

**Investigating Students' Management of Test Anxiety****Ghaouar Nesrine****ghaouarnesrine@tahoo.fr****Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba- Algeria****Receipt date:15 /01/2019; Acceptance Date: 05 /10/2019; Publishing Date: 31/10/2019****Abstract:**

Test/ exam anxiety is part of the learning process as along the exam period students show discomfort and uneasiness. Test anxiety is an inevitable state; however, its strength can lead to undesirable results. This research investigates academic anxiety with a special focus on test anxiety. It tries to answer the following questions: "What skills do master I students lack in order to effectively manage test anxiety? And what are the main reasons behind test anxiety? It has been hypothesized that master I students- department of English –Badji Mokhtar University-Annaba-lack study skills to cope effectively with test anxiety. Besides, they experience test anxiety because of the excessive concern about the consequences of failure. A questionnaire was administered and the results confirmed the hypotheses. Therefore, students need training on effective study skills along the year and anxiety management during the test/exam period

**Keywords:** Academic anxiety, test anxiety, causes, management.

**Résumé**

L'anxiété liée aux tests / examens fait partie du processus d'apprentissage car, tout au long de la période de l'examen, les étudiants sont gênés et mal à l'aise. L'anxiété de test est un état inévitable. Cependant, sa force peut conduire à des résultats indésirables. Cette recherche examine l'anxiété scolaire en mettant l'accent sur l'anxiété liée aux tests. Il tente de répondre aux questions suivantes: «Quelles compétences manquent les étudiants en Master I pour gérer efficacement l'anxiété liée aux tests? Et quelles sont les raisons principales de l'anxiété liée aux tests ? On a émis l'hypothèse que les étudiants en mastère I - département d'anglais - Université Badji Mokhtar, Annaba - n'avaient pas les compétences nécessaires d'apprentissage afin de faire face efficacement à l'anxiété liée au test. En outre, ils éprouvent de l'anxiété au test en raison de l'inquiétude excessive suscitée par les conséquences d'un échec. Un questionnaire a été administré et les résultats ont confirmé les hypothèses. Par conséquent, les étudiants ont besoin d'une formation sur les techniques efficaces d'étude tout au long de l'année et sur la gestion de l'anxiété pendant la période de test / examen.

**Mots-clés:** Anxiété scolaire, anxiété au test, causes, gestion

\*corresponding author

## Introduction

At the academic level, students experience anxiety with teachers, classmates, the educational system, and even exams. Test/exam anxiety is the hallmark of test/exam period at any educational level- primary, middle school, high schools and even university. It is that state of pressure and uneasiness observed in learners' behaviors, faces, and even the words and the expressions they use along that period. Tackling this topic becomes a necessity as in every test or exam students seem terrified and afraid and even request to postpone it. Hence, what are the components of test anxiety? Is it just an emotional state? Can anxiety have a positive effect on learning? Is it of different types? What are its main causes? And students can manage test-anxiety?

### 1. Academic Anxiety

Nowadays is marked by stress and anxiety. Anxiety is a general uneasiness, a feeling of self-doubt, and a sense of tension (Woolfolk, 2004, p. 365). It is of two types harmful and helpful (Oxford, 1990). The first is negative and should be avoided at all costs, whereas the second is positive and helps in boosting learners to realise themselves. Most learners suffer from raised inhibitions and fears that prevent them from taking the necessary risks to learn the foreign language (Brown, 2000). Academic anxiety is the stress that comes from schooling and education where there is often a lot of pressure that comes along with pursuing a degree and one's education (Prabhu, 2015, p.64). Academic anxiety has four components as follows (Hooda and Saini, 2017, pp. 807-808):

1. **Worry:** Thoughts that prevent you from focusing on and successfully completing academic work. For example, prediction of failure, self-degrading thoughts or preoccupation with the consequences of doing poorly. Some effective techniques for managing this component includes, disputing negative and self-defeating thoughts with more productive, realistic thoughts, and self-hypnosis.
2. **Emotionality:** Biological symptoms of anxiety. For example, fast heart-beat, sweaty palms, muscle tension. The most effective strategies for dealing with emotionality are muscle and breathing relaxation exercises.
3. **Task generated interference:** Behaviors related to the task at hand, but which are unproductive and prevent successful performance. For example, constantly checking the clock during an exam, or spending a lot of time on a test question you cannot answer. The best management technique is to work with a study skills instructor or a counselor to identify the specific behaviors that cause problems and create a plan to reduce or change them.
4. **Study skill deficits:** Problems with the current study methods which create anxiety. For example, last-minute cramming resulting in not knowing answers to test questions or poor note- taking during lecture resulting in confusion about a major assignment. Many students experience the first three components of academic anxiety as results of study skills deficits. If this is the case, then the grades will not improve unless study skills are addressed.
5. **Procrastination:** Procrastination means to put off or postpone for another day. Procrastination affects the behavioral, psychological, health of students. Academic procrastination is a form of procrastination peculator to education. Procrastination is found to result in stress, anxiety, a sense of guilt and crisis, health problems, and severe loss of productivity, as well as social disapproval for not meeting responsibilities or commitments.

Besides, learning styles are important when students are facing challenging tasks; “In this type of situation self-knowledge, including knowledge of one’s learning style and being able to adapt a task to meet an individual’s learning style, can pay dividends” (Reid, 2007, p. 26). Academic anxiety symptoms include abnormal behaviour of a student shown at the beginning of any new academic task like procrastination in academic activities, worrying most of the time, performing poorly in school work, failing classes and withdraw from socializing with peers or pursuing activities that interest him/her (Atieq, 2016, p. 107-108 ). He adds that there are different types of academic anxiety as follows:

- a. **Anxiety from poor study habits:** anxiety caused by study strategies applied by students in their daily academic learning process.
- b. **Anxiety from subjects:** possessing negative attitude towards a particular subject or different subjects due to one or the other reason.
- c. **Anxiety from school environment:** anxiety caused by prevailing school environment like stiff competition among students, role of school administrator (Authoritarian/ Democratic)
- d. **Anxiety from teachers**—teaching incompetency and partial attitude of teachers inside the classroom also provoke academic anxiety of students.
- e. **Anxiety from examination**—Introduction of schemes like continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) may lead students towards severe anxiety sometimes.

A high level of anxiety affects language learning and leads to learners’ poor performance; however, it differs from one person to the other (Sadiq, 2017).

## 2. Test Anxiety

Examinations are part of the learning process at the university level. It is a means of assessing students knowledge and skills; “The aim of the examination process is to test your knowledge and understanding in an environment with a time constraint” (Allan, 2010, p. 89). Test anxiety is considered a situation-specific trait which predisposes the students to respond with increasing anxiety to an exam (Vaz, Pothiyil, George, Alex, Pothiyil and Kamath, 2018, p.16). It has been found that students continually understand test as a threat that increases stress and a situation surrounded with uncertainty in allowing them illustrate their true success (Alghamdi, 2016, p. 112). Test anxiety does not only refer to students’ anxiety the day of the exam, but even transcends to the period before the exam (Alipour, Heydari, Firouzi, Mohamadi 2017, Kumari and Jain 2014). Indeed, positive emotions foster students’ control over their learning, whereas negative emotions lead to more passive behavior. Consequently, positive emotions lead to high academic achievements in opposition with the negative ones (Dembo, 2004). Then, what are the components of test anxiety?

Test anxiety is a multi-dimensional construct of emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physiological components (Afolayan, Donald, Onasoga, Babafemi and Juan 2013). The emotional symptoms of anxiety among students include feeling nervous before a study class, panicking, going blank during a test, feeling helpless while doing assignments, or lack of interest of difficult subjects; the cognitive dimension refers to cognitive deficits like misapprehension of information or blocking of memory and recall; the physiological dimension includes sweaty palms, racing heartbeat, or an upset stomach (Vitasari, Nubli, Othman, Awang 2010.p. 190). The cognitive, physiological and behavioral components are explained as follows:

The cognitive facet alludes to the negative thoughts experienced by individuals during tests and other evaluation encounters. These thoughts often involve self-deprecation like "I am going to fail this exam". The individuals' perception of their physiological condition makes up the other component, called the physiological affective component. This component manifests itself by feelings of muscle tension, shaking, feeling sick and etc, and the last one, which is the behavioural component, is expressed by the presence of poor study skills and test-taking behaviors, and inattentiveness or distraction during the examinations. The entire examination experience for these students becomes excruciatingly painful, with their self-esteem and motivation put under threat (Asghari, Rusnani, Elias, Baba, 2012, p. 4-5).

During the period of exams, students suffer from shaking hands and legs, speedy heart beats, and certain disabilities (Afolayan, et.al 2013). They experience cognitively problems with concentration and memorization; physiologically perspiration, headache, tachycardia and in advanced cases, severe gastrointestinal disturbances (Alghamdi, 2016, p. 113). Moreover,

The sign of stress before and during examination are, having irregular sleep, feeling of tiredness, isolated or sad, feeling ache all over, suffer from stomach upset, feeling of restlessness or leading to a condition where you are not able to recall whatever you studied. Getting panic, when you see a question and you cannot answer and your mind gone blank (Kumari and Jain 2014, p. 32).

Among the different categories of anxiety, test anxiety was ranked the second after communication apprehension, then fear of negative evaluation and last negative attitudes towards the English Class (Maatar, 2011, p. 96). Consequently, high levels of emotional stress have a direct correlation to reduced academic performance and higher overall student drop-out rates (Alipour, et.al, 2017, p.29). However, a manageable amount of anxiety may have a positive effect on the students during the exam period (Rani, 2017, Rupan, Parikh, Trivedi, Singh, Sha, Parmar, Shakya, Chauhan, Ganveet, 2016).

### 3. Types of Test Anxiety

Erica 2010 ranked anxiety into four levels: mild, moderate, severe and panic anxiety (cited in Afolayan et.al, 2013, p. 26):

1. **Mild level of anxiety** is healthy, at this level, the individual is highly alert and attentive and learning; cognition is in its best state. This stage improves academic performance.
2. **Moderate level of anxiety** on the other hand is unhealthy, the perceptual field of a person at this level is narrowed; individuals experiencing this level of anxiety have selective inattention. They have decreased focus and automatism can be observed as repetitive purposeless movements such as shaking of the hands and feet, twirling of hair and, tapping of fingers. Academic performance at this level depends on the individual's ability to control the anxiety and carry out the assigned task.
3. **Severe level of anxiety** is characterized by reduced perceptual field and a difficulty in communication. Gross motor movements, such as pacing are characteristic of people at this stage. Academic performance at this stage depends on the educator's ability to recognize such individuals and provide a safe environment for them. Communication should be kept short and simple since communication is altered. Performance at this stage is reduced.

4. ***Panic level of anxiety*** is the worst and the most severe form of anxiety. Total disruption of perceptual field is present. It is also characterized by loss of ability to communicate, loss of rational thought and total loss of conscious thinking. Academic performance at this level is very poor since the student will be unable to remember exactly what he/she is supposed to do.

At the three first levels, students use different expressions (Atieq, 2016). For instance at the severe academic level of anxiety students would say “I will definitely fail in most of the subjects”, “I will surely fail whatever I do”. At the moderate level of Anxiety, “If I will not study much before final exam, I may fail”, “Although I am not good at math but if I will try my best, I can obtain good marks”. However, at the Mild level of academic anxiety, students would say, “Although, I am not good at math but I will pass”. Therefore, a moderate amount of anxiety helps academic performance by creating motivation (Hooda and Saini, 2017).

#### **4. Causes of Test Anxiety**

Anxiety is an inseparable part of human life, and it greatly influences personal and social functioning and it has different causes as intra-personal (related to individual characteristics), inter-personal (involving relationship with others), and extra-personal (under the influence of environmental factors) (Bigdeli, 2010. p. 675). Moreover, research investigating the causes of test anxiety has led to two models, the interferences model and the skill deficit modal. The interference model states that anxious students are plagued by worry that interference with their ability to retrieve information during a test. The skill deficit model states that high anxious students’ problems occur before the test in the form of inadequate learning that results in poor performances (Rani, 2017, p. 151).

Nowadays overemphasis to succeed academically is one of the causes of test anxiety, “this culture pressurizes students to “succeed”, resulting in increased anxiety and stress and subsequently affects the individual’s academic, vocational and emotional state” (Asghari, et.al, 2012, p. 3). Besides, negative attitude towards some subjects, low level of understanding and over burden are some of the reasons of test anxiety among the students (Arain, Jafri and Saleem 2013, p. 110). Studies have also reported factors like inefficient study, studying previous night before exams, lack of review and no revision before exams, emotional factors, student’s inability to enhance their learning, complaints of not having enough time to prepare for the exams or learn the course materials, family responsibilities and family pressure influence exam anxiety (Vaz et. al, 2018, p. 16).

Kumari and Jain (2014) categorize pre-test anxiety into four areas. The first is lifestyle issues as “inadequate rest, poor nutrition and lack of efficient planning of the available time” (p. 33). Students who do not schedule for the exam won’t be able to read, understand, and memorize effectively the lesson because of time constraints. Even worse, this will lead to confusions and forgetting. The second is necessary information as exam dates and places, the covered lessons content, and required identification papers. The third is studying style as all night studying before exams, inefficient and inconsistent content coverage, not making revision notes, trying to memorize the content of textbooks. The last is students’ irrational beliefs as linking the bad grade with their loss of respect and self worth and others develop negative beliefs about the results whatever they did as efforts, they will fail. Besides, students who have a high and excessive concern about future and past procedures, too much worry about acting totally well (Hashempour and Mehrad, 2014,p. 118). Furthermore, Bruehl (2009) recognizes learners’ beliefs as sources of test anxiety as “students’ beliefs about their own skills and preparedness to engage in a given task (e.g., social interactions, academic

evaluations) represent a crucial link between actual experienced difficulties with that task and the experience of anxiety pertaining to the activity” (p.77).

### 5. Consequences of Test Anxiety

Generally, academic anxiety has certain consequences on learners. It may lead to difficulty in concentrating on a range of tasks including: reading, writing, listening and speaking, and students who suffer from academic anxiety may have intrusive thoughts which prevent them to think logically and clearly (Atieq, 2016, p.109). However, while some students have suffered from concentration, others can be focused- depending on the type of anxiety facilitating or debilitating. Specifically, test anxiety has certain negative effects on students as poor performance, low motivation, negative self-evaluation beliefs, and low concentration, as well as an increase in school dropout rates and general anxiety (Asghari et.al, 2012, p. 5). Hence, test anxiety influences success expectancy. By synthesizing the different research they provided, other consequences of test anxiety can be highlighted as low self-esteem, reading difficulties, low achievement, failing grades, disruptive classroom behavior, negative thoughts about the school, and feelings of unease/fear, memory interruption, sweating, muscle tension, hypertension, coronary heart disease, respiratory distress syndrome and suppressed immune system functioning and even suicide.

In his turn, Benedict, (2014, p.4-5) refers to four main negative consequences of test anxiety: 1) lower grade point averages in schools, 2) negatively relate to self-esteem as well as mental and physical health, 3) High levels of test anxiety have been linked to sickness as a result of a weakened immune system, 4) high levels of test anxiety have been associated with increases in blood pressure with the potential for future damaging health consequences. Besides, Vitasari et.al (2010.p. 190) stresses the negative effects of high anxiety level on concentration and memory

### 6. Managing Test Anxiety

Being aware of test anxiety consequences on students' academic achievements, it is necessary to find ways to reduce its strength. Some guidelines were proposed to achieve this end (Hooda and Saini 2017, p. 809) as:

1. Student should have preparation and organization.
2. Student should have time management skill.
3. Student should have lower goals and focus on performance levels.
4. Stay balanced during exam periods.

In getting organized, O'Hara (2005) emphasizes the organization of the study space, keeping track of one's work and managing one's time. She further clarifies that time management is based on recording one's schedule through planning class time, making to-do list and planning study time. Harboe and Müllen (2007) add that planning begins with every semester by preparing a study plan, reviewing and breaking tasks into smaller parts. They add that motivation, determination and self-discipline are indispensable tools and core premises for completing a university programme ( p. 7).

Moreover, students can apply various strategies to help themselves keep the stress at a manageable level as follows (Arain, Jafri and Saleem 2013, p.112):

- Have a positive self-image; neither underestimate nor overestimate.
- Never have highest grade expectations at the time of exam.
- Gain required skills according to the learning objectives.
- Engage in sports, play some games or take physical exercise daily even during the examination.
- Get teachers /peers or colleagues help if they face difficulty in any subject.

- Engage in positive self-talk through highlighting past testing success and failures, and its causes.
- Discuss your anxiety and stress with your teachers, parents and others.
- Pay attention to teachers' instruction, listen carefully.
- Learn and practice time management.
- Be realistic and tackle difficulties calmly and rationally.
- Never consider how others are doing in the exam hall.
- Breathe deeply and slowly while taking the test in the exam hall.

## 7. The Study

It has been observed that during the exam period (The period before the exams/tests and the days of the exams/tests) students are anxious and stressed and right after the exam, the majority say "I revised everything but my mind turned blank" " I know that I know the answer, but I did not find it!" . This recurrent situation along the years of my teaching raised my curiosity to investigate test/exam anxiety with first year master students- option language sciences- at the department of English- Badji Mokhtar University-Annaba.

### Research Questions:

1. What are the major symptoms of test anxiety experienced by master I students?
2. What skills do they lack in order to effectively manage test/exam anxiety?
3. What are the main reasons behind test/exam anxiety?

### Research Hypotheses:

1. Master 1 students do experience the four components of anxiety: physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural.
2. Master I students lack study skills to manage test anxiety effectively.
3. Master I students do experience test anxiety because of the excessive concern about the consequences of failure.

**The aims:** this study aims at:

1. Identifying the symptoms, causes, and consequences of test anxiety.
2. Recognizing the strategies that students apply or lack in order to manage effectively test anxiety.
3. Involving learners in reflection on their test anxiety and stimulating them to take decisions to improve their study skills.

### Research Methods:

The population involved in this study represents first year master students- option language sciences- at the department of English- Badji Mokhtar University. Out of 90 students, 60 students participated in this study. In order to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, two research methods will be used, the quantitative through the questionnaire and the qualitative via the introspective method using "the verbal report". The questionnaire aims at investigating students' academic anxiety with a special focus on exam anxiety symptoms, causes, and consequences. It has been conducted before the first semester exams of the academic year 2018-2019.

The verbal report is a conscious self-examination and self-analysis of individual's thought processes which are "made available by telling or writing about them" (Wallace, 2000, p. 76). There are three varieties of verbal report: self-report, self-observation and think aloud. This study will be concerned with self-observation as it relates to one particular instance or occasion (Wallace, 2000, p. 80) which is the first semester exams. It aims at eliciting learners' self observation and reflection right after the exams focusing on their feelings, learning strategies and study habits for a better management of their exam anxiety. It also seeks to get closer to the students and raise their self awareness.

### 7.1. Questionnaire Description and Analysis

The questionnaire was used as a research tool. It consists of twenty six questions considering the four components of test anxiety (emotional, physiological, cognitive, and behavioural), the type of self talk, stress management during the exam period, learning styles, study skills, causes of test anxiety along the period of preparation and the day of the test/exam.

In answering the questionnaire, **85.46%** of the students assure that they experience anxiety along the test /exam period while only a minority (7.27%) affirms that they feel confident. In considering the components of the test/exam anxiety:

1) **Physically**: Along the test/exam period, students experience the following symptoms: A) headaches **16.37%**, B) nausea or diarrhea 3.63%, c) extreme body temperature changes 5.45%, d) excessive sweating 10.90%, e) shortness of breath 10.90%, f) rapid heartbeat **21.82%**, G) drymouth 12.73%, A+F 9.10%, A+G 7.28% , and none of them 1.81%. Then, the highest physical components are rapid heartbeat (21.82%) and headaches (16.37%), dry mouth 12.73% then equally excessive sweating and shortness of breath 10.90%.

2) **Emotionally**: Along the test/exam period, students experience A) Excessive feelings of fear **27.27%**, B) disappointment 3.63%, C) anger 6.45%, D) Depression 9.09%, E) uncontrollable crying or laughing 9.96%, F) feelings of helplessness 7.27%, A+D 7.27%, A+C 3.63%, A+F 3.63%, A+ B 9.09, B+ C 1.81%, D+F 1.81% And none of them 9.09. Hence, they highest emotional component is excessive feelings of fear 27.27%.

3) **Behaviorally**: Along the test/exam period behave as follows: A) Procrastination and avoidance 5.45%, B) Excessive study 10.90% C) Over/ under eating 3.63% D) Sleeping too much or too little 7.27% E) Fatigue or inability to relax **29.09%**, A+ D 3.63%, B+ C 9.09%, C+ E 3.63%, C+ D+ E 3.63% , B+D+E 1.81% , C+D 14.54% B+D 3.63% and nothing 3.63%. Then the most opted for behaviors are fatigue and inability to relax 29.09% and excessive study 10.90%.

4) **Cognitively**: during the exam period, students experience A) racing thoughts **25.45%**, B) going blank on exam questions 16.36%, C) difficulty concentrating 10.90, D) negative self-talk 7.27%, E) Difficulty identifying key ideas 3.63% F) difficulty organizing your thoughts 7.27% , A+ C+ F 9.09%, A+D 9.09%, A+F 5.45%, A+B 1.81%, E+F 3.63%. Then, they mentally mostly have racing thoughts 25.45%, their mind goes blank 16.36% and face difficulty in organizing their thoughts.

During the exam period (the period of preparation for the test/exam and the day of test /exam), **67.27%** feel blocked while 32.37% persist on revising. The first percentages refer to the students who are experiencing the debilitating type of anxiety that blocked them from carrying on their revision. The second percentages refer to the facilitating type of anxiety as students use their anxiety to revise instead of letting their anxiety uses them.

During the period of preparation for the test/exam, **65.45%** of the students use this expression "I don't have enough time and I have a lot to revise" while 34.54% use "I can do it, I still have time". Then, the majority of the students are really anxious during the exam period as a result of time constraints which leads to the difficulty to manage effectively their time. The first percentages refer to negative self-talk.

Students manage their anxiety as follows: A) Practice deep breathing/ Meditation/ Exercise 16.36% , B) Positive Self-talk 14.54% C) Take too much coffee and tea 10.90% D) Social media, Watch TV, meet friends, Phone calls **38.19 %**, E) Sleep Well 7.27% F) Eat a lot 7.27% , A+B 1.81% , B+F 1.81%, D+F 1.81%. Hence, for 38.19 % of the students, social media, TV, meeting friends and phone calls are the major used strategies to manage



their stress; however, these are not ways to manage their stress but to run away from their stress. Students should recognize the type of stress and how to effectively manage it and this is the case of 16.36% of the students who practice deep breathing/mediation and exercising. Moreover, this is also the case of 14.54% who use positive self talk. In contrast, 10.90% take too much coffee and tea (caffeine) the period of test/exam. Consequently, only a minority (16.36%+ 14.54%) know how to use effective strategies to manage their stress. Therefore, the majority of the students under investigation lack the skill of stress management.

Considering the sensory learning styles, **76%** are visual, 8% are auditory and 16% are kinesthetic. However, for the visuals, only **40%** do take notes in the classroom, **48%** highlight, and circle and underline important ideas, **28%** use diagrams and charts in study, only **36%** do make their own summaries and **22%** learn by watching videos. Hence, the great majority of the students who are visual lack using the appropriate learning strategies that coordinate with their learning style. The auditory and the kinesthetic learners use strategies appropriate to their learning styles. All the auditory students: record lectures, listen to audios, read aloud, and participate in study groups. Similarly, all kinesthetic learners put information into rhythmic patterns such as song or poem, relate information with places, make their own notes though using the computer, and participate in class activities.

Concerning their study skills, the great majority of the students (**85.45%**) affirm that they do **not** revise regularly their lessons, while 14.54% do. If students do not revise regularly their lessons, they will face great problems with time management during the test/exam period and this will lead to excessive feelings of stress along that period. Besides, the majority of the students, **63.63%** do **not** quiz themselves for the test/exam. Hence, there is no expectation or training on test/exam questions. Only 36.36% do so. Besides, **96.36%** affirm that they do have all the lessons before the test/exam period and only 3.64% do not. Having all the lessons and making their own notes will help in not increasing the level of test anxiety.

**99.55%** of the students do revise the night before the exam and only 5.45% do not. For the hour they stop revision the night of the exam, 34.54% do revise till 22.00, 18.18% till midnight, **27.27%** after mid night, 14.54% **no sleep** at all and 5.45% provide no answer. Then, only a minority of students do have enough sleep the night of the exam, and the great majority (18.18% till midnight, 27.27% after mid night) no adequate sleeping time and for 14.54% no sleep. This situation is very alarming as how can these students concentrate and recall information during the test/exam. In addition, how can they manage their physical, mental, emotional fatigue the day of the test/exam?

The day of the test/exam 49.09% do arrive early, **45.45%** arrive on test/exam time and 5.54% arrive late. Those who arrive early will better manage test/exam anxiety, while those who arrive on time will experience the stress of finding a sit, asking for the paper, getting their pens; then, they will feel that they started losing time from the beginning and they will be in a hurry to read the exam questions. The situation is worse with those who come late, as they will have difficulty in taking their breath, concentrating and understanding the test/ exam questions, controlling their anxiety and recalling the information.

Before taking the test/exam, the great majority, **72.73%** do discuss the lessons with their classmates, while 27.27% do not. Discussing the lessons the day of the test/exam can lead to confusion, uncertainty, forgetting and even high level of anxiety. What if one the student explains the lesson in a different way than I understand it? What if different students provide different explanations? Normally, this is the time of breathing, relaxation and psychological preparation for the test/exam, but not discussion!

58.18% affirm that they do plan for the exam period while 41.82% do not. However, how do they plan for the test/exam period and at the same time 85.45% affirm they do not revise regularly their lessons, 63.63% do not quiz themselves for the test/exam, 99.55% of the

students do revise the night before the exam, 65.66% do revise till mid night and some do not sleep at all, and **45.45%** arrive on test/exam time? Where is the planning for the exam period? The students under investigation have serious problems in time management and study skills.

According to the students, the causes of their anxiety in relation to study habits during the exam period are as follows: A) cramming the night before the exam **18.18%**, B) poor time management **27.27%**, C) failure to organize text information.1.81%, D) poor study habits 10.90%, A+ B+ D 9.09%, B+ C 1.81%, C + D 1.81%, A+ D 7.28%, A+C 1.81%, A+B 5.46%, B+ D 5.46%, and no answer 7.27%. Then, these students suffer mainly from poor time management (27.27%), cramming the night before the exam (18.18%), and poor study habits 10.90%. To sum up, students have problems with time management and study skills.

However, the causes of their anxiety during the test/exam in relation to their worry are as follows: A) Past performance on exams 5.45%, B) How friends and other students are doing 3.63%, C) the negative consequences of failure **36.36%**, D) Parents' expectations 9.90%, B+ C 1.81%, B+ C+ D 9.90%, A+ D 3.63%, A+ B 1.81%, B+ D 3.63%, C+ D 7.27%, A+C 5.44%, low self esteem and being unaware about my revision 1.81%, Just worry not much pressure 1.81%, not finishing on time 1.81%, no answer 5.71%. Then, these students mostly worry about the negative consequences of failure.

### **7.2. Self Observation Report Description and Analysis**

The self observation verbal report was administered the first day after the period of first semester exams. Students' reports were guided by the following open ended questions:

- What made you anxious before the exams?
- How did you feel along the first semester Exams? Explain clearly and deeply your feelings and thoughts?
- In which modules' exam you were most anxious? And Why? ( provide all the reasons)
- How you managed your exam anxiety? (Positively, negatively, how?)
- How did exam anxiety affect your performance during the exam? Explain
- How did you feel just after the exams finished?
- Now, right after the exams, how do you think you would have better done/ modified/changed to manage better your exam anxiety? What learning strategies would have you used? And what learning habits would have you changed?

In order to stimulate learners' reflections, faithful answers and deep self observation, the researcher asked the students to clear their tables and just provide a sheet of paper, they began to worry by saying "is it a quiz?", I said "just have a paper and answer my questions" they were very disappointed till they saw the title self-observation report. The researcher insisted on honesty, deep reflection, and detailed answers- as if they were writing a letter to themselves about themselves. The report's questions gradually engaged learners' thoughts and feelings before, during and after the exam period. The purpose was to immerse them in a psychological recall of their past learning habits in order to make well studied decisions for a better management of their test anxiety. Their answers are as follows:

1. The sources of students' anxiety before the exams can be listed as follows:
  - a. Insufficient revision/ poor preparation/ lack of preparation: "I am not well prepared, so I started getting nervous and worry about the type of questions", "Before the exams no revision or insufficient preparation, fear of the unknown questions, the fear of failure make me anxious". "The things that make me anxious before the exams are the lack of revision".
  - b. The number of lessons made me worry, "A lot to memorize and too much details in a short time", "I get very anxious each time my lessons are accumulated without review".
  - c. "Fear of the unknown"/ "fear of failure"/ "fear of getting bad marks".

- d. Time constraints: “there is no much time to revise”, “you have a lot to revise and less time”, “I don’t have enough time to revise all the lessons in each module”.
- e. The bad habit of studying the exam eve.
- f. Over-thinking of the negative and exam results: “such as I will get bad marks, hard questions, not succeed”.
- g. “The nature of the questions and how the teachers correct”.
- h. “Classmates’ discussion of the lessons and of their fears from questions types and teachers’ strict marks”.
- i. Master 2 students’ experiences with master 1 teachers’ difficult questions and bad marks: “I heard from master 2 students that teachers are hard to satisfy, questions are impossible to answer; teachers do not give high marks”, “M2 students kept telling us how teachers give bad marks and how they are too severe”.
- j. The guests:” We had guests during the period before the exams, the period I planned to revise in, I felt stressed because I did not revise well”,
- k. “Low self-esteem”,” lack of self confidence”.
- l. Negative self-belief: “ No matter how much I prepare, I will never do well”

2. Along the exam period, students feel:

- a. Anxious/ very anxious/ super anxious/ disappointed: “ I feel super disappointed from my performance during the first semester exam”, “ I felt so anxious, stressed and depressed, I also felt so tired”, “ very anxious, I felt I am not ready because I did not finish my revision and I had modules which I did not review at all”
- b. Very tired/ too much stressed, ” many modules and short period of time, competition between students, not enough information, indirect questions”
- c. Depressed/ frustrated/ terrified.
- d. Afraid to forget and difficulty in memorizing well the lessons.
- e. Negative thoughts:” I will not succeed, I lost control of myself and became sick”.
- f. No control on myself and fall sick.
- g. Keep thinking about my past experiences: “I keep thinking of my past experiences, a conflict with myself which always stop me to show my capacities”.
- h. Confusion: “I was confused; I did not trust myself at all”.
- i. Mixture of feelings: “I was scared and excited at the same time along the first semester exams. I was scared because it is a new year and unknown teachers. I was asking myself all the time “am I going to do well this year or not”, there were a lot of negative thoughts especially that many people I know found great difficulties. I was excited because I wanted to do better than last year, So, I decided from the beginning to do my best”.
- j. “I have examophobia, I am always sick during that period and that affects my performance and my concentration, even the understanding of the questions”.

Then learners’ anxiety type is between mild anxiety and moderate one for the majority. Only for a minority, it was severe.

3. Students were mostly anxious in certain modules for the following reasons:

- a. Oral Expression: the fear of public speaking: “I am the kind of people who fears public speaking, I can’t talk in front of people, I lose my words, ideas and can’t breathe and I have a stomachache”. “I have the fear of presenting in front of people. Also, the problem of mispronunciation. I fear to seem foolish in front of others”.
- b. Written expression: ‘ I have some constraints in writing because of the lack of vocabulary and style of writing”

- c. Pragmatics: Lack of understanding and lots of handouts to memorize. "I am anxious in research methodology, pragmatics, and research presentation because I did not have sufficient comprehension in these modules".
- d. Research methodology: lack of practical part, only theoretical, coefficient: "Research methodology has the highest coefficient which also determines the degree of my average", "The teacher is very severe and make very hard questions and she gave very bad marks", "We did not practice in the classroom how to answer practical part", "Because it is related to our dissertation next year", " we only dealt with theories without practice".
- e. Educational psychology: the content is vague.
- f. ESP: lots of handouts and luck of understanding.

Then, as shown in the theoretical part, anxiety can be associated with certain language skills, and students' test anxiety was mainly related to speaking and writing. It was also related to certain subjects and teachers.

#### 4. Students managed their Anxiety in two ways:

- a. Negatively:
  - being sad, no concentration in exams, no self-control,
  - Low self esteem:
- b. Positively:
  - Positive self talk: tell my oneself" every day is a test, take it easy", " I revised hard, I will succeed", " I kept telling myself, I can do it, everything will be OK", " I already passed by this situation, it will end"; " You can do it, you handled so hard stuff before".
  - Drink water, Walk, relax, praying, read Holly Quran, studying more. " taking breaks while revising, drinking water to prevent headaches"
  - "Once the questions are in front of me, I try to focus totally on the answer, and I forget about my anxiety".
  - "I just keep calm, relaxed, and have a positive self-talk, and I try to remember how I passed other difficult things".
  - I convinced myself that I will perform well because I made efforts".

Some students said they first were very anxious but then they forget about their stress. Another answered: "First negatively but then I tried to control this anxiety by believing in myself and just calming myself by saying that "It is not the end of the world", I keep thanking Allah for the gift that he gave me which is I am in the branch that I like".

Hence, though students felt test anxiety, they tried to use it as a facilitating force during the exam.

#### 5. Exam anxiety affected students' performance during the exam in two ways:

##### *Certain Effects*

- a. time management and how to budget the time along the exam
- b. Forget the information and I lack confidence "I felt like that my mind is like a blank slate".
- c. "It affects my memory and focus, So I did not perform as good as I expected from myself".
- d. "Decrease in my self confidence and doubt my answers".
- e. "Being tired physically and morally".
- f. "I did not concentrate and I could not control myself".

- g. It affected my performance , I kept thinking of failure, so most of the modules were a disaster to me”
- h. “It affected deeply my performance. Sometimes I knew the answer but I forget because of anxiety. Later, I figure out that I was able to answer correctly but unfortunately I didn’t”.
- i. “My anxiety affected negatively my performance in term of time management. There were modules in which I did not finish my answer”.

***No effect on performance***

- a. “Exam anxiety does not affect me because I am usually well prepared”.
  - b. “I just focus and concentrate on my paper”.
6. just after the exams finished, students feelings can be grouped in these categories as follows:
- Freedom and relief: “too free and relaxed”, “, “I feel like a normal person”, “I feel good as at least I can sleep and eat well”, “I am relieved”, “I feel free, I can watch movies and read books without feeling of guilt”, “Relaxed and happy”, “A great relief”, “Oh dear God’, I believe this phrase expresses it all’. “ I feel alive again”, “ So comfortable”.
  - No t satisfaction and worry: “My feelings after every exam I passed are frustration, depression and regret”, “I feel disappointed” , “very tired and not satisfied”
  - Mixture of feelings: “Mixture of peace and not satisfied”, “Tired and worried about the marks”, “I was relieved and sometimes I blamed myself for not preparing well and letting the revision till the last days before the exams”.
  - Over-thinking: “After exams, I am usually overwhelmed with ‘what if ‘question, what if I wrote in on the sheet but not on the paper? What if I forgot this point? What if all is wrong? Then after few hours, I ‘disactivate’ my brain. Gradually my stomach ache fades away and I go back to normal, carless mode”.
7. Right after the exams, the students think they would have better done/ modified/changed their revision and study to manage better their exam anxiety and apply certain strategies and change their learning habits as follows:
- a. Develop a great will to neglect the bad feelings and thoughts and replace them with positive ones.
  - b. Improving my style of writing and punctuation.
  - c. Apply these learning strategies:
    - Prepare the lessons before the sessions.
    - Preparing before the period of exam to be more comfortable.
    - Memorize the lessons before the exam period: “Memorize the lessons little by little rather than cram it the night before the exam”.
    - Focus on summarizing lessons: “ Made summaries of my lessons beforehand not the night of the exam”
    - Take notes
    - Use the ideas in the draft paper
    - Use outline to answer the questions “I write first an outline for my essay”.
    - Use planning and self monitoring: “start preparing for the exam in advance”.
    - Follow the individual revision with group revision.
    - Asking possible questions on lessons: “Now I would better write summaries of the lessons and ask myself possible questions”.
    - Change my way of thinking “ tomorrow I will revise that lesson, I will do it right away not tomorrow”

- Stop studying before the day of the exam.
- Time management: "I would be more responsible of managing the time". " I would like to get rid of my incapacity to manage time, I would have to stick to the schedule of revision that I prepare always in advance"
- d. Change their learning habits:
  - "Never let the revision to the last days before the exam", " I would never let the revision for the last minute because it is a very big mistake".
  - "Revising more and more, I don't get anxious easily when I am familiar with the correct exam answers".
  - "Avoid procrastination: "never procrastinates my revision".
  - Avoid phone distractions and frequent family breaks while studying.
  - Control my stress: "I am always stressed in the exam period and this stress stops me from studying, I don't sleep, I don't study, I don't eat I just keep the whole night worrying about the exam without revising especially when I am depressed. I would like to change this habit"
  - Being easily distracted: "by family members, noise, facebook".

Here are some detailed answers:

- "After the exams, I learnt that I have to focus more in the second semester and never let anything for tomorrow. I have to study hard in each module and never let any information skip my mind. The learning habits that I like to change is never let it for the last minute, I have to give myself enough time by everyday revision".
- "After the exams, I noticed that my summaries are unsatisfied, therefore next semester I will focus more on the original lesson. Also, I missed a lot of sessions and now I regret it because if I attended I would not face hard time in trying to understand the lessons".
- I have to revise more seriously, if I focus on important lessons, if I well manage to revise all the points and not to miss anything, and more importantly to attend all the lectures and treat all the module equally because they are all important. Besides, I will try to change that bad habit of revising without concentration by taking notes and manage my time better because it is always not enough for me".
- "I am working on myself to change all I have done before those exams. I will prepare well before the exams, I will watch a lot of videos on youtube of how to face the fear of stage. I will search the web of how to be confident and how to be motivated, I will try my best to read books to know more vocabulary and have better language while speaking and writing".
- "I will definitely give attention to time management".
- "Now after the harsh lesson of the first semester exam, I have these new rules: Lessons must be revised weekly, must be rewritten after revision, further reading is a must. Try group learning".
- "After the exams, I am thinking of learning from my mistakes. I have to prepare before the exam, overcome my anxiety and fears. I decided to read to improve my writing style in written expression module and now I am reading to learn more and have ideas about methodology and how to do a research work".
- "I would give more importance to some modules which were in fact easy. I should have given myself more rest and sleep because exhaustion affected my performance negatively. I should have summarized the lessons. The learning habit that I have to change is not to leave everything to the last second and revising the night before the exam".

- “I will take notes in all sessions, revise them when I get home and rewrite those notes for later revision besides net checking for further information”.
- “I relied on my notes only without further researches in some modules. I didn’t summarize or use diagrams. I would change my way of note taking and organizing them, read more”.

### **8. Pedagogical Implications**

The results of the questionnaire and the self-observation report confirmed the three hypotheses. First, Master 1 students do experience the four components of anxiety: physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural. Second, master I students do lack study skills as time management, avoiding the night before the exam to revise, keeping away from classmates lesson discussion the day of the exam, coming in advance the day of the test/exam, and most importantly regular study routine. They also lack coordination between their learning styles and their learning strategies. The lack of these study skills lead to a raised level of anxiety during the test/exam period. Third, the majority of the students opted for worrying about the consequences of the failure which keep them anxious during the exam period and even after. The question now is how to reduce their anxiety taking into consideration their lacks and worries?

The surprise of this study is that the population is master 1 students and normally they have developed the needed skills to reduce their anxiety. This leads us to ask this question, were these students trained on time management in the study skills module in their first year licence? Have they dealt with the lessons of exam management? In fact, university students need guidance from their first year to develop the necessary skills that will help them in all their study whatever the content. Therefore, since it is never late, master 1 students need to be sensitized to the importance of regular revision from the beginning of the year. They need to be aware of how to manage effectively their time not only during the exam period but along the whole year. It is preferable to use the time management sheet and ask them to fill it in accordance to their priority list and to-do list. Besides, revision that is based on note making and quizzing oneself will be long-lasting. Students, also, need to develop awareness of their learning styles and the preferred strategies to be applied with every learning style.

Furthermore, teachers, from any specialty, are responsible for enlightening students with different strategies to be used first in the classroom whenever there will be tension and pressure as breathing, visualizing, relaxation and positive self-talk. After, students will extend the use of these strategies at home while revising and even as a life skill. In addition, teachers can begin applying these strategies with shy students whenever they face difficulty in finding words and communicating with others. Then the other students will understand that they can themselves manage their anxiety. Teachers should discuss test/exam anxiety with students in an attempt to know more about how they manage their anxiety in general, and test anxiety in particular. The discussion should consider students’ learning habits, feelings and strategies in managing their anxiety before- during and after the exam. Moreover, to decrease anxiety effect on students, “It is advisable to invite students to write openly, freely, and expressively about their worries about an exam in the time period just prior to the exam” (Blank-Spadoni, 2013, p. 69). Then writing can be an effective tool to decrease anxiety level and gain self confidence during the exam period; it also helps in developing self-awareness and decision making.

Moreover, students who focus their thinking on the consequences of failure will never plan effectively for success; “If you do not plan for success then you plan for failure”. Success needs planning; however, the majority of the students’ revision is based on last minute cramming, last day revision, exam eve, and coming on time not before time the day of

the test/exam. Besides, in order to shift their focus from the negative consequences of the failure, students should focus on the reasons behind success or failure. They must also to keep in mind that test/exam mark is just a grade and it is not final, "It could be better next time if I consider my lacks and apply better study skills". In fact, students need to feel responsibility towards their learning and activate all the necessary skills to guarantee success.

### 9. Further Reflection Questions

Here are some thought provoking questions that the researcher reflects on. First, what if teachers, from the different majors, are not aware of being responsible for providing students with strategies to use in the classroom to lessen pressure and, meanwhile, increase relaxation and positive self-talk on the part of students? I think, here comes the role of the researchers, whenever teachers are provided with questionnaires or involved in interviews about test anxiety, this will urge them reflect and become aware that they are responsible for reducing students' test anxiety. In addition, in invigilating exams/tests, there is always the case of the student who trembles before getting the exam questions and cries after reading them. Then, teachers find themselves obliged consciously or unconsciously to deal with test anxiety and relieve its pressure. Sometimes, in these situations, teachers find themselves asking each other how to act, and here they are consciously or unconsciously asking for strategies lessening test anxiety. Another way to raise teachers' awareness of test anxiety and acquire the strategies to reduce it is teaching the module of "study skills" in the first year of the licence degree. We suggest that all teachers whatever their specialty need to teach this module to understand how the students feel, think and behave during the test period- before, during and after the exam- and how they could better manage their learning and their anxiety.

Second, are all the teachers responsible for helping students to apply some strategies to manage their anxiety, or are there specific courses where teachers should assume this kind of responsibility? The answer is yes; all the teachers are responsible for helping students to apply some strategies to manage their anxiety. The reason is that in all the sessions, students pass tests and exams either orally or in written form, and if teachers do not provide strategies for stress management or study management, the results will not be promising for both the teachers and the students. In addition, the teacher should be a good observer in his/her classroom so that to intervene whenever the students need him/her even without saying a word. Only by observing students' faces and reactions, the teacher can read their thoughts and perceive their worries.

Third, how could teachers help students to overcome the problem of last day revision if the majority is demotivated to study some courses, or rather courses which do not appeal to them for many different reasons? From my experience as a study skill teacher and didactics, I learned that just urging students to revise before the exam period to lower their anxiety will not change what they used to do- It was just an awareness raising talk and they knew it. However, relating this talk with changing their learning habits would be more beneficial than just saying it. Therefore, in all my sessions whatever the module, to ensure that my students would revise, I always end the session with homework, and from one time to the other the homework will be accounted in their TD mark and it is their responsibility to take a good or a bad mark. Another method that I use so that my students avoid last minute cramming is lesson preparation; students remember better what they themselves do. Then, in the classroom, they will be involved in discussion of the lesson based on their research. Hence, students are obliged to revise the lesson in two different moments before the session with the preparation and after the session with the homework. However, this will not work with all the students because of individual differences, but it is beneficial with the majority. The keys for this to happen are raising learners' awareness of the benefits of doing this- lesson preparation and



homework- and the teacher should be firm in asking for the work to be done. In addition, it would be necessary after a certain period of preparing and doing the home work to involve students in reflection on the difference between how they felt before the new procedure and how they feel after it.

Furthermore, to solve the problem of students' demotivation to study some courses, teachers should be aware that teaching is an art, not just a craft. Teachers are responsible in getting students' attention and increasing their motivation. In the majority of the cases, students say "If I like the teacher, I like the module and if I do not like the teacher, I will never like the module". Then, if teachers are attentive to their students, change the classroom routines and the teaching method from time to time; this will assure their motivation whatever the module. Students know the teachers who are interested in them, make efforts for them and believe that they can be better. Consequently, the majority will never miss their sessions and will be motivated to learn better.

### **10. Scientific Implications**

Although the findings reveal students' test anxiety symptoms, reasons, learning habits and anxiety management strategies, there are several limitations to our study. First, to ensure that the results are generalizable, the sample in this study is by no means representative of all master 1 students of English; just master 1 students option "language sciences". Therefore, this study is only the first step in investigating students' test anxiety and its effect on students' concentration, well being and academic achievements. Second, another limitation to our study is the fact that we considered only two measurement occasions which are the questionnaire and the self report. Other research tools could be used as teachers' questionnaire, think aloud protocol/ focus group interview and even designing an experiment on the light of the findings provided by the questionnaire and the self observation report. Third, the researcher intended to apply the focus group method, but because of the political situation in Algeria- students' protest and constant absences- right after the conduction of the self observation report did not allow this method to take place. Therefore, further studies would collect additional information from different research tools with larger sample of students including all master 1 students from all options- language sciences, literature and civilization. Besides, investigating teachers' awareness and practices in relation with test anxiety will deepen the findings of the study.

### **Conclusion**

In the academic domain, especially during the exam period, the majority of students will inevitably experience anxiety. However, the level of this anxiety can be reduced if students are equipped with effective study skills and learning habits. Students need to manage their time well from the beginning of the year. Along with time management, study skills will be improved as taking notes will help memorization and retention of information. The same thing for quizzing oneself as it develops attention and concentration. Avoiding long revision time the night before the exam and having good night sleep will also lessen the tension of the exam. In addition, it is preferable to be in advance the day of test/exam and avoid classmates' discussion in order to concentrate on relaxation, breathing, and positive self talk.

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