A REVIEW OF FACTORS CAUSING TEST ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the concept of test anxiety by focusing on its complex definition, and the factors associated with it. Whilst there are several nuances in the definitions proposed, test anxiety can be generally defined as a tensed and stressed mental state faced by learners when they think of a test or when they are taking the test. Since it is situational in nature, test anxiety is categorized as the Situation-Specific Anxiety instead of Trait or State Anxieties. Common factors which cause test anxiety are stressful events which lead to worrying concerns. This paper is hoped to be useful to leaners and educators who are interested to get a concise review of test anxiety.

Keywords: Anxiety, Situation-Specific Anxiety, causes of test anxiety, stress, worrying concerns


1.0 THEORISING TEST ANXIETY

Leal, Goes, da Silva, Ferreira, and Teixeira-Silva (2017) define anxiety as mental state of being apprehensive, afraid, tensed, stressed and nervous regarding activities or surroundings of the individuals. Anxiety could be experienced temporarily or persistently. In an academic environment, Bisson (2018) indicates that while average anxiety has a positive impact on academic performance, high levels result in poor grades. Bisson (2018) also states that the rate of depression is more prevalent in female than male and varies according to race. Students with anxiety-related disorders experience fatigue, weight loss or gain, suicidal, psychomotor agitation, and hypersomnia or insomnia. Tiredness and loss of interest minimise retention of information and concentration hinders academic excellence.

University students are vulnerable to experiencing episodic stress especially when they newly arrive on campus as transitioning to a new life in the university could be stressful as they have to change their roles, identities and face other stressors such as getting ready for presentation, preparing for examinations. The students’ drastic life changes could make them more prone to stress (Monteiro, Balogun & Oratile, 2014). Their stresses also stem from the
fear of failing to do well academically and being overwhelmed with changes that affect them interpersonally and environmentally. Parental and institutional pressure forcing students to score high marks contributes to game and internet addiction to relieve stress. The affected students feel dissatisfied and are prone to suicidal tendencies.

Evidently, students’ psychological emotions rise and fall according to the academic calendar (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Students experience the highest levels of anxiety during their first year and examination periods. However, the levels decrease as they adjust to the environment and develop coping mechanisms. Studies reveal that prolonged psychological stress lowers self-esteem, concentration, attention, causes difficulties in solving conflicts, increases alcohol consumption, sleep disorders, and inhibits growth and academic performance (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015).

1.1 Types of Anxiety

Horwitz and Young (1991) make a distinction between three types of anxiety: Trait Anxiety, State Anxiety, and Situation-Specific Anxiety. According to Gidron (2013), trait anxiety is the tendency attending, experiencing and reporting negative emotions. For example being afraid, worried and anxious continuously regardless of any situations. Trait anxiety is part of an individual’s personality and its characterization is based on what the individual sees as a threat. They are constantly anxious even in non-threatening situations. Spielberger (1970; 1983) and Huang (2012) define state anxiety as a transitory emotional state that makes an individual feels apprehensive, nervous and experience heighten nervous system activities for instance increased heart rate and respiration. Horikawa and Yagi (2012) explain further that levels of state anxiety fluctuates or intensifies based on the individual’s response to the situation faced.

Situation-Specific Anxiety is a form of trait anxiety but it is limited to a specific situation. Situation-specific anxiety can be stable but the stability could be affected when if individual is faced with an unpleasant situation. This form of anxiety is commonly felt when an individual is preparing for an examination, competition, interactive activities and resolving issues. Test anxiety is an example of situation-specific anxiety. Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts (2006) describe test anxiety as the negative feeling where the individual feels worried, experience negative physiological and behavioural responses due to worries related to failing an examination or not having the competency to do well in any form of assessments. Individuals suffering from test anxiety are often agitated, have heightened awareness, unsettled with all that is associated within their vicinities (Bohlmeijer et al, 2010).

Educational stress has affected numerous male students studying in schools and universities. Zhang and Henderson (2014) assessed test anxiety of 166 third-quarter students in relation to academic performance in writing. Response variables from clinical examinations were compared to scores from written examinations. Regression analysis reveals that there was a statistically notable negative correlation between test anxiety inventory scores and written exam scores. Emotionality and worry were the best predictive models for written exam scores. For females, the average total anxiety and emotionality scores were significantly greater than for males; however, this was not the case for the worry scores.

According to Deffenbacher (1986a, p. 635), “worry, emotionality, and task-generated interference correlated positively with each other and negatively with performance”. Such concerns focus on negative test performance, potential negative results, and a fear of
comparison to others.

One of the reasons for students performing poorly in tests is memory dispersal due to anxiousness. As such, the working memory available to students during the test becomes less focused towards the test and recollection of material (Deffenbacher, 1978). Research displayed that the assumption of acting well in tests and successful performances in relation to worry as a component of test anxiety are negatively correlated (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995).

Ticker (2014) investigated the content of thoughts and worries related to test anxiety in order to expand the existing knowledge of its components. Respondents in the study were 177 undergraduate students of a campus at an urban university. The symptoms of test anxiety were measured using the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI); the worry content was measured by adopting the Worry Domains Questionnaire. Internalized vs. externalized worries were compared through the Brief-Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale. The findings showed that there was a significant correlation between test anxiety and external worry, as well as internal worry associated with lack of confidence. The findings implied that there was no considerable variation in externalized vs. internalized worries towards participants who experience test anxiety.

Lotz and Sparfeldt (2017) studied 192 college students and focused on the worrying aspects of test-anxiety. They found that there is a significant principal influence of the examination date. Test anxiety increased immediately before the examination. In the same vein, Arens, Becker and Möller (2017) studied 5135 German students in their seventh grade to identify whether and how they are engaged in test anxiety. They found that achievement correlated negatively with test anxiety. Brady, Hard, and Gross (2018) found that first year students experience higher test anxiety and are less confident regarding how to do well compared to their seniors.

2.0 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO TEST ANXIETY AMONG STUDENTS

The factors contributing to test anxiety among students are elaborated in the sub-sections below.

2.1 Stressful Situations

Transition from high school to university poses challenges to students as they have to become responsible for their lifestyle and decisions. First year students have to adapt to the new learning environment and cope with the social and academic demands of their institutions. As a result, the transition and adjustment to the higher education program enhances anxiety. International students experience issues like new responsibilities, separation from families, balancing between private lives and studying, and financial concerns. Students experience anxiety form personal factors like financial constraints, balancing between employment and studies, family conflicts and health. High-performance expectation, language barriers, and class workload triggers academic stress. The learning and living environment play a crucial role in the life of students. Therefore, factors like discrimination, interruption, affect their wellbeing, resulting in fear, anxiety, and lack of concentration in the classroom. Relationship and interpersonal relations play a crucial role in the student’s wellbeing. Therefore, there is a need for guidance and social support to enhance the mental health of learners. Anxiety has a negative impact on
the academic and health of students. Therefore, there is a need for learning institutions to incorporate stress management and coping strategies courses in the curriculum to equip students with sufficient skills.

2.2 Personal factors

Personality and personal experiences contribute to the mental well-being of students. Student life balance refers to the degree to which an individual balance all the aspect of his life. Deviation from one result in inclination toward the other; hence, resulting in an imbalance. Cheung et al. (2016) assert that poor lifestyle habits like lack of hobbies, exercise, balanced diet, rest, and sleep contribute to the anxiety levels among students. Similarly, alcohol and drugs impair the cognitive functions of learners, making them engage in illegal activities to sustain their life, resulting in absenteeism and indiscipline.

Financial difficulties result in unmet bills, which cause depression. As a result, some learners are compelled to combine their studies with a job to finance their needs. While working increases job experience, student experiences challenge balancing between classwork and employment. Most students are worn out during class time and do not get time to revise for their examination. The heavy academic load and job responsibilities result in stress (Essel & Owusu, 2017). Such mental burdens led to health problems that cause additional stress to students, as they have to balance between school life and taking care of their bodies (Salleh, 2008). Therefore, universities need to consider the welfare of learners battling ailments while undergoing their studies at the institution.

2.3 Academic Concern

Adapting to a new learning and living environment is fundamental for mental health. Students studying abroad and in their home country experience academic stress caused by the workload, financial strain, language difficulties, and high expectations. International students tend to experience frustrations due to lack of financial resource, language problems, loneliness, and inability to fit into the new culture (Alharbi & Smith, 2018).

One of the factors that contributes to academic stress is poor English language proficiency. Dimitrov (2017) argues that some students do not fear examinations but experience communication problems, which evoke a sense of anxiety. Language proficiency determines students’ ability to learn and transmit information as most learning institutions teach and evaluate their students in English, creating fear and anxiety among learners who cannot communicate in English.

Essel and Owusu (2017) assert that students need to have sufficient time outside the academic environment. However, long hours of study while working on assignments or revising for examinations reduce focus academic work. Lack of sufficient relaxation and socialisation time hinders performance, hence increasing anxiety among learners. According to Essel and Owusu (2017), although some students voluntarily miss classes, some do so because of reasons beyond their control. As a result, they fail to comprehend course materials or receive disciplinary measures. The thought of struggling to attend lessons and personal issues become an immeasurable burden. Examinations are mandatory, as they are the only way through which students prove that they deserve better grades, hence learners are highly anxious
during the exam period. Kulsoom and Afsar (2015) assert that grading and assessment methods affect the learners’ wellbeing. Inability to comprehend class material heightens the students’ anxiety, as they will answer the examination questions because failure may result in suspension of discontinuation of studies.

### 2.4 Problematic Relationships in Academic Setting

Relations play a crucial role in the different aspects of our lives. Students’ interaction with classmates, roommates, schoolmates, and other people in the host environment can influence their stress levels. While sharing houses and rooms of residence encourages socialization, it enhances distractions and dissatisfaction because of lack of time alone and distractions. Therefore, prevailing conflicts, misunderstandings, and abuse affect students’ emotional wellbeing, resulting in anxiety.

Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) argue that negative cognitions regarding examination where students overestimate the consequences of failure, set unattainable academic goals or underestimating their abilities resulting in poor performance and anxiety. Dental, medical and engineering students exhibit high-stress related symptoms like lack of sleep and sleeping disorders. This results in hostility, inability to concentrate, and reduced performance.

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

Test-anxiety should not be taken for granted as it has negative impacts on students. Stakeholders in academic setting should be sensitive to the factors causing test anxiety so that necessary actions can be taken to support the potentially affected students. This review has several implications to be considered. Firstly, educators should pay extra attention to the first year students as they are more vulnerable than their seniors. Secondly, the educators should develop a positive view of the test so that students do not simply see it as something that is carried out to measure their weaknesses. Thirdly, educators should help promoting supportive academic environment so that students do not encounter stressful events.

### REFERENCES


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