3. Causes related to learners’ test performance attributions**

The statements in this section might be mistakenly understood as being similar to those in the previous sections about the students’ fear for the test itself (4.1) and the causes related to learners’ research and learning skills (4.2). Nonetheless, as Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1992) claimed, learners’ test performance attributions referred to the test situations already experienced by the students themselves and they found that these circumstances would be very likely to result in failures in their own future test performance; the statements in the following table mainly describe the problems that students might face or recognize while doing the sample tests and/or the mock test. These difficulties were supposed to be dangerous for the students’ performance in the real test.

As shown in Table 3, statements 17, 18 and 19 describe the causes associated with students’ poor preparation for the test. Only when doing the sample tests or the mock test did the students recognize that they had not spent sufficient time on reading tasks (56%) and extra exercises (67.8%). Moreover, up to 84.5% of the students felt nervous when discovering that a number of questions in the test are not included in the textbook while they had always been focusing learning English from the textbook only.

Statements 20 and 21 show students’ anxiety because their teacher had not taught all the vocabulary and structures presented in the test (71.4%) and they therefore could not control what the real test would include in its content (65.5%), respectively.

The lack of skill to manage time when dealing with each part of the test also resulted in students’ anxiety with about 55.9% of the students showing their agreement on statement 22.



**Table 3.** Causes related to learners' test performance attributions

No	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree partly	Agree	Strongly agree
17	I feel anxious when I did not spend enough time practicing reading comprehension before the test.	3 3.6%	7 8.3%	27 32.1%	34 40.5%	13 15.5%
18	I feel anxious when I did not spend enough time doing more exercises relevant to the test.	0 0%	5 6.0%	22 26.2%	39 46.4%	18 21.4%
19	I feel anxious when recognizing that I had only focused learning the textbook lessons while the test contents have more than that.	0 0%	6 7.1%	7 8.3%	41 48.8%	30 35.7%
20	I feel anxious when recognizing that the teacher's lessons did not cover all the vocabulary and structures in the test.	3 3.6%	6 7.1%	15 17.9%	32 38.1%	28 33.3%
21	I feel anxious when I could not take control of the knowledge and skill content before the real test.	3 3.6%	13 15.5%	13 15.5%	30 35.7%	25 29.8%
22	I feel anxious when I did not know how to divide time for each part of the test appropriately.	0 0%	7 8.3%	30 35.7%	30 35.7%	17 20.2%

The findings of the questionnaire indicate that students' poor preparation for the test by relying on textbook only (84.5%) was a primary cause. Students from the interviews also agreed that they relied much on the textbook, as student C said, "I have done textbook exercises in most of my time spared for the English test preparation; just a bit of time was spent on exercises provided by the teachers or from the Internet." It is obvious that students with poor study skills or preparatory processes generally face reduced performance, regardless of testing format, allowed time for task completion, or item difficulty (Covington & Omelich, 1987; NavehBenjamin, 1991). Conversely, students with adequate preparation skills are hypothesized to encounter failures only in the presence of debilitating contextual anxiety (Benjamin et al., 1981; McKeachie, 1984; Mueller, 1980).

## 5. Conclusion and implications

The study has identified three groups of causes of EFL students' anxiety in preparing for the English test in the national high school graduation exam, including causes related to learners' perceived threat of test, learners' research and learning skills, and learners' test performance attributions. Concerning the causes associated with the perceived threat of test, students had the fear for the test itself due to its difficult and complex contents as well as their own personal barriers such as time pressure to prepare and deal with the test. For the second group of causes, the ones related to learners' research and learning skills, students were most anxious when they did not know how to select the right learning materials from the abundant sources from the Internet; in addition, they were unable to identify and employ appropriate learning methods for efficient test preparation. Regarding the causes related to learners' test performance attributions, the students described different problems they faced and recognized when doing the sample tests and the mock test, among which they felt nervous most when they

tended to rely on the textbook when preparing for the test whereas the contents of the test had more than that.

A number of suggestions to alleviate students' anxiety so that they could perform better in the English test should be proposed. Teachers should be aware of these causes of anxiety and decide which actions to take in order to prevent their students from anxiety. For example, teachers can familiarise students with the test itself by introducing the test format and set timelines to help students revise for the test. Teachers can also recommend reliable sources of learning materials for students, help them identify usable sources from the Internet together with equipping them with learning skills and strategies to prepare for the test and deal with every single part of the test. Moreover, teachers should explore the content of the test carefully in order to select prominent points to be included in their teaching as a way to get students familiar with the test right from the daily lessons.

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## NGHIÊN CỨU NGUYÊN NHÂN ÁP LỰC TÂM LÝ CỦA HỌC SINH KHI CHUẨN BỊ CHO BÀI THI TIẾNG ANH CỦA KÌ THI TRUNG HỌC PHỔ THÔNG QUỐC GIA

**Tóm tắt:** Hiện nay, nhiều thí sinh đang chịu áp lực tâm lý lo lắng khi thi. Nghiên cứu này điều tra những nguyên nhân chính gây ra sự lo lắng của học sinh khi chuẩn bị cho bài thi Tiếng Anh của kỳ thi tốt nghiệp Trung học phổ thông quốc gia. Dữ liệu được thu thập bằng bảng câu hỏi phát cho 84 học sinh lớp 12 tại một trường trung học phổ thông và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với 10 trong số 84 học sinh đó. Nội hàm của nguyên nhân lo lắng đang được điều tra có liên quan đến nhận thức của học sinh về mối đe dọa của bài thi, kỹ năng nghiên cứu và học tập của người học, cũng như các định mức làm bài thi hiệu quả do người học xác lập. Dữ liệu được tổng hợp, phân tích và diễn giải cả về mặt định lượng và định tính. Kết quả nghiên cứu đã chỉ ra những nguyên nhân có thể gây ra sự lo lắng khi chuẩn bị cho bài thi tiếng Anh của kỳ thi tốt nghiệp tiếng Anh quốc gia, trong đó nổi bật là sự sợ hãi của người học khi đối diện với độ khó và độ phức tạp của bài thi cùng với áp lực tâm lý về thời gian chuẩn bị cho thi cử, sự khó khăn của người học khi lựa chọn tài liệu học tập phù hợp và phương pháp học tập để làm bài thi hiệu quả, và cuối cùng là sự yếu kém trong việc chuẩn bị cho kỳ thi trong đó có sự phụ thuộc quá nhiều của người học vào sách giáo khoa trong quá trình ôn tập. Nghiên cứu cũng đã đề xuất một vài giải pháp nhằm giảm thiểu áp lực cho học sinh, giúp học sinh chuẩn bị và làm tốt bài thi tiếng Anh.

**Từ khóa:** Kỳ thi tốt nghiệp Trung học phổ thông quốc gia, bài thi tiếng Anh, áp lực thi cử, nguyên nhân