

# EFL Learner's Beliefs and Experiences of Test Anxiety

معتقدات وتجارب متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية الأجانب لقلق الامتحان

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## Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to identify the effects of anxiety on EFL students' performance in a testing situation at the Language Center of Zawia University. 210 students from the language center participated in the study. Data was collected by using a questionnaire. The collected data was analyzed by using a quantitative design and discussed in relation to the research question. The findings of this study show that there are negative effects of anxiety on students' performance in testing situation. It reveals that the more anxious the students are the lower they perform in a test.

## ملخص البحث :

تهدف هذه الورقة لمعرفة اثر القلق على أداء الطلبة لامتحانات اللغة الانجليزية بمركز اللغات بجامعة الزاوية. استهدفت هذه الدراسة مائتان وعشر طالبا من نفس المركز، تم جمع البيانات باستخدام طريقة الاستبيان وتم تحليلها باستخدام التصميم الكمي. أظهرت النتائج أن للقلق أثرا سلبيا على أداء الطلبة لامتحانات اللغة الانجليزية بمركز اللغات بجامعة الزاوية ويعتبر احد أهم الأسباب الرئيسية لضعف الأداء والتحصيل العلمي.



### **Introduction:**

Test anxiety is very common among EFL students. It prevents students from remembering what they need during the test, even if they have learned and known that thoroughly. Dusek (1980:88) defines test anxiety as “an unpleasant feeling or emotional state that has physiological and behavioral concomitants, and that is experienced in formal testing or other evaluative situations.” Young (1991:429) states that “In language testing, the greater degree of student evaluation and the more unfamiliar and ambiguous the test tasks and formats, the more the learner anxiety is produced”. Young (1991) believed that there is a relation between test anxiety and EFL students’ performance. That is, the more anxious the students are the lower they perform in test. Hancock (2001) investigated the effects of test anxiety on EFL students’ achievement and motivation. He found that all students, especially students with a high anxiety level, performed poorly and were less motivated to learn. Literature on test anxiety shows that some of the factors that influence students’ reactions to tests are related to test validity, time limit, test techniques, test format, length, testing environment and clarity of test instructions (Young, 1991).

Although this phenomenon has given attention all over the world, no significant study has appeared in Libya and this research paper tries to shed some light on the effects of anxiety on students’ performance in testing situation.

### **Literature Review:**

Test anxiety as a phenomenon has received considerable attention since 1950s. It is considered to be the most common educational problem which affects EFL students’ performance. Phillips (1992) conducted a research study on the effects of anxiety on EFL students’ oral test performance and attitude. An oral exam cue sheet for a role play was used as instrument. The results showed that students with higher anxiety tended to say less, to produce shorter words in communication and to use fewer dependent clauses and target structures. While students with a low anxiety tended to say more, to produce longer communication units and to use more dependent clauses and target structures. While the previous study examined the effects of anxiety on EFL students’

oral test performance and attitude, another investigation by Aydin et al. (2006) concentrated on the reasons and the effects of anxiety on EFL students' written tests. A test anxiety scale and survey questions were given to the sample group and the data gathered were analyzed statistically and descriptively. The findings from this study showed that: First, the level of test anxiety decreases at higher grades and the students who have higher scores are less anxious than the ones who have lower marks. Second, test anxiety producing factors are low level proficiency of the learners, negative attitudes of teachers towards test applications, students' attitudes towards language learning, test invalidity, fear of negative evaluation, bad experiences on tests, time limitation and pressure, the difficulty of course contents and parental expectations. Third, test anxiety causes physical and psychological problems, affects motivation, concentration and achievement negatively, increases errors in learning process, prevents students to transfer their real performance to test results and studying efficiently and decreases the interest towards language learning. Finally, teachers' behaviors and attitudes and learners' proficiency are the key factors to decrease and prevent test anxiety. Moreover, inter- and intra-rater reliability, validity of tests, test techniques, clarification of test items, the aims, content and number of the questions, time limitation and pressure are some significant issues which decrease and prevent anxiety of learners during test situation.

Another study conducted by Trifoni and Shahini, (2011) aimed to investigate the impact of test anxiety on learning as well as its causes and effects on students' performance. The data was collected by using a questionnaire that consisted of three parts. The first part was intended to collect personal information of participants, such as their age, gender and the year at university. The second part was test anxiety scale adapted from Sarason (1980). The third part consisted of an open question survey. The findings from this study showed that: First, the factors that cause test anxiety are related to, lack of preparation for the tests, inappropriate test preparation, fear of negative evaluation, bad experiences on previous tests, time limitation and pressure, the number of items included in the test and the difficulty of course content. Second, stu-



dents are usually affected by test anxiety, especially during the administration of the test. Also they found that the students who have a high level of test anxiety, performed very poorly. Finally, teachers' attitudes are the key factors in reducing test anxiety. Also they found that test techniques, specific orientation before the test, information on the content and number of questions, time limitation and pressure are some significant issues about which teachers and instructors should think in order to reduce test anxiety.

### **Components of Test Anxiety**

The fear of evaluation which is relevant to test anxiety is defined by Liebert and Morris (1967) and McDonald (2001) as having two distinct components. The first component is the cognitive component (worry) which is the mental activity that revolves around the testing situation and its possible effects on a person. The word 'worry' in the context of test anxiety research is defined as the feeling of distress, concern and anxiety over impending evaluative events (Zeidner, 1998). Initially, Liebert and Morris (1967:975) define worry as "any cognitive expression of concern about one's own performance", such as pessimistic expectations, obsession with performance and possible outcomes, including self-criticism, overwhelming fear about failing grades and absent-mindedness (Hambree, 1988; Berk & Nanda, 2006). As a result, individuals who are test-anxious become more obsessed with the implications and consequences of failure to meet situational challenges rather than rationally focusing on completing the task in an orderly manner (Sarason, 1986; Zeidner, 1998).

The second component in test anxiety is emotionality. It is seen as a physiological component of test anxiety whereby an individual experiences tense muscles, raised heart rate, the feeling of sickness, dizziness, sweating and shaking (McDonald, 2001). Schutz (2002) describes emotionality component as a type of emotions that the student is experiencing. These emotions can be pleasant (e.g., pride, satisfaction) or unpleasant (e.g., anger, hopelessness). The distinction is based upon cognitive appraisals. If the student's goals are being met and the exam is going as expected, then pleasant emotions are likely to emerge such as

feeling pride and contentment. However, if the exam is not going as expected then unpleasant emotions are likely to emerge such as feeling disappointed or angry. Furthermore, if a student believes that he or she cannot effectively cope with the exam, the experience of anxiety is more likely.

In brief, test anxiety consists of two components. The first component is worry which is related primarily to cognitive concerns about the consequences of failure. The second component is emotionality which is related to the physical reactions to the test situations, such as tense muscles, raised heart rate, the feeling of sickness, dizziness, sweating and shaking.

### **The Main Sources of Test Anxiety among Foreign Language Students**

The specific conditions and mechanisms that cause test anxiety are not well understood, but there is evidence that students who are test-anxious tend to have high levels of general anxiety that are exacerbated during evaluations (Huberty, 2009). However, the synthesis of the previous researches that focus on the major factors that cause test anxiety during testing and examination demonstrated that there are certain factors that cause test anxiety in foreign language learning. These factors include the following:

Time limit during test administrations is a significant variable that causes and affects the level of test anxiety among foreign language students. Immerman (1980) investigated the effect of time restraints on diagnostic test scores. In his study, he found that tests given without time limits remove test anxiety. Similarly, Madsen and Murray (1984) examined the reflections on the sources of stress during major examinations. Their findings demonstrated that students with a high test anxiety level are distressed by time constraints.

Several variables contribute to students' anxiety, these variable include: low English proficiency, lack of practice and competition and task difficulty which vary from context to context (Bailey, 1983). Neely and Shaughnessy (1984) reviewed the literature on cultural differences that affect test performance and the assessment process, including test anxiety. They noted six problems which are frequently cited regarding the use of tests: inappropriate content, inappropriate standardization samples, examiner and language bias,



inequitable social consequences, measurement of different constructs and differential predictive validity.

Learners experience more anxiety in highly evaluative situations. That is, the more unfamiliar and ambiguous the test tasks and formats are the more the learner anxiety is produced (Daly, 1991). Another factor that increases test anxiety and decreases performance is lack of face validity. For instance, a study conducted by Horwitz and Young (1991) note that tests in the lack of face validity lead to higher anxiety and a negative attitude toward instruction.

Inappropriate test technique is also one of the factors that provoke test anxiety. Young (1991) reported that students felt anxious when they had studied hours for a test and then they were asked question with which they had no experience. For him, students experienced anxiety with a particular test format. In addition to students' capacity, task difficulty, the fear of getting bad grades and lack of preparation for a test are the other factors that make students worried. He also found that students experience anxiety if the test involves content that was not thought in the class. Worry and fear of failure is the major component that cause test anxiety during testing and examination (Sapp, 1993). Moreover, he pointed out that non facilitative parent- child interactions and parents' negative communication patterns have links to the development of test anxiety.

The type of test sometimes leads to test anxiety. Some students become anxious during exams that require them to demonstrate their knowledge in ways in which they do not feel comfortable. For example, some students panic when they find they have to take essay tests. Others become anxious over oral exams. Different types of tests can make students anxious (Van Blerkomp, 2009).

From the previous research studies, it can be concluded that test anxiety has many sources: most commonly caused by a lack of exam preparation, poor study habits, poor time management, lack of organization of the text notes and homework are examples of being unprepared. Test anxiety can also be caused by worrying about past test performance, how others are doing on the test and the consequences if don't doing well. Moreover, negative com-

ments of teachers on test applications, the fear of negative evaluation and students' bad experiences on prior tests are other reasons that provoke anxiety. In addition to these, it is also possible to add some other factors: one of them is scoring subjectivity that makes learners anxious while another is closely related to negative aims of using tests such as a means of authority and punishment. To finish, low level proficiency and achievement of the students and their parents' expectations are last two reasons.

### **The Effects of Test Anxiety on EFL Students' Performance**

Understanding students' feeling during testing process has been a prime concern for researchers, educators and counselors as test anxiety may have a deleterious impact on test performance, academic success and overall well-being (Bonaccio and Reeve, 2010).

The results of the studies that focus on the effects of anxiety on EFL students' performance in testing situation found that test anxiety has certain effects on learning process, academic performance and educational outcomes. In this section, the results of these studies are presented: Sarason (1980) found that test anxiety plays an important role on EFL students' performance. It leads to negative evaluation, lack of concentration, unpleasant physiological reactions and low proficiency in test performance. Hancock (2001) found that all EFL students, especially students with a high anxiety level, performed poorly and were less motivated to learn. Thus he concluded that when students who are particularly test-anxious are exposed to a highly evaluative assessment environment in their educational institution, they perform poorly and are less motivated to perform.

Another research study was conducted by Cassady and Johnson (2002) to investigate the effect of cognitive test anxiety (worry) on EFL students' academic performance. The results showed that cognitive test anxiety exerts a significant stable and negative impact on academic performance measures.

EFL Students with a high-test anxiety as well as those with a low-test anxiety showed lower academic performance. Moreover, students with moderate levels of test anxiety performed the best (Vogel and Collins 2002). Aydın et



al (2006) found that test anxiety has many effects, as physical and psychological problems, increases the errors in learning processing, prevents students from reflecting their actual performance in their test results and from studying efficiently and reduces the interest in language learning.

Researchers have also demonstrated that EFL students with higher level of anxiety obtain lower marks in examination (Sena et al., 2007). Huberty (2009) claimed that test anxiety overtime tended to chip in more extensive under achievement. He described the outcomes of severe test anxiety including lowered self -esteem, lessened effort and loss of motivation for school task.

To sum up, anxiety has negative effects on EFL students' performance especially if the anxiety is very high. It is the factor that inhibits students' ability to absorb, retain and recall information. Moreover, it creates a kind of noise or mental static which includes going blank on questions and remembering the correct answers as soon as the exam is over. In other words, it blocks the ability to retrieve what is stored in memory and impairs the ability to comprehend and explain. In addition, it causes difficulty on reading and understanding the questions on the exam paper, organizing thoughts, retrieving key words and concepts when answering questions and doing poorly on an exam even though the material is known thoroughly.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this research paper was to investigate the effects of anxiety on EFL students' performance in examination settings. Being aware of this feeling and its effect, students become able to eliminate, avoid or cope with situations where anxiety is expected.

### **Research Question**

This research paper tries to answer the following question:

What are the effects of anxiety on EFL students' performance in testing situation?

### **Participants of the Study**

The participants of this study were students at the Language Center of



Zawia University. A sample of 210 students from the language center participated in the study. These students were different in their English level, gender and age. The purpose of this research paper and other information, including confidentiality, were clearly explained to participants.

**Instrument of Gathering Data**

To know the effect of anxiety on students’ performance the questionnaire was used. This questionnaire consisted of 12 items. The questionnaire items were adapted mainly from Horwitz et al. (1986), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. To test validity, the adapted questionnaire was presented to two experts in the field of education to find out whether the questionnaire was adequate to its objectives or not. According to experts’ suggestions the questionnaire was written in its final form. To assure the reliability of the questionnaire, the researcher used test-re-test method. It was administered to 12 participants from the language centre. These participants were selected randomly: four from each level (beginner, elementary and intermediate). After a couple of weeks, the same questionnaire was given to the same participants. The results indicated that the reliability was 0.727 that is according to Smith (1991) considered good and acceptable reliability. After testing the validity and the reliability, the questionnaire was given to participants during the spring semester of 2017. The participants were asked to respond to the statements by indicating whether they always, sometimes or never experienced the feeling mentioned in the statement. In order to make sure that participants understand all the items appeared in the scale, it was translated orally into Arabic.

**Table 1. Cronbach’s Alpha**

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach’s Alpha	No. of items
0.727	12

**Data analysis**

The data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed and presented in the table. This table shows the effects of anxiety on students’ performance in examination setting.



Table 2. Statistical Analysis of Students' Questionnaire

Questionnaire items	Always	Sometime	Never	Percent
1-Nervousness while taking the exam hinders me from doing well.	80.5%	9.5%	10%	100%
2- Feeling anxious while taking the test helps me do well.	13.4%	9.5%	77.1%	100%
3- The more anxious I am, the less efficient I become.	75.7%	12.9%	11.4%	100%
4- I feel anxious before the start of the exam.	74.3%	12.4%	13.3%	100%
5-During the test, I write the answers in the wrong places.	39.2%	44.5%	16.3%	100%
6-During the test, I make mistakes on easy questions.	33.4%	53.3%	13.3%	100%
7-In speaking tests, my anxiety prevents from doing well.	41.9%	47.6%	10.5%	100%
8- I work hard for the test, but I lose a great part of my knowledge in the test.	31.9%	55.2%	12.9%	100%
9- After the test, I become nervous until I get my results.	25.8%	27.1%	47.1%	100%
10- I study well, but my answers and grades don't reflect the effort I put into studying.	50%	39.5%	10.5%	100%
11-I feel my heart beating very fast during the English test.	69.9%	18.1%	12.0%	100%
12- I get a headache when I have an English test.	66.7%	20.0%	13.3%	100%

### Discussion of the Results:

The results obtained from this study reveal to the negative effects of anxiety on students' performance in testing situation. The high percentage of most

items of the students' questionnaire was clear evidence that led to this conclusion.

**The results obtained by item (1)** 'Nervousness while taking the exam hinders me from doing well' show the majority (90%) of students believed that they feel nervous when taking the test and this 'nervousness' hinders them from doing well. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Sapp (1993) that there is a negative relation between test anxiety and achievement. That is, the more anxious the students are the lower their performance becomes. Moreover, these results align with the results obtained by Vogel and Collins (2002) that the students with a high-test anxiety as well as those students with a low-test anxiety showed lower academic performance.

**The results obtained by item (2)** 'Feeling anxious while taking the test helps me do better' show the majority (77%) of students believed that anxiety is not the factor that makes them do well. That is mean; anxiety has a negative effect on students' performance in testing situation, since it is not the factor that helps students do well in their examination. These results align with the results obtained by Soler (2005) that a high level of anxiety affects academic performance. Moreover, these results support the results obtained by Hancock's study (2001) that there is a negative relation between test anxiety and students' performance. That is, the more anxious the students are the lower they perform in test.

**The results obtained by item (3)** 'The more anxious I am, the less efficient I become' show the majority (89%) of students believed that high- anxiety makes them less efficient. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Hancock (2001). He found that all students, especially students with a high anxiety level, performed poorly and were less motivated to learn. Thus he concluded that when students who are particularly test-anxious are exposed to a highly evaluative assessment environment in their educational institution, they perform poorly and are less motivated to perform. Moreover, these results support the results obtained by Soler (2005). He found an indication that a high level of anxiety affects academic performance. In addition, these results are on agreement with the results obtained by Young (1991). He found that the more



anxious the students are the lower their performance becomes.

**The results obtained by item (4)** ‘I feel anxious before the start of the exam but once I start I forget my anxiety’ show the majority (87%) of students believed that anxiety takes place before the test, but once they start answering the exam questions, they try to overcome it. These students are like those in Aydin et al.’s study( 2006) suffer from anxiety before the test but once the exam starts, they try to control their anxiety by using specific techniques, such as breathe deeply and stay focus on the test.

**The results obtained by item (5)** ‘During the test, I write the answers in the wrong places’ show the majority (84%) of students believed that anxiety is one of the factors that makes them make silly mistakes like writing the answers in the wrong places. These results are similar to the results obtained by Abdalrazzag (2010) that anxiety leads students to make silly mistakes like writing the answers on the wrong places and in some cases forgetting the answers to the easy exam questions.

**The results obtained by item (6)** ‘During the test, I make mistakes on easy questions’ show the majority (87%) of students believed that anxiety is one of the factors that makes them make mistakes on easy exam questions. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Covington (1985) that students with high anxiety often forget the answers to simple exam questions. Moreover, Abdalrazzag (2010) found that anxiety is the factor that leads students to do silly mistakes like making mistakes on easy exam questions and writing the answers on the wrong places.

**The results obtained by item (7)** ‘In speaking test, my anxiety prevents me from doing well’ show the majority (90%) of students believed that anxiety is the factor that prevents them from doing well in speaking test. These results are similar to Philips’ results (1992). He found that there is a relationship between anxiety and oral performance, reporting that the more anxious the students are the lower performance they display in oral tests. In other words, anxiety has negative effects on the oral proficiency of language learners.

**The results obtained by item (8)** ‘I work hard for the test, but I lose a

great part of my knowledge in the test' show the majority (87%) of students believed that anxiety is one of the factors that makes them lose a great part of their knowledge in the test. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Aydin et al.'s study (2006) that test anxiety has many effects, such as increasing the errors in learning process and making students lose a great part of their knowledge in the test situations. Moreover, these results support the results obtained by Covington (1985) that students with high anxiety often forget the answer to simple exam questions.

**The results obtained by item (9)** 'After the test, I become nervous until I get my results' show the majority (53%) of students believed that anxiety takes place until the results be known. This feeling may affect students' performance if other exams are coming. In other words, test anxiety takes place even if the exams finish and this may affect students' performance if other exams are coming. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Aydin et al.'s study (2006) that students with a high anxiety level suffer from worry and anxiety until they get their results.

**The results obtained by item (10)** 'I study well, but my answers and grades don't reflect the effort I put into studying' show the majority (90%) of students indicated that anxiety is one of the factors that why their answers and grades don't reflect the efforts they put in to studying. They indicated that anxiety prevents them from displaying their real knowledge and abilities in the test and transferring their real performance to test results. In other words, it prevents students from remembering what they need during the test, even if they have learned and known that thoroughly. These results are similar to the results obtained by Aydin et al.'s study (2006) that anxiety prevents students to reflect their actual performance to test results and from studying efficiently, and reduces the interest in language learning. In addition, these results support the results obtained by Sena et al.'s study (2007) those students with a high level of anxiety obtain low marks in examination.

**The results obtained by item (11)** 'I feel my heart beating very fast during the test' show the majority (88%) of students indicated that anxiety makes



their heart beating very fast during the test. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Aydın et al.'s study (2006) that students who have a high level of test anxiety suffer from headache, stomachache, increasing heart pulse and acnes before and during test administration.

**The results obtained by item (12)** 'I get a headache when I have an English test' show the majority (87%) of students believed that anxiety makes them have a headache when they have English test. These results are in agreement with the results obtained by Immerman (1980) that anxiety makes students suffer from a headache when they have English test.

### **Conclusion:**

The data of the current study reveal that anxiety has a negative relation with a bad effect on students' performance in testing situation. In addition, it takes place before, during and after the exams finish. It is the factor that causes a difficulty in retrieving from memory the information that has been learned, and decreases the concentration during the test. Moreover, it makes students do silly mistakes like writing the answers in the wrong places and making mistakes on easy exam questions. The results also show that anxiety is the factor that prevents students from displaying their real knowledge and ability in the test and transferring their real performance to test results. In other words, it is an obstacle to efficient study and to an effective use of the knowledge already acquired. In addition, it is the factor that bothers students and makes them be unsure if they will get good results or no or even succeed or not. Moreover, it causes physical problems like getting a headache and increasing heart beat before and during test administration. Finally, it is hoped that these findings encourage EFL teachers to identify students having a high anxiety and low self-esteem and create a supportive and friendly atmosphere for them to perform well and concentrate on their test for better results and academic performance.

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