

A Planned Investigation into Test Anxiety among Second Language Students

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Abstract

A Planned Investigation: Test Anxiety Among Second Language Students who embark upon the learning/studying a foreign language are faced with this challenge in the effort to broaden their linguistic and cultural horizons as they prepare to live in a global society. While some students excel in this quest for knowledge, others may struggle with the obstacles of assessment along the way. There are certain factors to be explored in easing the tension of students in regards to assessment.

Keywords

Fear, Assessment, Curriculum, Emotionality, Worry

1. Background/Introduction

Horwitz et al. (1986) define anxiety as “a combination of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours that the students form in their minds about the learning process” (Horwitz et al., 1986, cited in Joy). The operative term in this definition would be “minds”. Test anxiety is a common factor in the success or failure of students at all levels and subjects of education, and language anxiety is described as the “best single correlate of achievement” (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: p. 183, cited in Joy) in the language learning process. Researchers Hill (1972, cited in Joy), Hembree (1988, cited in Joy), Wigfield and Eccles (1989, cited in Joy), and Foxman (2004, cited in Joy) “have reported that test anxiety starts as early as seven to ten years... [and] grows with age”. Moreover, Joy (2013) explains that Indian schools are focused on helping students achieve high scores on 10th and 12th grade public exams because “These two academic years are crucial for students because the marks they score determine their future path of education”.

Liebert and Morris (1967) further expound on test anxiety. They consider test anxiety “as a two-dimensional construct, consisting of worry and emotionality. *Worry* refers to the cognitive concern about the possibility of failure and the consequences of failure; and *emotionality* is the physiological change characterised by nervousness, tension autonomic reactions, and so on” (Liebert & Morris, 1967, cited in Joy). In addition to anxiety regarding making high marks, there is also a fear of not meeting the requirements of parents and future failure.

Ellis (1994, cited in Joy) identifies three categories of anxiety, which are trait, state, and situation-specific. Ellis (1994, cited in Joy) further probes the connotation of test anxiety by describing it as, “situation-specific anxiety affective factors related to specific factors and events”. The drive to perform and succeed can be an overwhelming force, sometimes causing students to crack under the pressure. Although different students may struggle in different school subjects, the subject of foreign languages can pose an added challenge to some, being that it is almost like learning to talk again. Students are faced with learning new vowel and consonant sounds, phonetic changes that depend on environments to which they are not accustomed, and semantics that is ambiguous at times. Moreover, languages are formed based on the culture and way of life of their speakers, meaning that the learners of that language are learning a new way of life in addition to the spoken language.

Researchers identify 5 variables that attribute to this anxiety. The first variable would be that of “inadequate test-taker qualities such as topical knowledge, language knowledge, personal trait, strategic competence, and effective schemata” (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, cited in Joy). The second variable entails the “students’ anxiety level is high if the test involves content that has not been taught in class’ (Young, 1991, cited in Joy). Young (1991) also identifies the third variable, which is a test format that encourages anxiety. Fourthly, “inadequate time allotment... can pressurise test takers” (Mollenkopf, 1960; Ohata, 2005, cited in Joy). The final variable is “the very thought of teachers being strict on assessment of answer scripts poses anxiety problems” (Horwitz & Young, 1991, cited in Joy).

Other factors that are believed to trigger test anxiety are “cultural differences, inappropriate test content, social inequality, and the testing process...” (Neely & Shaughnessy, 1984, cited in Aydin et al.). Another important factor that provokes test anxiety is “ethnic and socioeconomic background” (Putwain, 2007; Rasor & Rasor, 1998, cited in Aydin et al.).

2. Rationale for Study

The word “test” is considered a dirty word by students, but it’s like the unpleasant medicine we have to take within our courses. Even if we replace the word “test” with the word “assessment”, the connotation is still the same, and usually won’t ease the anxiety of some students. However, although some students view assessment as a form of attack launched by faculty, frequent assessment allows faculty to closely monitor the course progress and comprehension of students, which, if we refer to “the unpleasant medicine”, offers welcome relief to faculty

and students when students receive high marks on assessment. On the other hand, for those who do not receive high marks on assessments, the faculty and students are able to pinpoint areas requiring more focus and make sure the necessary action is taken to improve the performance of the student. Assessment may refer to chapter exams, which occur once or twice a month depending on the chapter, or quiz, which entails only one topic, occurring usually once a week. The following studies conducted by Joy (2013) and Aydin et al. (2020) show cause for concern among students in Turkey and India who studied English as a second language regarding test anxiety. These alarming rates of anxiety are affecting students' grades, even to the point of not successfully completing the course. Students display anxiety not only during chapter exams and the final exam, but during brief quizzes which assess only one topic as well, and although course averages are based on homework and classwork/participation, the anxiety that affects student performance on tests can lower the course average even with high marks on homework and participation. Foreign language faculty properly balance percentage weights to each course category, i.e. homework, classwork/participation, quizzes, chapter exams, final exam, etc., but extremely low test grades are posing a problem for some students due to high test anxiety levels. For this reason, we should observe and continue to investigate the essential element of test anxiety among students.

3. Researchers' Methods of Study on Test Anxiety

Foreign language educators have taken action in the quest to discover and resolve the underlying issue of test anxiety among their students. We should peruse the research of experts in the field in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of test anxiety and take action to assist students in eliminating this unfortunate pitfall. Joy (2013) distributed a questionnaire to 80 male and 53 female randomly-selected ESL students from four colleges located in Tamil Nadu, India. All were approximately 18 years of age and first-year undergraduate students. The questionnaire included twelve first person statements in two parts with the first part having ten statements on pre-, during-, and post-exam factors and the second part having two statements pertaining to anxiety and measures taken. After explaining the statements to the students in their native language, the students were then permitted to respond to the statements with "Never Me", "Rarely Me", "Sometimes Me", or "Very Much Me". The responses were based on a four-point scale, with the lowest score indicating lowest anxiety level and the highest score indicating highest anxiety level.

Aydin et al. (2020) conducted a study on 57 EFL students at a preparatory school of a university in Turkey. The students ranged in ages from 18 - 22, with 30 females and 27 males. The three data collection methods were focus groups, essays, and interviews along with a background questionnaire. The purpose for these research tools was to collect data based on their actual feelings and opinions. It is important to note that the study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Social Sciences because "it was a must to clarify whether there is an

ethical problem or a risk regarding participation in the study” (Mack et al., 2005, cited in Aydin et al.).

During the process of collecting data, the students answered three questions which pertained to their feelings before, during, and after taking a test, problems as a result of feeling anxious before, during, and after taking a test, and strategies to overcome the problems.

4. Upcoming Research Methodology

The above studies by Joy (2013) and Aydin et al. (2020) will serve as a reference for a qualitative study of foreign language students at Johnson C. Smith University, an HBCU in the United States. The students will be given a questionnaire and will be interviewed at various times to determine when their anxiety is at its highest and lowest level. Students will be asked in various scenarios about their thoughts and feelings at that time. The selected students for the study will be first-year students of Spanish and French who show need of improvement based on their current foreign language course average, below 80%. Students with a course average higher than 80% will be allowed to participate if they choose based on what they perceive to be issues with text anxiety that may mean a difference between an A and B letter grade. It may also be helpful to consider psychological factors for selected students. These factors may include learning disabilities, life changes brought on during the pandemic, other obligations that may affect performance, etc. Data from the completed questionnaire and interview will be collected and calculated.

5. Results from Joy (2013) and Aydin et al. (2020)

Joy (2013) discovered that the vast majority, 92.5%, of the students in the study demonstrated an anxiety level above 50%. This high percentage is mostly during the second stage (during a test) of the process. Also, all students indicated that they have not been trained nor assisted at all by teachers in coping with anxiety, which shows a lack of concern from teachers on the issue. Joy (2013) stresses that the role of teachers is imperative in eliminating stress, and a grading system should be utilized instead of numerical test scores. It is also suggested that teachers should allow student input when composing tests in order to avoid student and parent competition.

Students’ pre-test responses included “I get irritated for frivolous incidents whenever the English language (EL) exam approaches”, “Despite thorough preparation I feel nervous about taking EL exams”, “The very thought of EL exams frightens me”, and “I have fallen sick during exam weeks and I think it is because of exam-oriented stress”. In response to the during-test responses students stated that they would forget details while taking a test, experience headaches, dry mouth, sweaty hands, shivering, and pounding heart during the test, which was mentioned by Joy (2013).

According to Aydin et al. (2020), the following responses by students reveal

the sources of test anxiety: “I can say that I have a fear of failure and repeating the same class next year. This makes me feel very anxious about my future”. Regarding past experience, a student responded, “I am a repeat student, so I am so frightened that I will experience the same this year”. Regarding test preparation/studying for a test, a student responded, “I don’t feel nervous if it is a test I have studied for. If it is a test, I haven’t studied enough, I naturally become nervous”. Students also expressed concerns pertaining to “fear of evaluations by their teachers and classmates” (Joy, 2013). They also expressed that “an emotional factor, the lack of self-confidence” triggered anxiety, which refers to Liebert and Morris (1967) who explained “worry” and “emotionality”.

Aydin et al. (2020) revealed that the sources of test anxiety among the students were the following: fear of failure (19%); parental expectations (15.2%); fear of negative evaluation; (13.0%), lack of study skills (12.5%); lack of self confidence (11.4%); low performance on tests (8.7%); past experiences (7.6%); test administration procedure (6.5%); high achievement goals (3.8%); poor language proficiency (2.2%). These students also expressed such physical effects of test anxiety as eating and sleeping disorders, “small itchy scars on the different parts of my body... stomach aches and nausea”.

6. Anticipated Results for Upcoming Study

It is predicted that the results of the upcoming qualitative investigation may be similar to those of Joy (2013) and Aydin et al. (2020). What is anticipated more than the results will be the curriculum development that will follow the results. Joy (2013) and Aydin et al. (2020) have pointed out that more efforts from foreign language educators are needed in order to remedy test anxiety among students, and proposed changes will be made according to the results of the investigation. As the results are revealed, special attention will be paid to the target language, which may point to language complexity. Students in the studies of Joy (2013) and Aydin et al. (2020) were studying English as a foreign language, and students in the upcoming study will be students of French and Spanish. English is classified as a West Germanic language while French and Spanish are classified as Romance Languages, making the language being studied a crucial factor.

7. Possible Considerations for Future Study

A high test anxiety level is anticipated for the study, which allows us to now consider future research to remedy these results. Although the results of the study will offer a better view of future research and action that needs to be taken, curriculum development in regards to in-class activities and sessions should now be considered. Test anxiety may not only entail a test in and of itself, but faculty should also consider making the classroom a stress-free, tension-free environment on a daily basis.

We’ve acknowledged that music is known to ease the anxiety of students, but considering the learning styles of students, we should research transforming the

classroom into more of a “recreational” learning space for students. By doing this, we should allow the input of students in terms of their hobbies and skills as a reference in shaping the lessons. As a result of this transformation, we may also want to consider testing in this manner.

In order to gather the aforementioned data from students, further qualitative studies would be conducted, including questionnaires and interviews, which would still offer insight into the true feelings of students as their rendered responses. These studies to be conducted in the future would offer foreign language educators a wealth of knowledge on establishing a classroom environment that would guarantee a stress-free learning experience for students, allowing students to perform to the best of their ability and receive the highest possible marks.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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