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The altitude of test anxiety among second language learners

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Abstract

Taking a second-language test is a nervous affair; and in India, test anxiety has silently wreaked havoc on students' psyche. Particularly for students who take public exams in Grades X and XII, anxiety is quite lurid. Given the influence of the obsolete and rigid nature of exams on students' psyche, we believe that a study related to test anxiety will provide useful insights. This paper reports a research conducted with 133 students to find out their level of anxiety related to pre-, during- and post-test stages with a view to studying the impact on students' performance and providing teachers with a better perspective on test-related problems.

Keywords: Test anxiety, Affective filter, Motivation, Assessment, Evaluation

Background

Every attempt made hitherto in majority of the Indian schools has been aimed at helping students score high marks in the public exams held in Grades X and XII. These two academic years are crucial for students because the marks they score determine their future path of education. One of the guaranteed ways of getting high marks is through rote-learning because the out-dated, rigid and narrow testing methods encourage such practices. Regrettably such methods keep schools away from any relevant innovations. In addition, school authorities pressurise teachers to train students to memorise than practise communication skills to better their scoring chances because these marks are used by the school authorities as advertisements to lure prospective students at the time of admission. Apparently, parents too insist on such marks-driven procedures. Willingly or unwillingly, teachers have to follow suit, for the expertise of the teachers is assessed primarily by the marks their students obtain.

The concern for high marks, as we know, has engulfed all the stakeholders alike; and this very concern eats into the development and happiness of the students who are at the receiving end. The students find it difficult to digest the fact that they are not trained for the practical use of the target language, instead are encouraged to memorise and ape responses. Also, the over-dependence on marks leads the students to adopt desperate measures sometimes even to manoeuvre unethical ways such as copying from the neighbours and from the 'hidden' notes. We also come across shocking news ranging from students fainting inside the exam hall to the extent of taking their own lives after disappointing results. In India, the suicidal toll is high, as Srivastara (2011)

has claimed, "Of the 19 students who commit suicide each day in India, 6 of them kill themselves fearing failure in examinations" (p. 76).

Test anxiety: definition, causes and consequences

Anxiety refers to affective factors that influence the way students learn a second language in classrooms. Horwitz et al. (1986) have defined it as a combination of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours that the students form in their minds regarding the language learning process. Studies suggest that language-anxiety is the "best single correlate of achievement" (Gardner & Maclntyre, 1993, p. 183), therefore, the level of anxiety often determines the amount of learning. Krashen (1982) in his affective filter hypothesis has claimed that high anxiety leads to negative impact; and this state is common among the second language students. In a study conducted by Campbell and Ortiz (1991), they have found that almost half the sample population "carry alarming levels of anxiety" (p. 159). However, the intensity and longevity of it differ among individuals depending on personality traits.

Anxiety can be classified into three categories such as trait, state and situation-specific anxieties (Ellis, 1994); and test anxiety is part of situation-specific anxiety which is based on affective factors related to specific situations and events. Horwitz and Young (1991) have defined test anxiety as an apprehension over academic evaluation which is a fear of failing in test situations; and for Zeidner (1998) it is a set of phenomeno-logical, physiological, and behavioural responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure in an exam or similar evaluation situation. Liebert and Morris (1967) have considered 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. Test anxiety, thus, is considered as a type of anxiety concerning apprehension over academic evaluation which emanates predominantly from fear of failure. Failure in this regard does not alone refer to the doubt over securing the required pass mark, but also to the failure related to meeting the future requirements, expectations of parents and so on.

It is not surprising that test has emerged as one of the most compelling anxiety-evoking stimuli, and thus has turned into a serious problem (Sarason, 1980; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). The devastating impact of test anxiety on learning intake and output has a well-documented history. In fact, it has invited ample investigative attention since early 1950s. One of the earliest investigations is a series of study by Sarason and Mandler (1952) in which they have found a strong relationship between test anxiety and student-performance. On the positive side, research by Blau (1955) and Chastain (1975) have suggested that better performance is linked to encouraging levels of test anxiety among the students. On the negative side, Spielberger (1966) has observed a counter negative relationship among college students. Findings reveal that academic failure has been more among high-anxiety students than low-anxiety counterparts. Eventually more of high-anxious students have dropped out of college. All these studies point to the fact that test anxiety could not only impair test performance but also harm students' future.

Closely linked to anxiety level is the stage in which anxiety grips students' psyche, and it is a matter of concern because studies like that of Hills (1972), Hembree (1988),

Wigfield & Eccles (1989) and Foxman (2004) have reported that test anxiety starts as early as seven to ten years. Importantly, the first three of these studies have also identified that anxiety grows with age.

Apart from the level and the stage of anxiety, personality type of students is also important because the level of anxiety correlates with the personalities of the students. It is normal for students to be worried when they face life's challenges. However, intense and prolonged anxiety harms their performance. Some take exams lightly and others, as far as Spielberger and Vagg (1995) are concerned, "experience more intense levels of state anxiety when taking tests" (p. 6). Nonetheless, as mentioned elsewhere, anxiety is not always a deterrent to better learning conditions. Sometimes it functions as a base to better learning conditions because anxiety at a reasonable level can be facilitative. Bailey's (1983) study has evidenced that facilitative anxiety is closely associated with better language learning and competitiveness among the students. So, moderating the level of anxiety becomes imperative as the higher the anxiety level is, the lower the language performance of the students appear.

A number of variables is attributed to test anxiety. Firstly, inadequate test-taker qualities such as topical knowledge, language knowledge, personal trait, strategic competence, and effective schemata may cause anxiety (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). Secondly, unfamiliar content increases test anxiety. In a study, Young (1991) has established that students' anxiety level is high if the test involves content that has not been taught in class. Thirdly, complicated and unfamiliar test format decreases test performance and increases anxiety (ibid). Fourthly, inadequate time allotment, according to Mollenkopf (1960) and Ohata (2005), can pressurise test takers. Finally, the very thought of teachers being strict on assessment of answer scripts poses anxiety problems (Horwitz & Young, 1991).

These five factors mentioned above impinge on the students as they cause psychological and physiological problems. At the psychological level, it affects motivation (Campbell & Ortiz, 1991), decreases attention and increases the probability of language errors while using language (Sarason, 1980) and creates a negative attitude towards target language (Shohamy, 1982) and towards the self which Knox et al. (1993) have termed as negative self-concept. Physiologically too students experience difficulties. For example, their hands sweat and shiver, heads ache, hearts pound, memory falls short of expected recollection and so on. As a result, to use Alcala's (2002) words, anxious students "frequently fail to reach their potential. Their marks do not fully reflect their knowledge of second language" (p. 2).

Context of the study

We have seen that the testing of English as a second or foreign language needs radical change in terms of its substance and method. However, the helplessness of educators in not being able to break away from the traditional practices has been voiced time and again by the authorities. One such admission is from the director of National Council of Educational Research and Training, Kumar (2010), who in an interview has said that ". . . some of the basic reforms are yet to occur. There are some systematic tendencies on which greater dialogue and clarity are overdue" (p. 11). Later in the interview, he has also stated that "Both children and teachers feel so stressed and scared because the

examination system is so mark-oriented and rigid." Recently, the education ministry has categorically stated that the mark-oriented testing system would gradually be phased out by the continuous assessment system. Nevertheless, the idea of doing away with the present system has received mixed reactions not only from the school managements and the parents who are particular about continuing with the current system, but also from the teachers. Strangely enough, voices of the students are hardly listened to or heard from. Studies related to exams and the related anxiety are still sparse in India.

Objectives of the study

The study aims at measuring the anxiety level of students in relation to exams. It tries to find out the altitude of test anxiety particularly the pre-, during- and post-stages with a view to informing teachers on the impact of anxiety and the related problems. In addition to this, the study also tries to find out the attitude of teachers towards test anxiety.

Methods

A sample comprising random-selected 80 male and 53 female students from four colleges of Tamil Nadu, India, formed the backbone of the study. They were about eighteen-year old first-year undergraduate students who had taken their Grade X and XII state board public exams.

A questionnaire comprising twelve statements in two parts was given to the students (see Appendix). The first part had ten statements on pre-, during-, and post-exam conditions, whereas, the second part consisted of two statements on overall anxiety and remedial measures taken. All the statements were explained to the students in their mother tongue before they started selecting their choice on the rating scale. The statements were given in first person narrative and students responded by ticking on a four-point scale labelled 'Never Me', 'Rarely Me', 'Sometimes Me' and 'Very Much Me'. Each label was given a score between zero and three to indicate the level of anxiety. For example, the first choice 'Never Me' was given zero points to indicate that the anxiety level of the students was almost mute if they had chosen it as their choice. Whereas, the other end of the scale had 'Very Much Me' with three as a score against it to indicate that the anxiety level was in its peak. The minimum the score is, the lowest the anxiety level stays; and the maximum the score is, the highest the anxiety level stands.

The individual score of a student for the first part of the questionnaire would range between zero on the lowest level and thirty on the highest. The questionnaire was given to first-year undergraduate students during the first month of the academic year of 2011–2012. In order to get genuine responses, the students were advised not to write their names or any other personal information. Moreover, discussion among students was discouraged while answering the questionnaire.

Data description and analysis

The graph given below illustrates the anxiety level of the students in relation to Grade X and XII exams. The 'y' axis displays the score of individual students for the first part of the questionnaire. The altitude of anxiety can be measured along these points, that is, from zero to thirty. As mentioned elsewhere, the more the score is, the higher the anxiety stands; the lesser the score is, the lower the anxiety remains. The 'x' axis shows

the total score of the 133 students. Complicated statistical measures are intentionally avoided. Instead, the score is presented raw in order to capture the responses visually. In other words, the score shown on the graph is the exact visual reproduction of the original score of the students which has not gone through any mathematical calculations or interpretations.
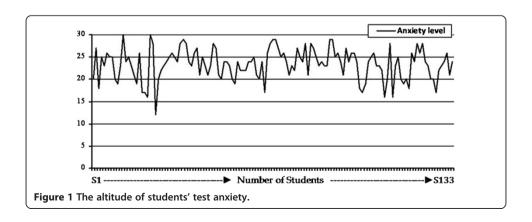
Figure 1 a cursory glance at the graph given above reveals the fact that for 92.5% of the students the anxiety level is above 50%. Only 7.5% of the students have the anxiety indicator on or below 50%. Of those students whose anxiety level is above 50%, shockingly 42.5% of students have anxiety level above 79% which, no doubt, is alarmingly high. Among the three stages, the level of anxiety is comparatively higher during the second stage than the preceding and succeeding stages.

The responses for the second part of the questionnaire indicate that 94% are unhappy with test anxiety as it prevents them from performing to their potential. Strangely, no student was given training on how to handle test anxiety. 77% chose 'Never Me' and the rest said 'Rarely Me', that is, 100% of the students responded that teachers have not helped them to cope with test anxiety. Apparently, coping strategy, with reference to test anxiety, is a non-issue for teachers.

Results and discussion

Students, irrespective of their proficiency level in L2, are unable to perform well in exams. They are psychologically affected and hence become silent victims of the rigid testing system. It has to be noted that anxiety at any stage is detrimental to better performance. However, the most hazardous are those at the pre- and during-test stages because these stages are directly linked to test scores. During exams, anxious students are affected by the inherent threat created by tests which distract them from effective performance.

The post-test stage does not seem to affect performance directly unless the anxiety of a particular test is carried over to other succeeding tests. However, the consequence of post-test is also damaging as the results end up in systematic miscalculations of educational measurement. It becomes imperative on the testers part to create a test environment in which the students excel in their performance because the purpose of testing is vital to both the tester and the testee. For example, a placement test which fails to get the best out of students would end up streaming them wrongly and as a result

Figure 1 The altitude of students' test anxiety.

would impair their future; or in case of a career-based test, the result would be rejection of deserving students which is a loss for employers and employees.

While it may seem trite to state this, it cannot be denied that the role of a teacher is paramount in moderating anxiety. The belief that the teachers should do more than preparing students with test content to make them perform to their potential has been reiterated. The fact that all the students have responded unanimously about teachers doing nothing about helping them tackle test anxiety suggests two possibilities: firstly, the teachers are not aware that such a problem really exists; and on secondly, despite knowing the condition, they do nothing to check it because it is not part of the syllabus and that doing anything about it requires additional time and effort. Whatever reason it may be, it is about time that the negative influence of test anxiety is treated with care.

In order to reduce anxiety, numerical test score could be replaced by grading system. This would reduce competition among students as well as parents. This could be supported by a relevant testing method which is skill-oriented. Moreover, allowing student involvement in test development can create a positive attitude towards learning a second language. Since test anxiety affects academic achievement, effective therapeutic interventions for reducing its adverse effects should be considered important by teachers and policy makers.

Conclusions

We have established that test anxiety is a major factor that can impair test performance and lead to underachievement. Unfortunately, in India, the anxiety level is too high that along with weakening performance level of the students it also affects the lifestyle of students. Theoretically speaking, testing has become more authentic, formative, developmental, ethical and user-friendly leading to student autonomy. But a three-hour paper-and-pencil exam can neither lend itself to accommodate these features, nor test language skills comprehensively and help classrooms benefit from positive washback. In fact, a major change in the present testing system does not seem be on the cards for some time now. Given the scenario, it is better that teachers do something about educating the students on the coping strategies to tackle test anxiety. This would at least reduce unwanted pressure which is looming large in the contemporary educational setup.

Appendix
Test Anxiety Questionnaire

Tick (√) the appropriate choice
(0) Never Me / (1) Rarely Me / (2) Sometimes Me / (3) Very much Me

PART I

Pre-test
1. I get irritated for frivolous incidents whenever the English Language (EL) exam approaches.
(0) (1) (2) (3)
2. Despite thorough preparation I feel nervous about taking EL exams.
(0) (1) (2) (3)

3. The very thought of EL exams frightens me.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

4. I have fallen sick during exam weeks and I think it is because of exam-oriented stress.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

During-Test

5. I forget important details while writing exams because of stress.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

6. During exams, my head aches, mouth dries or hands sweat/shiver.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

7. My heart pounds abnormally while taking the exam.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

Post-test

8. I feel that I have not been able to give my best in exams.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

9. MI worry about my inability to perform better in exams.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

10. I am demotivated after every exam because of my inability to perform to my best satisfaction.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

PART II

11. I think that anxiety has played havoc on my performance and I am unable to perform to the best of my ability.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

12. I have been taught by teachers how to handle test anxiety.

(0) (1) (2) (3)

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