

Beyond the Test: Unravelling Test Anxiety Among Saudi Undergraduates

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Abstract—This study explores the perspectives of Saudi learners regarding the factors that make them anxious, impact their performance on tests, and weaken their test-taking abilities. Quantitative research has been used for this study because it can be used to duplicate results and verify information. For data collection, a questionnaire consisting of fifteen closed questions was administered to the students. Data was collected in class (after the lecture) manually (on paper). Although more useful information could be elicited from open questions, the respondents were asked to answer the closed questions due to the shortage of time. The participants in this study were (N=45) Saudi female learners (enrolled in the Intensive English Program at a public university in Saudi Arabia) aged 18-19 whose L1 is Arabic. The analysis was conducted in two phases. The findings of this study show that test anxiety impacts the academic performance and learning of students. The study concludes with some recommendations that can help reduce test anxiety in students.

Index Terms—academic performance, perspectives, Saudi learners, test anxiety, test-taking abilities

I. INTRODUCTION

Test anxiety is widespread among learners at all levels of their education, secondary and postsecondary education. The definition of anxiety is quite complex. “Test anxiety is characterized by physiological overarousal, tension, and physical symptoms, as well as feelings of concern, dread, and fear of failure...” (Drachev et al., 2018). Test anxiety is a type of performance anxiety that is the result of many interrelated beliefs and expectations. Mashayekh and Hashemi (2011) explain that test anxiety is a mental condition where an individual feels significant stress either before, during, or after an exam or assessment. This level of anxiety can negatively impact performance or disintegrate the normal learning process.

Since taking tests is a regular part of every student’s experience, those who are prone to test anxiety tend to feel anxious in situations where they are being evaluated. For this reason, test anxiety is considered a trait that emerges specifically in certain situations (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). Understanding the causes of test anxiety is important so that strategies can be developed to help students overcome fear, stress, and worry. Earning a university degree requires students to complete a series of exams, which can be a highly stressful experience for many. During exams, students often worry about their ability to recall information and experience rapid heartbeats, sweating, and a strong urge to leave the exam room. These cognitive and physiological responses are characteristics of test anxiety (Cassady, 2004; Pekrun, 2001). Students with test anxiety typically respond with heightened stress in such situations, making it a situation-specific trait. Research indicates that approximately one in three students experience some degree of test anxiety (Quek et al., 2019), highlighting its prevalence among the student population.

It is usually observed that students whose L1 is not English suffer from test anxiety (more than other types of tests) because they have to speak a foreign language. Teachers are responsible for improving or transforming the classroom environment by making it free of anxiety. If students are engaged in discussion-based learning and other stress-free activities, their academic performance can be enhanced.

Purpose/Context of the Study

Having taught Saudi learners for more than a generation, the investigators have encountered many cases where some of their learners suffered from test anxiety before, during, or after exams. These learners felt shaky and nervous, sometimes fainted, and started crying. These symptoms triggered the researchers’ interest in investigating the causes of test anxiety in their Arab learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tests are the most widely used method of assessment in educational systems worldwide. Regardless of students' preferences, this is an undeniable reality, and they must face them. Mohamed (2018) states that many important decisions that impact students' lives are made based on these tests. Given these considerations, every possible effort should be made to support both test-takers and designers in performing well on these assessments. He also adds that testing offers several benefits, with one key purpose being the identification of students' weaknesses to enhance future performance. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of developing perceptive, affective, and psychomotor skills in learners. Therefore, teachers should demonstrate a high level of expertise in assessing their students' perceptive and non-cognitive skills.

Test anxiety, characterized by concerns about potential failure or negative outcomes in evaluative situations (Zeidner, 2007), often leads to lower performance among test-anxious students across various assessments, including classroom exams, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and intelligence tests (Von der Embse et al., 2018). Yousefzadeh et al. (2019) note that several factors influence students' academic performance, such as their level of effort, preferred learning styles, prior qualifications, class attendance, anxiety levels, motivation, supervision of their education, and study habits. Mohamed and Halim (2021) argue in their study that a first-year undergraduate student definitely struggles more with study skills/habits because s/he undergoes various types of pressure. Also, the study of Everson and Millsap (1991) says that test anxiety can significantly interfere with academic performance.

Research examining gender differences in test anxiety suggests that female students tend to be more affected by it than their male counterparts. Among girls, test anxiety is more often characterized by physiological and cognitive symptoms, while in boys, it is typically expressed through behavioral or motor responses (Wren & Benson, 2004; Rodriguez et al., 2014; Aydin, 2019). According to Theobald (2022), the relationship between test anxiety and academic performance remains uncertain. Her findings indicate that test anxiety did not significantly influence exam results beyond what could be explained by students' actual knowledge, as demonstrated in mock exams and exam preparation.

According to Torrano et al. (2020), students tend to feel more anxious during oral exams conducted in front of the class and during oral presentations. Additionally, Zeidner (1987) found that students generally favor multiple-choice tests over essay exams, as the latter require more effort in both studying and expressing ideas, which increases anxiety. Apart from this, the study of Dahoroy and Palma (2024) discusses students' communication apprehension, mentioning that students whose L1 is not English suffer from speaking anxiety because they have to speak in a foreign language.

However, other studies have investigated strategies to reduce test anxiety. In a study by Neuderth et al., the participants agreed that since there are frequent and more challenging tests at the university, students become anxious. They opined that time management can help reduce stress. Furthermore, a study by Jirjees et al. (2024) identified several causes of test anxiety and strategies students use to manage it. Participants reported making changes to their daily routines, such as adjusting sleep schedules, seeking support from family and friends, practicing relaxation techniques, engaging in prayer and physical exercise, and altering their eating and drinking habits—for example, increasing their intake of energy and caffeinated drinks. Additionally, some students used medication before exams to help reduce stress and anxiety. Research conducted in Saudi Arabia has similarly shown that medical and health sciences students often use prescribed medications to enhance concentration and cope with exam-related anxiety.

All the above-mentioned studies have discussed test anxiety among learners in general, but none of these studies have discussed test anxiety experienced by Saudi learners at the tertiary level. This study fills in the research gap by exploring how test anxiety is related to the academic performance of Saudi learners at King Khalid University and the perspectives of these learners on the factors that cause test anxiety in them.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

1. What are the specific causes of test anxiety in Saudi learners at King Khalid University?
2. How does test anxiety affect the academic achievement of Saudi learners at King Khalid University?
3. What are some ways to reduce test anxiety?

A quantitative study was used because the findings can be generalized to a larger population. To avoid subjective judgement and researcher bias, quantitative data has been collected. Although this method has some drawbacks, it has been chosen for collecting data quickly. However, after analyzing the responses, they were coded under the dominant themes.

B. Participants

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants. The participants in this study were (N=45) Saudi female learners aged between 18 and 19, whose L1 is Arabic. The students were from Level 1 (first year, first semester), doing Honors in Engineering, Computer Science, Business Administration, and Law. The sample was selected carefully, and they understood the purpose and relevance of the study.

TABLE 1
AN OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS

No. of participants	Gender	Age	L1	Program/ Level	Department
45	Female	18-19	Arabic	First semester, Level 1 (undergraduate)	Engineering, Computer Science, Business Administration, Law

C. Instruments

Questionnaires are quite a popular means of collecting data. Therefore, the researchers constructed a valid and reliable questionnaire comprising 15 closed (Agree/Disagree/Sometimes) items. Confusing questions were avoided, and the responses were quantified and analyzed manually. The findings were manually categorized into themes/patterns. Narrative explanations of each theme/pattern were composed, incorporating representative interview quotes. The researchers' observation (non-participant observation) and informal student discussions were documented through field notes.

D. Data Collection

Data was collected in class (after the lecture) manually (on paper) using primary sources such as interviews and observations. The researchers reached the saturation point; no new information emerged from the instrument used to collect data. The researchers purposefully selected 'information-rich' respondents who provided the required information. Although more useful information could be elicited from open questions, the respondents were asked to answer the closed questions due to the shortage of time.

E. Data Analysis Procedure

In the first phase, the researchers collated and interpreted the responses manually. Because the number of respondents was small and there were not too many variables, no computer program was used to analyze the data. In the second phase, based on the responses, the researchers coded them under the dominant themes.

F. Ethical Considerations

The researchers have maintained the confidentiality of the respondents by keeping their names anonymous. The participants were also assured that they could choose not to answer the questions. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the nature of their involvement and assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes. No incentives were provided for participation, and the questionnaire posed no risk to the participants' academic performance.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The questionnaire which was administered to the students and their responses are provided in the table below:

TABLE 2
STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON TEXT ANXIETY

Variables	Agree	Disagree	Sometimes
1. I am anxious before, during, and after a test.	30 (66.66%)	10 (2%)	5 (11%)
2. Before and during tests, my heart beats faster, and I sweat.	17 (37.7%)	9 (20%)	19 (42%)
3. Before and during tests, I feel a stomach ache or a tension headache.	20 (44%)	13 (28.88%)	12 (26.66%)
4. Before a test, I cannot eat or sleep properly.	19 (42%)	14 (31%)	12 (26.66%)
5. During a test, I panic and feel like throwing up.	9 (20%)	23 (51%)	13 (28.88%)
6. Because of test anxiety, I perform poorly on tests.	14 (31%)	14 (31%)	17 (37.7%)
7. When I suffer from test anxiety, I face problems in preparing for tests and experience distractions in tests.	21 (46.66%)	9 (20%)	15 (33%)
8. Before and during tests, I want to know whether I can remember the required knowledge.	33 (73%)	2 (4%)	10 (2%)
9. Because of test anxiety, I am unable to provide information on tests that I know before the tests.	20 (44%)	10 (2%)	15 (33%)
10. Fear of failing a test affects my learning and performance.	20 (44%)	13 (28.88%)	12 (26.66%)
11. My performance on tests is affected by my poor self-confidence and inadequate preparation.	9 (20%)	29 (64%)	7 (15.5%)
12. Before tests, I am stressed out because of the demands and expectations of my family about my performance.	20 (44%)	15 (33%)	10 (2%)
13. The types of tests that make me anxious are the speaking tests and oral presentations.	24 (53%)	8 (17.7%)	13 (28.88%)
14. I feel more anxious on essay tests than multiple-choice tests.	28 (62%)	5 (11%)	12 (26.66%)
15. My study patterns and test-taking skills are poor.	8 (17.7%)	23 (51%)	14 (31%)
16. I can reduce my stress level before/ during, and after the exam.	9 (20%)	29 (64)	7 (15.5%)

A. Data Analysis

In response to question no.1, 66.66% of the students agreed that they feel anxious before, during, and after a test. Answering question no.2, 37.7% of the students agreed that before and during tests, their heart beats faster and they sweat, but 20% disagreed. 42% of the students said that sometimes they experience this condition. Responding to question no.3, 44% of the students said they felt a stomach ache or a tension headache before and during a test. 28.88% of the students disagreed with the view, and 66.66% expressed that sometimes they had these physical discomforts. In answering question 4, 42% said they cannot eat or sleep properly before a test. 31% disagreed with this view, and 66.66 % of the students said that sometimes they cannot eat or sleep appropriately before a test. Expressing their view about question no. 5, whether they panic and feel like throwing up during a test, most of the students (51%) disagreed. However, 20% agreed that during a test, they are panic-stricken and feel nauseous, but 28.88% said that only sometimes they panic or feel like throwing up.

Responding to question no. 6, 31% of the students opined that they performed poorly on the tests because of test anxiety. The same percentage of students disagreed with this view, but 37.7% said that sometimes their poor performance results from test anxiety. In question no.7, most students (46.66%) agreed that when they suffer from test anxiety, they face problems in preparing for tests and experience distraction in tests. 20% of the students disagreed, and 33% said that sometimes, due to test anxiety, they are distracted during tests. Most of the students (73%) answered question no. 8 by agreeing that before and during tests, they worry whether they can remember the required knowledge. Only 4% of the students said they did not worry, but 2% said they sometimes worried about knowledge retrieval. Responding to question 9, 44% of the students expressed that because of test anxiety, they cannot provide information on tests that they know before the tests. However, only 2% did not agree, but 33% of the students said that sometimes this was their condition. Answering question no.10, the majority of the students, 44%, agreed that fear of failing a test affects their learning and performance. 28.88% disagreed, but 26.66% said that sometimes, the fear of failure affects their performance in a test.

In answering questions 12 and 13, most learners agreed that they suffer from test anxiety, mainly in the speaking test (and essay tests). Regarding questions 11 and 15, most learners disagreed about their poor self-confidence and test-taking skills. Responding to question no. 12, 44% of the students agreed that they become test anxious due to family pressure. However, in responding to question no. 16, 64% of them stated they cannot reduce stress, 20% said they can, whereas 15.5 % said sometimes they can.

After analyzing the responses in detail, the researchers focused on and coded the most dominant themes.

B. Data Coding and Analysis

The following themes have been the most dominant in the questionnaire. Therefore, the researchers have categorized them in the following way: See Table 3.

TABLE 3
MAIN THEMES IDENTIFIED FROM PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

Themes	Responses
Types of Anxiety	Faster heartbeat, loss of appetite, lack of sleep, feelings of nausea/vomiting
Poor confidence level	Unsure about preparation and failing to remember information
Family Expectations	Fear/ shame of not being able to meet family expectations
Specific Tests	Tests such as Listening/ Speaking and essay-type questions lead to extreme nervousness.
Poor study habits/ lack of preparation	Suffer from poor study habits/ study skills resulting in inadequate preparation.
Attempts to reduce stress	Change in habits and taking medicines

The findings show that the causes of test anxiety in Saudi learners are knowledge retrieval during an exam, fear of failure, poor self-confidence, inadequate preparation, expectations of family members, poor study patterns, and poor test-taking skills. This answers research question number 1. Regarding research question number 2, *How test anxiety affects the academic achievement of Saudi learners*, it can be said that due to test anxiety, students perform poorly on the tests, they experience distraction in preparing for the tests, some of them are unable to provide information in tests that they know before a test, and they worry about the consequences of their failure. Moreover, the participants have opined that they use several strategies to reduce stress, such as changing sleeping patterns, studying habits, adapting, adopting practical time management skills, drinking caffeine, or sometimes even taking medication to help with concentration level. This answers research question 3.

V. DISCUSSION

The study results reveal a significant connection between test anxiety and the academic performance of Saudi undergraduate students. This finding is consistent with existing research, which identifies anxiety as a major obstacle to academic achievement (Everson & Millsap, 1991; Zeidner, 2007). Participant responses shed light on both the cognitive and physical aspects of test anxiety and its effects on their test preparation, self-confidence, and ability to retrieve information during exams. This view supports the opinion of Mashayekh and Hashemi (2011), who said that test anxiety

is a mental condition where an individual is stressed out before, during, or after an exam or evaluation, to the point that it negatively affects their performance or disrupts their ability to learn effectively.

One of the primary findings is that knowledge retrieval issues and fear of failure are significant contributors to test anxiety. Most students (73%) agreed that they worry about their ability to remember required knowledge before and during tests. A similar view is expressed in the studies of Chakraborty (2023), and Everson and Millsap (1991). Chakraborty's statement is, "Test anxiety can lead to lack of confidence in their abilities, leading to poor test performance and results. Everson and Millsap (1991) say that test anxiety can significantly interfere with academic performance".

Another notable cause is family expectations, with 44% of students indicating that parental pressure exacerbates their anxiety. This finding aligns with cultural factors in collectivist societies like Saudi Arabia, where familial aspirations heavily influence students' academic lives (Aydin, 2019). These pressures can create an environment of heightened stress, particularly among female students, who traditionally bear societal expectations tied to academic success and future roles.

The physical symptoms reported by students—such as faster heart rates, sweating, and stomachaches—highlight the somatic dimension of test anxiety. Nearly half (44%) of the participants noted experiencing physical discomfort before and during tests. This supports Mashayekh and Hashemi's (2011) assertion that test anxiety is a multifaceted psychological condition with both emotional and physiological components. Furthermore, a significant proportion of students (66.66%) expressed experiencing anxiety before, during, and after tests, reflecting the persistent nature of this issue. This suggests that test anxiety is not merely situational but an enduring challenge for these learners.

The study also reveals the types of tests that influence anxiety levels. Oral presentations and essay-based tests were reported to be more anxiety-inducing than multiple-choice exams. This corroborates Torrano et al.'s (2020) findings that the format of the test plays a critical role in shaping students' anxiety levels. Students' preferences for less demanding test formats suggest that educators might consider diversifying assessments to accommodate different comfort levels. When it comes to reducing stress levels, only a few participants in this study agreed that they can reduce their stress levels, while others have said they cannot, and the rest have stated that sometimes they are successful. This aligns with the study by Jirjees et al. (2024), which explores the various reasons for test anxiety and ways to reduce it. Participants reported modifications in their daily routines, including alterations in sleep schedules, seeking support from family and friends, engaging in relaxation practices, praying, exercising, and changes in dietary habits—such as increased intake of energy and caffeinated beverages. Additionally, some students used medication prior to exams to manage stress and anxiety. Multiple studies conducted in Saudi Arabia have also indicated that to improve focus and alleviate exam-related anxiety, medical and health students commonly use prescribed medications (Jirjees et al., 2024).

VI. CONCLUSION

The prevalence of test anxiety cannot be denied. Test anxiety often disrupts the learning process because students shift their focus from learning to memorization on tests. A student's ability to focus, recall information, and show their abilities can be hindered by test anxiety; therefore, to reduce test anxiety and improve academic performance, educators can consider promoting self-efficacy beliefs among students. They can provide tools and techniques to help their students perform at their best. Educators can develop a strong sense of self-belief in the learners to overcome the fear of failure and confidently approach tests. Test anxiety overshadows the learning experience into a high-stakes game of test performance, so teachers, parents, and society should collaborate to remove student tension and anxiety. Students should be valued for their growth and development, not only for their test performance. Educators must consider creating supportive and low-stress environments where students see challenges as opportunities for developing themselves rather than being judged. Test-anxious students should study systematically, be active learners, and not brood over past failures.

A. Recommendations and Implications

The findings point to the need for systemic interventions at both institutional and familial levels. Educational institutions must foster environments that minimize test anxiety by integrating stress-management strategies into the curriculum. There are many ways of reducing test anxiety, but a few have been mentioned below:

Effective study skills can reduce test anxiety.

Adequate preparation before any tests is needed.

Studying only before the tests should be avoided.

Students should focus on their strategies and efforts rather than compare them with the high achievers.

A strong belief in oneself is needed so that a student does not have negative self-esteem.

Eating a well-balanced meal before tests is advisable.

Students need to ensure a sound and regular sleep schedule before any tests.

It is necessary to take self-tests or have another peer to test the student.

Educators need to make the students familiar with the test formats.

Providing practice tests can improve the mental preparation of the students.

Institutions and Educators can reduce the emphasis on high-stakes tests and help students manage their anxiety.

B. Limitations of the Study

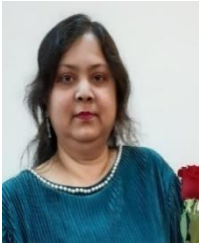
The study has some limitations. A pitfall of this research was that not all the female students (of different sections of the Intensive English Program) and the instructors teaching the Intensive English Program could be interviewed or given a questionnaire to record their responses. Besides, if the male students' perspectives about test anxiety could be known, then the researchers would be able to see if the Saudi male and female students differed in their responses to test anxiety.

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