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Reducing Test Anxiety among 12th Grade Students: Iraqi Kurdistan Region/ Soran City as an Example

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ABSTRACT
This study aims at reducing test anxiety among twelfth grade students at Soran city high schools. Throughout the study both quantitative and qualitative methods used to collect data. The participants were 450 twelfth grade students in five schools at Soran City-Kurdistan region of Iraq. Non-random purposive sampling because the students needed special qualifications as they were required to be 12th grade students study in general schools at Soran city. The data was analyzed by using descriptive statistical techniques by computing Mean, standard deviation, t-test of significance and Eta squared. The results show that all participants are dealing with high test anxiety. Female students are more anxious to male students, and also students from science branch have higher test anxiety than literary students.
Keywords: English, Test anxiety, Reducing test anxiety12th grade

Introduction

There is no doubt that successful modern lifestyle requires striving for success and passing the stage of assessment in order to be regarded as qualified and competent amongst others. Further, modern education system tends to put focus on the significance of tests and remarkable academic performance. Thus, one of the factors that make foreign language learning somehow problematic is the individuals' differences which may have impacts on the learning process. Hence, this culture plays crucial roles to pressurize students to succeed and it results in stress and anxiety which will be reflected later in the individuals' professional and academic performance or state. To put it differently, anxiety or exam anxiety becomes a salient point of concern since students are expected to meet the needs and standards of a certain determined criteria; individuals are being tested to pass a certain level.

The researchers are interested in investigating such an issue since anxiety plays a crucial role in determining students' future majors. In addition to this, at the end of the high school senior year, all 12th grade students must take a national standardized test. This test is somehow similar to the ACT, and it will determine what type of university and what type of subjects/curriculum they will be allowed to take. Many students who do not score high on this test will go to Institutes or vocational types of schools to study electrical, automotive, secretarial, etc. Students who score the highest will be able to go to the University to study English, Science, health and Math and related Engineering Degrees and the others will only be able to enter some the Arts and Humanities.

Literature Review

Anxiety, as a psychological and physiological condition occupying mind, is a negative unpleasant concern about future events and influences the mood as well as behavior and hence results in impatience, discomfort…etc.

In addition Zeidner defined test anxiety as "the responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure on an exam or similar evaluative situation"(1998:17-18). And Ergene, quoted Spielberger's(1972) definition that " test anxiety is an unpleasant state characterized by feelings of tension and apprehension, worrisome thoughts and the activation of the autonomic nervous system when an individual faces evaluative achievement-demanding situations"(2003:314).

Generally, different studies have been forwarded regarding test anxiety. Strongman (2000) pointed out

that test anxiety results in differences in individuals' cognitive performance. Driscoll (2004) highlights that students are significantly affected by test anxiety. That is, stress and anxiety are considered as fundamental components to overwhelm individuals during examinations or presentations.

Test anxiety is a manifestation of social evaluation anxiety tested by students in an assessment environment (Putwain, 2007). Zeinder (1998) and Rathman (2004) shed light on the point that all students experience tests at least once in their academic life. Moreover, advances in research on test anxiety and its relation with test performance broaden to some factors such as poor motivation (Elliot McGregor, 1999), the function of immune system (Keogh& French,2001), cognitive activity(Eysenck& Calvo, 1992, Sarason, 1988, Zatz&Chassin, 1983, Peleg-popko,2004).

It is worth mentioning that when the negative consequences of tests are taken in to consideration in an individual's educational and vocational aspects, tests evolve anxiety (Sarason, 1986; Zeidner, 1998; Rathman, 2004).

Moreover, studies suggest that test anxiety comprises of many negative effects such as low enthusiasm, poor performance, negative self-evaluation viewpoints and low concentration (Hancock, 2001; Tobias, 1979; King, Mietz, Tinney & Ollendick, 2007).

Further, other studies have attempted to explain how test anxiety affected students (Culler&Holahn, 1980; Dendato&Diener,1986;Musch &Broder,1999; Wine,1971;Wittmaier,1972; Zeidner,1998).However, many researchers have found causes and treatments for test anxiety(Culler&Holahan,1980). They tackled the development of effective treatments for anxiety. It is found that poor study skills or training and physiological impacts of anxiety lead to poor academic achievements (Culler&Holahan, 1980). While Morris and Liebert (1970) note that there would be a negative response between worry and test performance, and also they suggested that the physiological acts such as pulse rate, temperature, blood pressure are indicators of anxiety. And emotionality, which includes nausea and sweating, affects the nervous system (Cohen, Ben-zur& Rosenfield, 2008). Similarly, Michenbaum (1972) highlighted that emotionality plays a minor role in test anxiety and academic performance. Thus, he suggested that it is worry which is directly linked or related to a decrease in test performance, and therefore treatments should give focus to the worry phenomenon.

Zondi(2013) dealt with the effect of breathing techniques on test anxiety among university students . The results of the study show that breathing techniques had appositive effect on students with test anxiety.

In summary, other researches handled relations between gender and anxiety. It is illustrated that gender affects the growth of anxiety in identified evaluative encounters (Basso, Gallagher, Mikusa& Rueter, 2011).However, Hannon (2012) revealed that none of the cognitive/ learning factors accounted for gender differences in SAT performance. On the other hand, in elementary schools, gender differences start to be noticed and female students may appear to be higher test anxious compared to male students(Hembree,1988;Hill& Sarason,1966;Zeidner,1998).Cassady(2004) conducted a study on the negative impact of cognitive test anxiety in the test preparation, performance and reflection phases. The study revealed that students with high cognitive test anxiety showed lower study skills. Further, the relationship between test anxiety and academic performance has demonstrated that cognitive domain of test anxiety may have a crucial influence on test performance (Cassady&Johnson, 2002; Morris & Hutchings, 1981). In addition, students who are equipped with poor study skills are inadequate in self-monitoring during tests (Covington, 1992). That is, students with high test anxiety appear to take or perceive tests as threatening events.

Moreover, Cassady, Mohammed&Mathieu (2004) conducted a study among women in the two countries Kuwait & USA and they confirmed that test threat is not felt in communities where success is guaranteed to all the individuals.

Putwain and Natalie (2011) examined the point whether fear appeals used prior tests raised test anxiety and had a detrimental effect on reducing test scores. This study demonstrated that exposure to negative information (i.e. fear) is considered as a damaging mechanism and is causally related to reducing examination scores and may indeed contribute to the development of test anxiety. Furthermore, Cassady and Ronald (2001) investigated the cognitive dimension of test anxiety for psychometric quality. They pointed out that higher levels of cognitive test anxiety were noticeably associated with lower test scores. However Aydin (2009) highlighted that test anxiety has crucial impacts on the foreign language learning process. All in all, most researches in test anxiety have been put forward toward creating better measures of test anxiety (Liebert&Morries, 1967; Spielberger, Gonzalez, Taylor, Algase&Anton, 1978). Taken as a whole, the quantity of studies has been quite limited and to date and no study has yet demonstrated Reducing test Anxiety among 12th grade students in Iraqi Kurdistan Region/soran City.

The research aims:

1- Finding the English test anxiety level from the participants.
2- Finding the statistical differences in terms of gender.
3- Finding the statistical differences in terms of branch of study.

4- Did the students use any scientific ways to reduces English test anxiety?

Assumptions and Limitations

1. It is assumed that all participants answered the questions willingly and truthfully.
2. It is assumed that all the participants took the time to seriously reflect on and consider each question.

Limitation of the study

One might not be able to generalize the findings of these quantitative and qualitative interviews because the samples are nonrandom purposive and convenience sampling. Future research could involve more participants.

Research Methodology

Methodology:

The current study is a mixed of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The research is quantitative because the researchers used (Driscoll, 2004) with some changes, and the researchers also used a qualitative data method. They utilized it in this study to look at in depth open–ended interviews. Nowadays, mixed methods research design has received a growing interest in humanities and social sciences fields (Creswell, 2012; Dahlstrom,Nygaard, & Crosno, 2008; Freling & Forbes, 2005; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). The major advantage of combining a mixed methods research design is that the weakness of one approach is compensated for by the strengths of the other (Creswell, 2012; Sekaran, 2006).

Population:

The present study was conducted on a sample of (450) 12th grade students in five schools at Soran City-Kurdistan region of Iraq in March 2016. See table (1).

Table (1) High school names

N	Branch	Population
1	Science	1698
2	Literary	2346
T		4044

Sample:

The researchers chose non-random purposive sampling because the students needed special qualifications and there were 450 students as they were required to be 12th grade students study in general schools at Soran city.

Instruments:

The researchers used Driscoll, 2004, scale with some changes and they translated the questionnaire into Kurdish language and showed to three expert translators. Furthermore, for running reliability with using Cronbach's Alpha of (.89), the researchers used Spearman brown Test and re-test method, and gave the questionnaire to (20) students, then after ten days giving the same questionnaire to the same (20) students, the result of that test was (0.87).

Method of Analysis

The data was analyzed by using descriptive statistical techniques by computing Mean, standard deviation, t-test of significance and Eta squared. Also, for the qualitative method, the instruments used for data collection were designed to discover the thoughts, opinions and recommendations of students to overcome English Test Anxiety Validity for this study depends on the "Methodological skill, sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher" because the researcher is the instrument for the interview (Patton, 1990, p.11).

Results of quantitative method:

Table (2)

	N	Mean	Hypothesized mean	Std. Deviation
Test Anxiety	450	38.84	30	6.18

	t-test for Equality of Means					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Test Anxiety	30.34	449	0.00	8.84	8.26	9.41

One sample t-test was conducted to compare the statistical differences between the population mean and the hypothesized mean. There was a significant difference in scores between them (M= 38.84, M 0= 30, SD= 6.18 ; t (449)= 30.34 , p=0.00 , two tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean differences=8.84, 95% CI: 8.26 to 9.41).

Table (3)

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Test Anxiety	Female	189	40.39	5.79
	Male	261	37.71	6.22

	t-test for Equality of Means					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Test Anxiety Equal variances assumed	4.64	448	0.42	2.68	1.54	3.81

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the statistical differences between male and female. There was no significant difference in scores of females (M= 40.39, SD= 5.79) and males (M=37.71, SD= 6.22; t (448) =4.62, p= 0.42, two tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean differences= 2.68, 95% CI: -0.26 to 4.71). (eta squared=0.045) indicated a small effect size.

Table (4)

	Branch	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Test Anxiety	Science	193	41.52	4.83
	Literary	257	36.82	6.32

	t-test for Equality of Means					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Test Anxiety Equal variances assumed	8.61	448	0.001	4.7	3.36	5.77

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the statistical differences between science branch and literary branch. There was no significant difference in scores of science branch (M= 41.52, SD=4.83) and literary (M= 36.82, SD= 6.32; t (448) = 8.61, p= 0.001, two tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean differences=2.68, 95% CI:1.54 to3.81). There was a large effect size of eta squared=0.14).

The Results of Qualitative Method:

Students are asked an open-ended question (whether they have ever used any method or way to reduce test anxiety before). Out of 450 students only 18 students mentioned that they have used some ways to reduce test anxiety. To put it differently, for example, nine students used spiritual religious ways as making duaa (i.e., prayer) and reciting verses of the Holly Book to reduce test anxiety (Students, 1, 33, 46.58, 75, 106, 223, 326. 443). Moreover, only two students are using working out strategy (students, 165, 421). Also, two students decided to have enough hours of sleep during the night before the test (Students, 189, 374). (Student, 411) was

listening to music to reduce test anxiety for only one hour a day before taking the test. (Student, 98) used a different method, stated that "I smoke cigarettes 10 minutes before the test". (Student, 284) said "I am using cheat sheet during English test and this helps me to reduce test anxiety. (Students, 70, 112) stated that they are having personal private tutors. The rest of the participants were used no ways for reducing their test anxiety before, during and after the exam.

Discussion:

Findings of the quantitative method:

The first aim of this research is to find out the English test anxiety level among the students, specifically 12th grade ones. The findings of this study show that all the participants are dealing with the high level of test anxiety according to Driscoll (2004), because the populations mean (38.84) is higher than the hypothesized mean (30). The results clearly show that the mean differences between these two variables are (MD=8.84). Furthermore, there is a statistical difference between these two variables (t=30.34).

The second aim of current research is to discover whether there is a statistical difference in terms of gender with test anxiety variable. The mean of male was (M=37.71), while the mean of female was (M=40.39). According to Driscoll (2004), female participants are dealing with extremely high test anxiety; while males are having high test anxiety. The independent sample t- test to find the statistical differences is used ,and the result found is (t=4.62).This shows that there is a statistical difference between male and female participants, and this obviously shows that female participants are more anxious than male participants.

The third aim of this study is to find out that whether there is a statistical difference between science branch and literary branch with test anxiety variable. The mean of science branch was (M=41.52), and the mean of literary branch (M=36.82). After running the independent sample test, the T- test was (t=8.61). This shows that there is a statistical difference between these two variables. The findings show that the students in science branch are experiencing extremely high level of test anxiety and the participants in literary branch are experiencing high level of test anxiety; this shows that students in science branch are more anxious in English test than the students in literary branch.

Results of qualitative open- ended question:

In the last part of the questionnaire, the researchers asked students whether they used any scientific ways to reduce the English Test anxiety. Surprisingly, it is discovered that (432) students pointed out that they have not used any ways or methods to reduce English test anxiety. This means that they answered (**No**) to that question.

Also, the spiritual religious ways are used by (9) students, while (2) students slept well before the test, two other students listened to music, and another couple of students mentioned that they work out exercises to reduce their test anxiety before English language exam. A shocking answer was that one of students said s/he employed cheating device to reduce English test anxiety. Finally, smoking cigarette, ten minutes before the test, is mentioned by only one student to reduce the test anxiety.

DISCUSIION AND RECOMMENDATION

In fact, identifying test anxiety symptoms can be considered as a first crucial step in encountering the suffering of test anxiety. Throughout analyzing the collected data, the researchers reached to the point that only a limited number of students employed multiple strategies (i.e. spiritual religious ways, sleeping the night before the test, listening to music, smoking cigarettes, using cheating sheet as well as having private tutors) to maximize their performance on English test while others used no working out strategies to reduce test anxiety. Furthermore, this inability to employ effective study skills results in student's high-test anxiety. Hence, students with high-test anxiety are seen as poor self-regulators.

Moreover, some consideration should be given to what it might be called gender differences. The evidence that presented in this study highlighted the point that gender is causally related to test anxiety, female participants are more anxious than male participants. This finding supports the previous result study by other research in literature review. And also students from science branch have higher test anxiety than literary students, and this is due to the fact that science branch students should achieve higher marks so to be enrolled in medical and engineering schools.

On the basis of these findings, it would be prudent to combat test anxiety on the part of students, teachers of English and psychologists acting as tutors at schools. In other words, students would be best advised if they know basic facts about the test; that is, they should not believe or rely on rumors. They should familiarize themselves with the format of the questions, and making an organized study schedule and stick to it. In addition, students have to counter negative thoughts, which distrust them and freeze them up during the test, with positive thoughts and actions. It is important that students should arrive with a plan to find out the reality and ignore the myths which are tricks or secrets behind test-questions. However, teachers of English and psychologist tutors or social advisors should advice students to try hard and stick to their study schedule, take study breaks regularly as

well as surround themselves with positive friends who support their studying have positive attitudes about the test itself.

Finally, it could be of key importance if students take some tips into consideration in order to overcome test anxiety, namely English language test anxiety. Preparation, organization and practice are the best steps to reduce test anxiety. In other words, students have to know well the studying area. They have to stay organized and stick to the study plan along with practicing answering questions since the more they are accustomed to studying, the more comfortable they will feel when they actually sit down to take the test.

CONCLUSION

It is a known fact that a tiny anxiety is normal and can be considered as something not bad. However, on the basis of the findings that researchers arrived at, twelfth grade students (males/ females) at Soran city high schools are seen with high-test anxiety when they have English module test. Hence, when their level of test anxiety is high, they are showing symptoms (mental and physical) which results in poor performance.

It is recommended that students have to remember the three tips to reduce test anxiety: preparation, fixed study plan and practice. In addition to this, if they find that their level of test anxiety is high; they should consult with s psychologist advisor at school and make a list of the fears about the English test and ask the tutor to write down the specific steps that are necessary to take to help conquer each fear. It is concluded that when students become proficient in knowing the sources of fear and the techniques of study through practice, they will be able to employ them during the times of taking tests whenever they feel anxiety creeping up to them.

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