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Test Anxiety among Foreign Language Learners: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

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Keywords

English as a Foreign Language, Test Anxiety, Qualitative Research

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Test Anxiety among Foreign Language Learners: A Qualitative Study

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Test anxiety is a strong predictor of achievement in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process and has considerable influences on proficiency in the target language. Research also has not reached a consensus on the sources and the effects of test anxiety. This study aims to examine the sources of test anxiety among foreign language learners, to find the effects of test anxiety on EFL learners, and explore the strategies used by learners to overcome test anxiety. The sample group of the study consisted of 57 students studying EFL at a preparatory school of a state university in Turkey. A background questionnaire, focus groups, essay papers, and interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The findings reached in the study show that EFL learners suffer from test anxiety due to several reasons and that they experience physical problems, problems related to tests, and affective problems, whereas they use a limited number of strategies to decrease the level of test anxiety. The study suggests that EFL teachers should raise their awareness of anxiety-provoking issues, their effects on learners, and the strategies to decrease their levels. Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Test Anxiety, Qualitative Research

Introduction

Test anxiety has certain influences on the foreign language learning process and achievement. For instance, it decreases the achievement in foreign language learning and adversely affects the learning potential (Julkunen, 1992) and creates an inconsistency between the scores obtained and the actual use of the target language (Latulippe & Light, 1983). Moreover, it is a barrier to reflecting the learner's real performance (El-Banna, 1989). Test anxiety creates certain physical and psychological problems among learners, decreases learning motivation and interest in language learning, and increases the number of mistakes (Aydin et al., 2006).

Many factors provoke test anxiety (Aida, 1994; Petridou & Williams, 2007). For example, Neely and Shaughnessy (1984) state that cultural differences, inappropriate test content, social inequality, and the testing process are some of the sources of test anxiety. Young (1986) points out that test validity, time limitation, test techniques, format and length, test environment, and unclear test instructions are some other sources of test anxiety. Similarly, Rotenberg (2002) underlines that the use of standardized tests constitutes a significant factor that negatively affects language proficiency. Furthermore, it can be stated that a low level of language proficiency, learners' previous experiences, and weak study skills are the sources that provoke test anxiety (Madsen, 1981; Rasor & Rasor, 1998). Environmental and situational variables are also directly and closely related to test anxiety (Bushnell, 1978). Time limitation

(Immerman, 1980; Madsen & Murray, 1984), gender (El-Banna, 1989; Madsen, 1981), ethnic and socioeconomic background (Putwain, 2007; Rasor & Rasor, 1998), test techniques and procedure (Oh, 1992; Shohamy, 1982), and cultural background (Lynne, 1984) are some of the factors that relate to test anxiety. Similarly, exam format and instructions (Madsen & Murray, 1984) are related to the levels of test anxiety among learners.

While test anxiety has considerable effects on the foreign language learning process and certain factors provoke anxiety among foreign language learners as emphasized above, more research seems necessary on the issue due to several reasons. First, there is no consensus on the relationship between language proficiency and test anxiety. Second, cultural differences and educational contexts all over the world may play considerable roles in terms of test anxiety. Thus, it is necessary to present realistic and concrete solutions to cope with test anxiety on a global scale. Third, most of the studies that aim to measure test anxiety among foreign language learners have been designed to be quantitative. Within this scope, qualitative research seems necessary due to changing parameters, new approaches and methods appeared, recent theoretical concepts, and innovations in language teaching and learning for a deeper and better understanding of test anxiety.

In addition to the issues listed above, test anxiety in the Turkish EFL learning context constitutes special attention that should be attracted by researchers. Speaking more specifically, it should be pointed out that while foreign language learning seems a problematic area in the Turkish EFL learning and teaching contexts, several developments, improvements, and innovations have been put into practice in addition to the use of traditional methods and techniques. These improvements mainly focus on communicational and interactional skills within the scope of productive language skills. Within this context, several improvements are considerable regarding The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) that is defined as an international standard for the description of language ability and describes language ability on a six-point scale from A1 for beginners to C2 for the ones who master the target language. However, it is necessary to perform research for a better understanding of the contributions of new developments to the foreign language learning context. Within this perspective, it seems necessary to investigate test anxiety in light of these developments. In this way, it is possible to understand the relationship between the outputs that are reached from the application of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the levels of test anxiety. Dramatically enough, the number of studies on test anxiety is fairly limited in Turkey, as can be seen below.

Studies have mainly focused on foreign language anxiety in a broader perspective, whereas test anxiety has not been a research issue at an expected level in the Turkish EFL learning context. Studies have concentrated on the sources and effects of foreign language anxiety (Aydın et al., 2006), the relationship between gender and anxiety (Aydın & Takkaç, 2007), the effect of anxiety on achievement (Dalkılıç, 2001), and technology effect on anxiety (Aydın, 2011). In addition, the relationships among the elements of anxiety (Aydın, 2008; Koralp, 2005) and writing anxiety (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Kurt & Atay, 2007; Öztürk & Çeçen, 2007) are other issues that have been investigated. As a final point, it can be stated that the number of studies on test anxiety is too low to draw conclusions on a national scale. Thus, it should be clarified what causes provoke test anxiety, how it affects learners, and what strategies are preferred to allay test anxiety among EFL learners.

Literature Review

Given that test anxiety has profound impacts on the foreign language learning process and certain factors provoke anxiety among EFL learners, this subsection presents a review of the literature. For this purpose, the subsection first draws a theoretical framework regarding

test anxiety. Then, a brief research synthesis on the impacts of tests on the EFL learning process and the factors that cause test anxiety is presented.

A theoretical framework for test anxiety

Human learning is investigated in two major domains as cognitive and affective. The affective domain involves emotions, feelings, and values that guide one's perceptions of a learning effort. They are claimed to have an indirect but significant impact on the learning outcomes (Boyle et al., 2007). As one of the substantial constituents in the affective domain, anxiety is used to refer to an emotional state or a psychological disorder: a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome. In the broadest sense, anxiety is defined as an unpleasant emotional condition associated with feelings of uneasiness, worry, discomfort, and dread (He, 2018; Riskind & Rector, 2018; Spielberger, 1972).

Spielberger (1972) distinguishes emotional traits and states. He defines traits as "relatively enduring individual differences among people in specifiable tendencies to perceive the world in a certain way and/or in dispositions to react or behave in a specified manner with predictable regularity" (Spielberger, 1972, p. 31) whereas an emotional state occurs at a time with a specific level of intensity. Therefore, *trait anxiety* refers to a permanent personality disposition. Thus, it is rather stable and predictable, whereas *state anxiety* identifies a rather temporary emotional condition that changes according to the perceived danger in a circumstance. Endler and Kocovski (2001) argue that there are four components of state anxiety: social evaluation, physical danger, ambiguity, and daily routines. Likewise, trait anxiety is made up of two elements that are cognitive-worry and autonomic-emotional. To add, Alpert and Haber (1960) categorize anxiety as *facilitating* and *debilitating* (as cited in Ellis, 1999). *Facilitating anxiety* leads to a good performance whereas *debilitating anxiety* is considered an obstacle for achievement (He, 2018). This distinction is generally used for academic or physical performance, and naturally for test achievements and competitions.

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) refers to "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128). Ellis (1999) asserts that FLA has the power to determine the quality and quantity of input, processing, and success in the outcome. This assertion is also supported by Krashen's Comprehensible Input and Affective Filter Hypotheses (Brown, 2007). Krashen argues that comprehensible input is the precondition for successful language acquisition. However, the learner can benefit from the comprehensible input properly only in the presence of a low affective filter (Du, 2009; Pierce, 1995). In other words, the learner needs to lower the affective filter to let the input in (Aydın, 2019; Du, 2009). The affective filter comprises of certain emotions such as motivation, self-confidence, attitudes, and anxiety. Therefore, someone with high levels of motivation, self-confidence, positive attitudes, and reduced anxiety can lower her affective filter and get rid of the potential psychological barriers (Aydın, 2019; Ni, 2012). In short, FLA, a significant component of the affective filter, is regarded to have a negative effect on foreign language learning (Horwitz, 2001).

Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that FLA is constituted by the combinations of the following three components that are briefly described below: *communication apprehension*, *fear of negative evaluation*, and *test anxiety* (Aydın, 2019; Williams, 1991). First, *communication apprehension* is "a type of shyness characterized by the fear of or anxiety about communicating with people" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 127). Second, *fear of negative evaluation* is basically about the social impression people create in their community and refers to the apprehension of being perceived and judged unfavorably by others (Carleton et al., 2006;

Leary, 1983). Last, *test anxiety* is directly related to academic evaluation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Test anxiety is “the set of cognitive, physiological, and behavioral responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure on exams or similar evaluative situations” (Zeidner, 1998, p. 17; Zeidner, 2007, p. 166). It creates “excessive amounts of concern, worry, and fear about negative evaluation during or in anticipation of performance or evaluative situations” (Goonan, 2003, p. 258). In other words, individuals are afraid of getting embarrassed by their unsatisfactory performance since they consider it as a threat to their ego or self-esteem (Putwain, 2008; Goonan, 2003; Sapp, 1999) and consequently, they either avoid evaluative situations or experience excessive stress if they cannot flee from being tested (Sarason, 1978). Test anxiety appears in specific situations or contexts where one’s performance is being evaluated and it has an evident social aspect due to the concerns with how that performance will be judged by the others (Putwain, 2008).

The fundamental constructs of test anxiety involve evaluative situations, personal variables, perceptions of test situations, state test anxiety, coping reactions, and adaptive outcomes (Zeidner, 1998):

- *Evaluative situations*: The level of test anxiety experienced by a learner is determined by such elements in the evaluative situation as the nature of the task, task difficulty, atmosphere, time constraints, examiner characteristics, and administration mode.
- *Personal variables*: People do not get worried equally about a particular evaluative situation, so they may feel different levels of challenge and threat within the same testing context. It is possible to explain this variation as “a situation-specific form of trait anxiety” (Zeidner, 1998, p. 22). Individuals with high trait anxiety are likely to view an evaluative situation more frightening and stressful than ones with low trait anxiety; therefore, they tend to get hurt more intensely and frequently in testing situations.
- *Perceptions of test situation*: Their cognitive perceptions act as a mediator between individuals and contexts. In the case of a test situation, their emotions and behaviors are guided by their judgment of that particular evaluative condition. In other words, how they feel and behave mostly depends on their “subjective appraisal of the situation” (Zeidner, 1998, p. 22). This implies that it is not the situation itself but the way it is interpreted by an individual that evokes anxiety.
- *State test anxiety*: This term is used for “the transitory, anxious affect state provoked by a specific evaluative situation” (Hong & Karstenson, 2002, p. 349). In such cases, people are drifted to feel tense and get incited. Besides, their autonomic nervous system is activated which results in physiological arousals like trembling, sweating, or irregular blood pressure.
- *Coping reactions and adaptive outcomes*: People react to a test situation to reduce or tolerate the stress they feel as a result of their interaction with the environment. That is, they apply some problem-oriented, curative, avoidance, or defensive strategies to regulate their emotional state and to manage their anxiety (Zeidner, 1998).

Finally, a conceptualization for test anxiety appeared with the application of the Self-Regulative Theory of anxiety and competence to test anxiety (Zeidner, 2007; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005). The model specifies the significance of transactional processes and self-referent information (Zeidner, 2007). Self-regulative processing is activated by an intrusion

which may refer to the thought of potential failure in a testing situation. With the activation, the system begins to search for a proper way to cope with it. This search is largely influenced by self-knowledge, and if negative self-beliefs are fetched, an increase in test anxiety occurs. As a result, the individual focuses on his/her poor performance and negative feedback. He/she gets extremely alert for danger, starts to accuse himself/herself of being incompetent, and tends to exhibit avoidance behaviors. This type of processing eventually triggers state anxiety causing distress and cognitive interference. Normally, an individual is expected to restructure his/her self-knowledge by learning from each evaluation experience and by adding more efficient coping strategies to his/her repertoire. However, constant worry may prevent one from such a beneficial update in the self-knowledge and direct him/her to avoid evaluative situations. Such avoidance is hazardous as it reduces the chances for modification in the coping strategies for better (Zeidner, 2007; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005).

Research on test anxiety

Research shows that demographic variables and socioeconomic backgrounds relate to test anxiety. For instance, Hembree (1988) discussed the nature, effects test anxiety, and evaluative anxiety treatment. The results revealed that different levels of test anxiety stemmed from ability, gender, and level of school grade. In another study, Guida and Ludlow (1989) examined test anxiety of students in Grade 7 and 8 in terms of culture, socioeconomic level, and gender through the Test Anxiety Scale for Children with four sample groups of students. Findings demonstrated that the test anxiety score of students with high socioeconomic status was lower; students from South America were more anxious than North Americans. In addition, females with low socioeconomic background were more high-anxious than males from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Putwain (2007) aimed to gather exploratory data on test anxiety scores of 690 schoolchildren in the Year 10 and 658 schoolchildren in the Year 11 from seven secondary schools in the UK using the Test Anxiety Inventory and the Student Profile Questionnaire to collect demographic variables. In the study, it was found that gender, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds of students significantly predicted the variance of their test anxiety scores.

Research also demonstrates that poor study skills are a source of test anxiety. For instance, in an earlier study, Wittmaier (1972) investigated whether there was a relation between facilitating and debilitating test anxiety and students' study habits. He found that low test-anxious students had more quality of studying behaviors. Similarly, Culler and Holahan (1980) examined the relationship between college students' test anxiety and academic performance to find out whether students with high anxiety and low anxiety differed in terms of studying behaviors. Studying behaviors were differentially effective in these groups they worked with a sample of 65 students with a high level of anxiety and 31 students with a low level of anxiety based on their scores on the Test Anxiety Scale. It was concluded that test anxiety was associated with a low level of academic performance and that studying behaviors of students with a high level of anxiety was lower. Rasor and Rasor (1998) aimed to find the relationship among test anxiety, students' studying behaviors and their age, gender, and ethnicity with a sample of students in introductory psychology and English classes at American River College and Sacramento City College in California through the Study Behavior Inventory and Sarason's Test Anxiety Scale. The findings revealed that non-white students might need more help in terms of study habits and overcoming test anxiety. They also suggested that more instruction about studying habits might be necessary for younger male students and female students need more support to combat test anxiety. As a final point, they noted that having lower study skills was the indicator of higher test anxiety. Finally, Cassady and Johnson (2004) investigated the effect of cognitive test anxiety on test preparation,

performance, and reflection steps. It was found that high-anxious students had low studying behaviors and less effective preparation.

The testing atmosphere is another factor that provokes test anxiety. Bushnell (1978), for instance, evaluated the effects of altering test environments by administering mid-terms and final exams in two different environments; large lecture halls and small language labs, and it was found that environmental and situational variables affect scores of students with high anxiety and low anxiety, and conceal their actual learning performance. Furthermore, Shohamy (1982) aimed to investigate whether students displayed different attitudes towards different testing procedures, whether there was a relationship between attitudes to procedures of testing and test performance, and what testing experiences they favored and regarded as relaxing, stressful, and low anxious. In the study, two cloze tests, a questionnaire consisting of a five-point Likert-scale, an essay question, and an oral interview were used to collect data. The findings indicated that tests that were similar to real-life situations, which are viewed as a learning tool by students and which constituted a relaxing and low anxiety atmosphere were the most preferred ones.

Research shows that a low level of proficiency in the target language is a source of test anxiety. Within this scope, Rotenberg (2002) aimed to find if learners' level of language proficiency was affected by standardized test procedure, and analyzed 22 native and non-native speakers of English who are in Grade 2 in terms of whether students proficiency levels constituted a difference in their worry, test anxiety, foreign language anxiety, efficacy, and environmental pressures. The findings showed that there was a negative correlation between language proficiency and test anxiety.

Finally, assessment methods and test instructions are directly related to test anxiety. First, Oh (1992) investigated whether different second language reading assessment methods affect students' levels of anxiety through the Cognitive Interference Questionnaire (Sarason, 1978). The questionnaire was administered after each reading task with a sample of 18 first-premedical students at a university in Korea. The results showed that cloze and think-aloud assessment methods increased students' anxiety and that students might be negatively affected by some assessment procedures. Second, in an experimental study, Mandelson (1973) examined the effect of test instructions on foreign language learners' test scores by administering an oral task and a criterion test to 96 pupils in three groups; one group taking instructions that are anxiety increasing, one taking anxiety-allaying instructions and one as the control group. The findings revealed that the effect of the instructions differed in genders. Anxiety-arousing instructions had a debilitating effect for boys but a facilitating effect for girls while anxiety-allaying instructions were depressing for girls' scores compared to the control group.

Research indicates that test anxiety has some considerable effects on the foreign language learning process. First, in their study, Aydın et al. (2006) aimed to detect the test anxiety level among Turkish students as EFL learners as well as to investigate its reasons, effects, and results on foreign language learning. They concluded that test anxiety negatively affected motivation, concentration, and achievement as well as increasing errors in the learning process. They also noted that test anxiety prevented students from reflecting their actual performance in their test results and from studying efficiently, and reduced the interest in language learning. Furthermore, In'nami (2006) investigated the effects of test anxiety on listening test performance. The study concluded that test anxiety did not have any effect on the performance in listening tests. Unlike listening performance, in their study, Haskin et al. (2003) concluded that test anxiety had negative effects on the spoken proficiency of language learners. Moreover, Arnold (2000) aimed to investigate the means to improve listening comprehension by using some visuals. In the study, the results revealed that visualization strategies reduced test anxiety. Additionally, Alberio et al. (1997) aimed to measure the effects of test anxiety on

the test scores of children. They found that children who experienced test anxiety had dramatically lower scores. In another study, Schonwetter (1995) found that test anxiety yielded differences in students' learning outcomes and that students who suffered from test anxiety were not able to benefit from organized instruction although organized instruction increased students' motivation to attend future classes. Last, in El-Banna's (1989) study, the results showed that learners who suffered from test anxiety tended to have poor scores in language tests, while the ones who had a low level of test anxiety seemed to perform successfully.

Research also indicates that there is a relationship between language proficiency and test anxiety among foreign language learners. For instance, Joy (2013) examined the level of test anxiety related to pre-, during-, and post-test stages of second language learners. The results revealed that language learners had the highest level of test anxiety during the test stage, followed by the pre-test stage. The post-test stage was the least anxiety-provoking stage. In another study, Williams (1996) examined test anxiety among academically talented high school students by assessing cognitive and psychological components. The results revealed that students who suffered from test anxiety had science performance at a low level. Furthermore, Julkunen (1992) aimed to explore the effects of test anxiety among learners and found that anxious students showed traits like worry, tensions, test – irrelevant thoughts, and physical reactions. The results also revealed that test anxiety prevented learners from showing their actual language potentials. In addition, Hall's (1991) study examined the texts and students' behaviors in a practice essay test and an actual English composition proficiency examination in a second language context. The results suggested that assessment needed to distinguish writing problems from language problems and that instructional processes needed to focus on composing behaviors and accommodating students who felt apprehension about writing tests. In another study, Horwitz (1986) concluded that test anxiety had a negative relationship with final grades in the case of introductory-level among foreign language students. In addition, Young (1986) examined the relationship between anxiety and oral proficiency ratings. The results revealed that anxiety did not have a drastic effect on learners' scores. However, in the case of spoken proficiency interview as an official test, anxiety might increase. Deffenbacher and Hazaleus (1985) examined the causes of interventions in participants with high anxiety under performance stress. An intellectual test was administered to students from upper and lower quartiles of the Test Anxiety Scale by Sarason (1972). The findings demonstrated that the subject anxiety level was effective on the variables excluding pulse rate, and participants with a higher level of anxiety displayed poor performance. In addition, Galassi et al. (1981) demonstrated that low academic success was the probable reason to increase students' test anxiety about the following exams. Last, Chastain (1975) found that test anxiety was negatively and moderately correlated with course grades among beginner-level language learners.

From the review of the research presented above, several conclusions can be drawn. For example, research shows that demographic variables and socioeconomic backgrounds relate to test anxiety, whereas poor study skills are a considerable source of test anxiety. Moreover, the testing atmosphere is a significant factor that may provoke test anxiety. More importantly, research shows that a low level of proficiency in the target language is an important source of test anxiety, whereas assessment methods and test instructions are directly related to test anxiety. As a final note, it can be pointed out that test anxiety has adverse effects on the foreign language learning process.

Overview of the Study

The study is designed to be qualitative due to several reasons. First and in the broadest perspective, while test anxiety has attracted interest among researchers, scales and questionnaires have been mainly used to collect data. However, it is evident that the data

collected by the use of the mentioned tools mostly reflect the learners' perceptions of test anxiety rather than their actual and realistic opinions and experiences. Thus, it is necessary to carry out qualitative studies for a better and deeper understanding of test anxiety from learners' perspectives in realistic settings. Second, as previously underlined, researchers mainly prefer the Test Anxiety Scale that was developed by Sarason (1978). However, today, it seems necessary to develop new descriptive tools in accordance with the changing paradigms in foreign language education. Thus, it is strongly necessary to obtain qualitative data to design and develop tools to measure the levels of test anxiety regarding changing parameters, new approaches and methods, recent theoretical concepts, and innovations in language teaching and learning.

As clarified above, test anxiety is a strong predictor of achievement in the target language and has considerable influences on the foreign language learning process, while there is no consensus on the sources and the effects of test anxiety when the research results are considered. Within the scope of the Turkish EFL learning context, the number of studies on test anxiety is fairly limited. As a final point, more research is necessary to increase the level of achievement and proficiency, to use the facilitative effects of tests on foreign language learning, and to find ways to allay test anxiety. With these concerns in mind, this study aims to investigate the sources of test anxiety among foreign language learners, the effects of test anxiety on EFL learners, and the strategies used by learners to overcome test anxiety.

The first author of this paper completed his Ph.D. thesis on the effects of computers on testing writing skills. He researches issues such as basic language skills, computer-assisted language learning, language testing, and anxiety in the foreign language learning and teaching contexts. He also teaches pre-service teacher training courses. As an experienced researcher, he is aware that anxiety in the EFL learning context is directly related to learners' achievement and proficiency in the target language. The second author completed her Ph.D. dissertation on the Communicative Approach. She studies issues such as teacher training, teaching methods, and course books and teaches pre-service teacher training courses. She believes that affective states in the foreign language learning process are considerable issues that may have influences on the learning process. The last three authors are the MA students and experienced language teachers at a preparatory school. They believe that a combination of their experiences in the field and research activities will guide them to be professional researchers. As anxiety constitutes profound problems regarding language teaching and learning, they believe that research will be beneficial to increase their awareness of affective states in the teaching and learning processes. As a note, it should be added that the researchers of this study are the members of a research team that conduct a project aiming at investigating test anxiety, developing a tool to measure the levels of test anxiety, and exploring the relationship between the levels of test anxiety and certain variables.

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were 57 students studying EFL at a preparatory school of a state university in Turkey. The mean for the ages of participants was 20.03 within the range of 18 and 22. Of the participants, 30 (52.6%) were female, whereas 27 (47.4%) were male. All of the participants were the students at the language program that is participated before their BA programs where they were instructed in English. The participants were students at the departments of Business Administration (12), Political Science and Public Administration (12), Molecular Biology and Genetics (12), English Language Teaching (11), History (6), Law (1), Dentistry (1), Visual Communication Design (1) and Computer Engineering (1). In terms of

their proficiency levels in the target language, 18 (31.6%) were at the A1 level (for beginners), whereas 19 (33.3%) were at the A2 level (for the ones at the elementary level). Finally, 20 students (35.1%) were at the level of B1. As the sample group included 57 participants among 205 students at the program, the nature of sampling seemed appropriate to understand and describe the phenomenon.

Tools

The study used three data collecting tools. First, 18 EFL learners participated in focus groups focusing on their feelings about the tests they took. Second, 19 participants wrote essays about their experiences and feelings about tests. Third, 20 students were interviewed about their experiences and emotions before, after, and during tests. The rationale behind using focus groups, essay writing, and interviews in the study was that they help explain, explore and better understand the participants' experiences, opinions, and behaviors in terms of test anxiety. Three independent researchers administered each of the mentioned tools to the participants in each group. The rationale behind the administrations of different tools by different researchers was to compare the data from each group to others regarding the validity and trustworthiness of the data. As a note, it should be stated that the researchers used focus groups, essay writing, and interviews for gathering data from the participants' perspective as their personal opinions and thoughts seemed necessary to obtain qualitative data. In other words, the study was contextualized to measure participants' realistic and actual opinions and thoughts rather than how they perceive test anxiety in the foreign language learning context. As a final note, a background questionnaire was used to collect data about the participants' age, gender, departments, and proficiency levels in the target language.

Procedure

The study was performed in accordance with the ethical committee report that was approved by the Ethical Committee of Social Sciences of a state university. In addition, a legal permission document was obtained from the university administration. The reason why the ethical committee report and the legal permission document are necessary is that it was a must to clarify whether there is an ethical problem or a risk regarding participation in the study (Mack et al., 2005). In addition, it was necessary to inform the participants about protecting the privacy and obtaining voluntariness. For those reasons, all of the participants in the study were informed about the purpose of the study, outputs, and ethical rules. They were also informed that the study did not have any social and psychological risk and that the results obtained would be used for scientific purposes. After informing the participants about ethics, the study was performed.

As previously mentioned, focus groups, essay writing, and interviews were used to gather data and triangulate the data regarding validity and trustworthiness. The first researcher asked the participants to participate in focus groups. Similarly, the second researcher asked them to write about their experiences, feelings, opinions, and thoughts about tests. It should be noted that different groups of students participated in each of the three data collection processes. To add, the questions given below were used in all three settings after designing the questions, developing guides, and planning. Finally, the third researcher interviewed students to interrogate their experiences, took written notes, and recorded each interview. During this process, answers to three basic questions were sought:

1. Do they feel anxious or worried before, during, and after the test they take? If yes, why?

2. What problems do they encounter if they feel anxious before, during, and after the test they take?
3. What do they do to overcome those problems?

Data Analysis

After designing the questions, interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Then, each researcher separately analyzed the data collected from each data collection source. In this process, the researchers examined, noted, and underlined each of the statements in detail according to the questions listed above due to several reasons. First, it seemed to obtain data about participants' experiences and feelings regarding different aspects of the same phenomenon in realistic settings (Denzin, 1978). Second, for obtaining interpretation, trustworthiness, consistency, and validity of the collected data, three separate researchers used three data collecting tools and sources (Patton, 2001). It should be noted that during the process of data collection from focus groups and interviews, the researchers took detailed notes, recorded audios, created and annotated transcripts, created categories and subcategories, segmented the data and analyzed these segments. In terms of essay writing, the researcher examined each of the papers, categorized and segmented the data, and analyzed the segments. As some of the participants were at a low level of proficiency in the target language, the researchers performed the data collecting process in Turkish, the participants' native language. Then, each researcher marked passages with code labels and gave each of the codes a name to obtain an indication of the concept or idea that underpinned the categories, causes of test anxiety, effects of test anxiety, and the strategies to overcome test anxiety. Next, the numbered topics, terms, ideas, concepts, and phrases found in each source were listed and transferred to the three separate tables by each researcher. In this way, each researcher prepared three separate tables showing the causes of test anxiety, the effects of test anxiety, and the strategies used by learners to overcome test anxiety. Finally, a fourth researcher examined and compared all of the tables to see whether the data from the three sources were similar or not. After comparing the data from tables, the data seemed similar, valid, and trustworthy. Then, she listed, transferred, and combined the data into three tables, as seen in the sample table given below.

Table 1

Sample table for data sources

Sources of test anxiety	Focus Group		Essay Writing		Interview		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Fear of failure	18	100	8	42.1	9	45	35	61.4
Parental expectations	12	66.7	4	21.1	12	60	28	49.1
Lack of study skills	12	66.7	2	10.5	9	45	23	40.4
Bad experiences from past	7	38.9	7	36.8	0	0	14	24.6

Results

This section presents the findings obtained from the qualitative data. For this purpose, first, the findings on the sources of test anxiety were given. Then, the data on how learners were affected by test anxiety are presented. Finally, the section presented findings on what strategies were used to cope with test anxiety among EFL learners. Before presenting the findings, several points can be clarified. First, as the data were collected by using qualitative research tools and techniques, the findings reflected the observable phenomena, and participants' realistic opinions and experiences concerning the research questions rather than their perceptions (Bergman & Coxon, (2005). Second, as the data were collected through focus groups, essay papers, and interviews by asking the same questions to the ones in all groups, it was assumed that the collected data characterized and approximated participants' real behaviors. However, why the descriptive values were given in the tables was to demonstrate the order of importance of the items recorded and analyzed through qualitative research design rather than a descriptive approach. Third and last, when the data from the groups were compared during the analysis and comparison processes, it was observed that the findings presented below represented the data quality in terms of accuracy, saturation, and validity. Furthermore, after the process that included data collection and analysis by three researchers from different groups, data sets were found to be relevant, complete, and trustworthy during the combination process by a fourth researcher.

Sources of test anxiety

Results show that EFL learners suffer from test anxiety due to several reasons. First, the participants thought that fear of failure on examinations was one of the strongest reasons regarding test anxiety, as seen in the following excerpt.

I can say that I have the fear of failure and repeating the same class next year.
This makes me feel very anxious about my future.

Second, the participants believed that their parental expectations were another source of test anxiety. In addition, the participants implied that their negative past experiences caused test anxiety, as one of the students mentioned:

I am a repeat student, so I am so frightened that I will experience the same this year.

The third reason why they feel test anxiety was their perceptions of the lack of study skills, as one of the students said:

I don't feel nervous if it is a test I have studied for. If it is a test, I haven't studied enough, I naturally become nervous.

Apart from the reasons mentioned above, EFL learners seemed to suffer from test anxiety because of the fear of negative evaluations by their teachers and classmates, whereas they believed that an emotional factor, the lack of self-confidence, provokes anxiety. Moreover, their low performance on previous tests might be a strong reason to suffer from test anxiety, whereas they seemed to be anxious due to their high achievement goals regarding tests. Last, they thought that their perceptions of the low level of proficiency in the target language were

a reason to feel anxious, whereas they believed that the procedural issues during the test administration process caused test anxiety (See Table 2).

Table 2

Sources of test anxiety

Statements	Number	%
Fear of failure	35	19.0
Parental expectations	28	15.2
Fear of negative evaluation	24	13.0
Lack of study skills	23	12.5
Lack of self-confidence	21	11.4
Low performance on tests	16	8.7
Past experiences	14	7.6
Test administration procedure	12	6.5
High achievement goals	7	3.8
Poor language proficiency	4	2.2

Effects of test anxiety

Results indicate that the effects of test anxiety on the participants can be seen under three categories. These are (1) physical problems, (2) problems related to tests, and (3) affective problems. First, the participants stated that they experienced physical problems such as eating and sleeping disorders, as one of the participants mentioned.

When my exam dates are close, I have small itchy scars on the different parts of my body. Also, I have stomach aches and nausea.

Second, they seemed that test anxiety caused them to show poor performance on the tests, to lose concentration during tests, to manage time during tests, and to experience difficulties in remembering answers, as one student said.

When I spend too much time on questions I know because of anxiety, I run out of time. I can't do the others anyway. When I decide to focus on those, it becomes another problem because I don't have time for the ones I know.

Third, fear of failure, one of the strong sources of test anxiety, was also seen as one of the influences of test anxiety. Last, the participants believed that test anxiety was a source of demotivation and amotivation before, after, and during tests, while some students thought that it increased the level of motivation, as mentioned by one of the students. In addition, they stated that test anxiety had a negative effect on their self-confidence (See Table 3).

Anxiety is actually good. It motivates us after the exam. ... It affects my study. At least it makes me study the things I haven't studied yet.

Table 3
Effects of test anxiety

Statements	Number	%	
Physical problems	Eating disorder	6	4.8
	Sleeping disorder	11	8.9
Problems related to tests	Poor performance on tests	33	26.6
	Loss of concentration during tests	14	11.3
	Fear of failure	19	15.3
	Difficulties in time management	13	10.5
	Difficulties in remembering answers	10	8.1
Problems in relation to affect	Amotivation and demotivation	5	4.0
	Lack of self-confidence	5	4.0
	Feeling more motivated	8	6.5

Strategies used to overcome test anxiety

The findings demonstrate that the strategies used by the participants seem too limited. Among them, breathing exercises seemed to be used most frequently to overcome test anxiety, as mentioned by one of the participants. Second, the participants preferred to talk to their friends, family members, and school counselors when they felt anxious. Third, the students preferred praying to decrease the level of test anxiety they experienced. Finally, some of the students believed that listening to music was an effective way of reducing test anxiety (See Table 4).

If I get too anxious, I take a deep breath through my nose and give it slowly out of my mouth. This is a breathing technique.

Table 4
Strategies to allay test anxiety

Statements	Number	%
Breathing exercises	11	31.4
Talking to friends, family members, and school counselor	10	28.6
Praying	9	25.7
Listening to music	5	14.3

Conclusions and Discussion

Three main conclusions from the study were reached. The first conclusion is that EFL learners suffer from test anxiety due to several reasons that can be listed as fear of failure, parental expectations, past experiences, the lack of study skills, fear of negative evaluation, the

lack of self-confidence, low performance on tests, problems related to test administration procedure, high achievement goals, and poor language proficiency. The second conclusion is that EFL learners experience physical problems, problems related to tests, and affective problems. In other words, due to test anxiety, students experience eating and sleeping disorders, show a low level of performance on the test, lose their concentration on tests, feel fear of failure, experience difficulties in test management, and have difficulties in remembering answers during the tests. Moreover, they lose their motivation and self-confidence. On the contrary to those negative effects, it is concluded that test anxiety increases the level of motivation among foreign language learners. The third conclusion is that EFL learners use a limited number of strategies to decrease the level of test anxiety. Within this scope, they mainly prefer breathing exercises, listening to music, praying, and talking to their friends, family members, and school counselors.

A summary of the findings obtained from the study is as follows. First, the research had a similar finding to the ones by Wittmaier (1972), Culler and Holahan (1980) and Rasor and Rasor (1998), and Cassady (2004) who pointed out that high test-anxious students had less quality of studying behaviors and that having poorer study skills was the indicator of higher test anxiety. Moreover, the results of the study showed that the test administration procedure was a source of test anxiety, as found by Bushnell (1978). Moreover, as found by Rotenberg (2002), it was noted that there was a negative correlation between language proficiency and test anxiety. On the other hand, while Oh (1992) found that test anxiety might be negatively affected by some assessment procedures, this study did not reach a finding regarding the assessment process from the participants' perspectives. Similarly, no finding was available regarding test instructions, while Mandelson (1973) noted that instructions had a debilitating effect. As a note, the study found that fear of failure, parental expectations, past experiences, and high achievement goals were the anxiety-provoking factors that were reached in prior research. Second, while this study reached similar results found by Aydın et al. (2006) who noted that test anxiety had adverse effects on motivation and concentration, no findings in the current study were reached regarding achievement and increasing numbers of errors. Similarly, while the study did not reach any conclusion regarding the effects of basic language skills and knowledge areas, Haskin et al. (2003) noted that test anxiety had negative effects on spoken proficiency. Interestingly enough, while Schonwetter (1995) found that test anxiety was not able to increase students' motivation, this study indicated that test anxiety had both decreased and increased the level of learning motivation. More interestingly, the current study concluded that fear of failure was not only a source of test anxiety but also one of its impacts. The study also found that test anxiety caused physical problems as Julkunen (1992) noted that anxious students had physical reactions. Similarly, Deffenbacher and Hazaleus (1985) found that anxiety level was effective on the variables excluding pulse rate. Third and last, in the current literature, no findings were reached regarding strategies to decrease the level of test anxiety from learners' views, while Arnold (2000) revealed that visualization strategies reduced test anxiety from teachers' perspective. As a final note, it should be pointed out that the studies mentioned above mainly used descriptive and correlational research designs, while a qualitative research design was preferred in the current study. In other words, differently from the studies that mainly measured learners' perceptions of test anxiety, this study focused on students' actual and realistic opinions and experiences concerning test anxiety. Another difference was that the study holistically and synthetically examined the sources and effects of test anxiety, and strategies used to cope with test anxiety in the foreign language learning context, while the mentioned studies analytically and separately examined the elements of test anxiety.

Some practical recommendations regarding the conclusions reached in the research are as follows. In the broadest perspective, EFL teachers should raise their awareness of anxiety-

provoking issues, their effects on learners, and the strategies to decrease their levels. For this purpose, test anxiety and related issues should be integrated into both pre- and in-service teacher education programs. Within the scope of those courses, teachers should be instructed about the factors that cause anxiety, its effects on the learning process, and the strategies to moderate anxiety. Speaking more specifically, teachers should know how to guide learners about fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation, negative experiences, and the lack of self-confidence. Moreover, teachers should inform students about developing strategies for effective study skills and increasing their performance on tests. They should also create positive testing environments and moderate the test administration processes. On the other hand, teachers should also know that a moderate level of test anxiety is a reason to motivate learners regarding their achievement goals and that good performance on tests is a factor that reduces test anxiety, whereas anxiety is also a predictor of learning motivation. Teachers should also know that fear of failure is both a reason and an effect of test anxiety. Then, as EFL learners experience physical, affective, and test-related problems, they need professional guidance and counseling. Within this scope, school guides and counselors should present professional services in terms of eating and sleeping disorders, fear of failure, time management, and the lack of concentration, motivation, and self-confidence during tests. In addition, school guides and counselors should train learners regarding relaxation techniques before tests. As a final note, as parental expectations seem a reason that provokes anxiety, education programs should be organized to inform parents about the dramatic impact of their expectations on students.

The study has several limitations. First, the participants in the research were 57 students studying at a preparatory school of the state university in Turkey. The scope of the study was confined to the qualitative data obtained from focus groups, essay papers, and interviews. The data obtained from the study reflected EFL learners' reactions to the potential sources of test anxiety, its effects on learners, and the strategies used to decrease test anxiety.

Several recommendations for further research can be made. First, as the findings of the current study present the factors regarding test anxiety in the foreign language learning context holistically and synthetically, further research can focus on each of those factors analytically in descriptive, correlational, and experimental studies. Second, as the findings present learners' actual and realistic opinions and experiences with regard to test anxiety, the results can be used to design measurement tools to measure test anxiety. For those purposes, Further research focusing on determining the levels of test anxiety in the foreign language learning process is necessary. In addition, experimental studies are necessary to contextualize how and why probable factors have influences on learners' reactions to test anxiety and to understand the relationships between the levels of test anxiety and demographics, internal, and external factors.

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