

Dixie Dixit: New Trends with Technology Test Anxiety: Fact or Fiction? Part 2

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In the previous column, I discussed how I became interested in the topic of test anxiety, and what test anxiety is. In this column, I will explore a study we carried out at my university and the results. Finally, I shall close with some strategies to cope with test anxiety.

The reason for my interest in test anxiety was because one of my students seemed to be suffering from this. Because Daniela (not her real name) had been my student, and I knew that she had good comprehension skills in English. I also felt that she was hard-working. I found it hard to believe she had taken two standardized proficiency tests and had not gotten the required score. Because of this, she could not get her degree. Seeking a way to help Daniela led me to look into the topic.

I found that test anxiety is an emotional reaction to some kind of evaluation, especially evaluations of skills (Furlán, 2006). I also realized that it consists of several elements, such as avoidance, concern, and physiological reactions (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). Women are much more likely to suffer from test anxiety than men (Cizek & Burg, 2006; Grandis, 2009), and Hispanic students in the United States are more possible to suffer from it than other ethnic groups in that country (Cizek & Burg, 2006).

In order to carry out my reserach, I was able to obtain a research assistant with support from my university. Karen is in her last year of the undergraduate program in Psycho-Pedagogy at the university, and she had been my student in a research seminar offered as part of her school program.

As I mentioned in the previous issue, some of my colleagues have carried out studies in math anxiety (Eccius-Wellman et al., in press) and they recommended Grandis' (2009) study of test anxiety among university students in Argentina. In the course of Grandis' research, she developed and validated a 34-item questionnaire that she used to discover if students at her university suffered from test anxiety or not. The questionnaire includes thirteen items related to concern; there are fourteen items related to physiological manifestations of anxiety, and the final seven have to do with avoidance. Grandis' results show that fewer than 2% of her respondents admitted to suffering from test anxiety, that students in the fields of humanities suffer more than engineering students, and that women are much more likely to acknowledge anxiety than men.

For our study, Karen and I applied the questionnaire to 138 students who were sitting a Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) exam between November, 2015 and May, 2016. The TOEIC is one of the exams offered by Educational Testing Services (ETS). We selected the TOEIC because we had more students taking this exam than others. We compared their exam results with their responses on the questionnaires. What was found was a low negative correlation between the two scores. This means that the more anxiety the person reported, the more likely he or she was to

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do poorly on the exam. The correlation was low, so this is not an important finding. Our findings were similar to those of Grandis: fewer than 2% of our respondents reported suffering from test anxiety; more women than men reported suffering from test anxiety; engineering students were less likely to express test anxiety, while students from humanities were more likely.

With this information, we selected six students for interviews. The six were female and they were all from the School of Pedagogy. They were selected, firstly, because even though they did not express test anxiety, they did not obtain the score they needed on the exam. Secondly, they were all known to Karen, so it was easy for her to talk to them.

From the interviews, we found that the six had in common that they liked English, and they used it in their daily lives. They all had a lot of experience learning the language; four of them had been in bilingual schools, while three had done language studies abroad. They all felt comfortable speaking or reading the language.

Another commonality we discovered is that none of them had prepared for the exam. Even though they knew that grammar was their weak point, they did not make any special effort to study or review. They were not obligated to take an exam preparation course, either at the university or elsewhere, so they were not always aware of the type of tasks the exam included.

It would be easy to conclude that the reason why our students are not passing the exam is lack of preparation. However, Karen and I wonder if that refusal to prepare is not a symptom of anxiety. It could be a form of avoidance. In all cases, we are working on helping students by offering coping strategies to avoid anxiety. These strategies can be divided into three categories: preparation, organization, and practice.

Regarding these three categories, preparation strategies have to do with getting to know the test, understanding what is expected of the test taker, the time limitations, the instructions, to name a few of the strategies. Organization strategies include not only things such as making a plan to study, but also making sure that the test-taker knows where the exam will take place and the test-taker arrives there with plenty of time. Finally, practice, of course, has to do with practicing the specific type of activities included in the test.

Other ways to reduce test anxiety include getting plenty of rest before the test, eating enough, but not too much, and avoiding cramming the night before. Some deep breathing exercises before the exam are also useful, as well as positive self-talk. This is when you tell yourself: "I can do this. I will be fine", or similar positive statements.

If you teach exam preparation courses, I invite you to go over these strategies with your students. In the case of the students at my university, we will find alternative ways to get the message across.

References

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