

OVERCOMING TEST ANXIETY: PERSPECTIVES OF SENIOR STUDENTS OF THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION

Abdul Halim Abdul Raof & Nurul Hana Binti Ab Nasir
Fakulti Pendidikan,
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

ABSTRACT : This study set out to investigate ways to overcome test anxiety from the perspectives of senior students of the Faculty of Education. Test anxiety as Zeidner defined it and quoted by Cizek and Burg (2006) is uneasiness feelings towards things that have to do with evaluative situation. The study which took place in UTM, Skudai aimed to look for expressions and sources of test anxiety as perceived by UTM senior students. It also aimed to find out how they overcome it. A set of questionnaires was distributed to 91 students from SPM 3112 course, Programming Language II. Nine of the respondents agreed to participate in a semi- structured interview. The overall results showed that senior students of UTM expressed their test anxiety through thought disruption and they felt anxious because they were concerned about their preparation for test. It was found that most participants perceived test anxiety as a normal feeling and thus, not many were bothered to overcome it. However, it was found out too that there were two ways that participants overcome test anxiety. These can be categorised as physical reactions and mental reactions. The mental reactions are further divided into two which are self-motivation and religious belief. It is hoped that this study will give benefits to both students and lecturers of the Faculty of Education, in particular, on the issues of test anxiety.

ABSTRAK : Kajian ini menyiasat cara menghadapi keresahan terhadap ujian dari perspektif pelajar kanan Fakulti Pendidikan. Keresahan terhadap ujian seperti yang diterjemahkan oleh Zeidner yang diambil dari Cizek dan Burg (2006) adalah perasaan tidak selesa terhadap perkara yang melibatkan situasi penilaian. Kajian yang dilakukan di UTM, Skudai ini dijalankan untuk mencari cara pelajar kanan UTM mengekspreskan keresahan mereka terhadap ujian dan punca mereka merasa resah terhadap ujian. Ia juga bertujuan untuk menyiasat cara mereka menghadapi keresahan terhadap ujian. Satu set borang soal selidik telah diagihkan kepada seramai 91 orang pelajar dari kursus SPM 3112, Bahasa Pengaturcaraan II. Sembilan orang dari mereka telah bersetuju untuk terlibat dalam sesi temuramah separa struktur. Keputusan keseluruhannya menunjukkan yang pelajar kanan UTM mengekspreskan keresahan mereka terhadap ujian dengan gangguan minda dan keresahan ini berpunca dari kerisauan mereka tentang persediaan mereka untuk ujian. Dari dapatan kajian, didapati kebanyakan pelajar menganggap keresahan terhadap ujian adalah perkara biasa dan kebanyakannya tidak mengambil apa-apa tindakan untuk menghadapinya. Namun, didapati terdapat dua jenis langkah yang diambil oleh responden untuk meghadapi keresahan terhadap ujian. Dua cara itu boleh dikategorikan sebagai tindakan fizikal dan tindakan mental. Tindakan mental ini pula terbahagi kepada dua iaitu motivasi sendiri dan kepercayaan terhadap agama. Diharapkan kajian ini dapat membantu para pelajar dan pensyarah dari Fakulti Pendidikan, khususnya, dalam memahami isu- isu keresahan terhadap ujian.

Katakunci : *anxiety, Zeidner.*

INTRODUCTION

Test anxiety has become more visible nowadays as more students tend to do last minute revision. Teachers, too, often do pop quiz in class and sometimes give monthly tests without informing the students first. Some students gain benefit from their anxious feelings towards test taking but many others somehow are affected as shown in their performance in a test. The same scenario is happening

in the tertiary education environment. Students study at the last minute as most of their time is spent either completing their assignments and projects or on club activities.

It is often observed that people who experienced test anxiety will be doing things that they seldom do, such as, jiggling their legs, touching their nose every five minutes, or fiddling with a pen when they happen to be in that uneasy situation. Test anxiety is known as a situation type of anxiety. It will only happen in certain undesirable situations. However, it can be controlled as one grows and it is likely advised to be controlled to better the performance of those who suffer from it. Nevertheless, a little sensation of test anxiety feeling sometimes is beneficial as it makes the brain works faster than usual. This is because there are those who perform better when they are under some pressure.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS

As test is usually conducted mid-way throughout a semester, many students are usually busy with their assignments and other co-curricular activities. This study will look at test anxiety behaviour of senior students of the Faculty of Education when taking a test.

Nowadays, humans compete to be the best in order for self satisfaction. Students will start worrying on how others will view them if they do poorly in tests, assignments and examination. Attitude and also ability to socialize are among those that worry them most. Especially for those who are around 18 to 25, they will trying to put a nice image in order to receive recognition from both friends and special friends. To have been viewed positively from people around them might work to boost their self confidence.

Students too, will start to realize that they are responsible to maintain their parents' reputation. In order to do that, of course they will have to take care of their own. This is another big concern that students would usually face which is to be concerned about their self-image. This feeling of uneasiness does not need attention from others. The person himself can feel the need to be clean and to have a nice image.

Students always have difficulty in managing their time. So, they have problems deciding whether to complete an assignment or be ready for a quiz or test. This is really stressful and students might end up feeling anxious. For instance, a test might come up after a test and is likely to be followed with another test and this is also contributing to the lack of time for students to prepare.

Thus, this study intends not only to look at expressions and sources of test anxiety but also the perspective of UTM senior students on how they overcome test anxiety.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

1. To discover the expressions of test anxiety as experienced by UTM senior students when taking a test.
2. To discover the sources of test anxiety among UTM senior students when taking test.
3. To investigate how UTM senior students overcome their anxiety when taking test.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study explores test anxiety experienced by UTM senior students of the Faculty of Education when taking a test. It will serve as a reference on how to overcome problems associated with it. It is hoped that this study will provide the information on how test anxiety could be overcome. By being aware of them, it is also hoped this will help improve the students' performance or achievement.

Lecturers too, are hoped to gain some benefits in terms of being more creative in conducting or preparing students for a test. They can find alternative ways to help students face this challenge. Lastly, it is hoped that this study might benefit others who would like to investigate this matter in the future.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study is intended for UTM undergraduates especially senior students of the Faculty of Education. Sources of test anxiety, symptoms of test anxiety and things that students do to reduce the test anxiety will be examined.

As this study will follow views proposed by Spielberger, symptoms of test anxiety that will be taken into consideration are body reactions which cover any habit done when one is tested or evaluated, thought disruptions and general test-taking anxiety. This will be further explained in the definition of terms and in chapter two.

The intention is not to look at the sociological structures of the anxiety, so the focus will be on sources that contribute to test anxiety by the interpersonal thinking of an individual which is students' perception. As proposed in Test Anxiety Inventory, test anxiety happens when one started to feel unease at an undesirable condition. In this case, students are concerned about four different aspects; concerned about others' view, concerned about self-image, concerned about future security and concerned about preparation.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were third and fourth year undergraduates of a computer course, SPM 3112, Programming Language II, from the Faculty of Education, UTM. The class consists of students from various programmes such as TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) programme, Mathematics and Education programme, and Chemistry and Education programme. It is a two-credit class where students learn everything about Microsoft Visual Basic.

All participants were tested on their comprehension of the subject for their mid term evaluation and the test consisted both of objective and subjective type questions (refer to appendix 3 for a sample of the test paper).

There were altogether 91 participants of this study. The reason why this group of students was chosen as participants is they attempted a subjective test which suits one of the research requirements. This type of test is believed to be more challenging and thus might end up causing more anxiety to the students as compared to the objective type.

As this study is supposed to be assuming senior students' perspectives of test anxiety the temptation to approach other classes that have students from various courses was great. There were three types of subject in the Faculty of Education which have students from various courses. They are computer

subjects such as Programming Language, faculty subjects such as Psychology, and English classes such as Academic Report Writing. However, to pick an English class would be in favour for students who majored in TESL and to pick a faculty subject would not do either as the subject would usually be tested in the form of objective test.

In order to carry out this study, the lecturer was approached beforehand. After getting permission from her, we discussed the details I had to follow such as arrangement of the test for the course. It is so as I wanted to distribute the questionnaire as soon as the students have done with their test.

This study will not look into the issue of differences between race or gender. This research works as a whole which values the sources of test anxiety and how students of Faculty of Education overcome it in total.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Questionnaire : A set of questionnaires on test anxiety were distributed to obtain data on symptoms and sources of test anxiety among UTM senior students. This questionnaire was written in Bahasa Melayu and English and participants were free to choose to answer in any language. It is divided into two sections, section A for background information of the respondents and section B, the Test Anxiety Inventory.

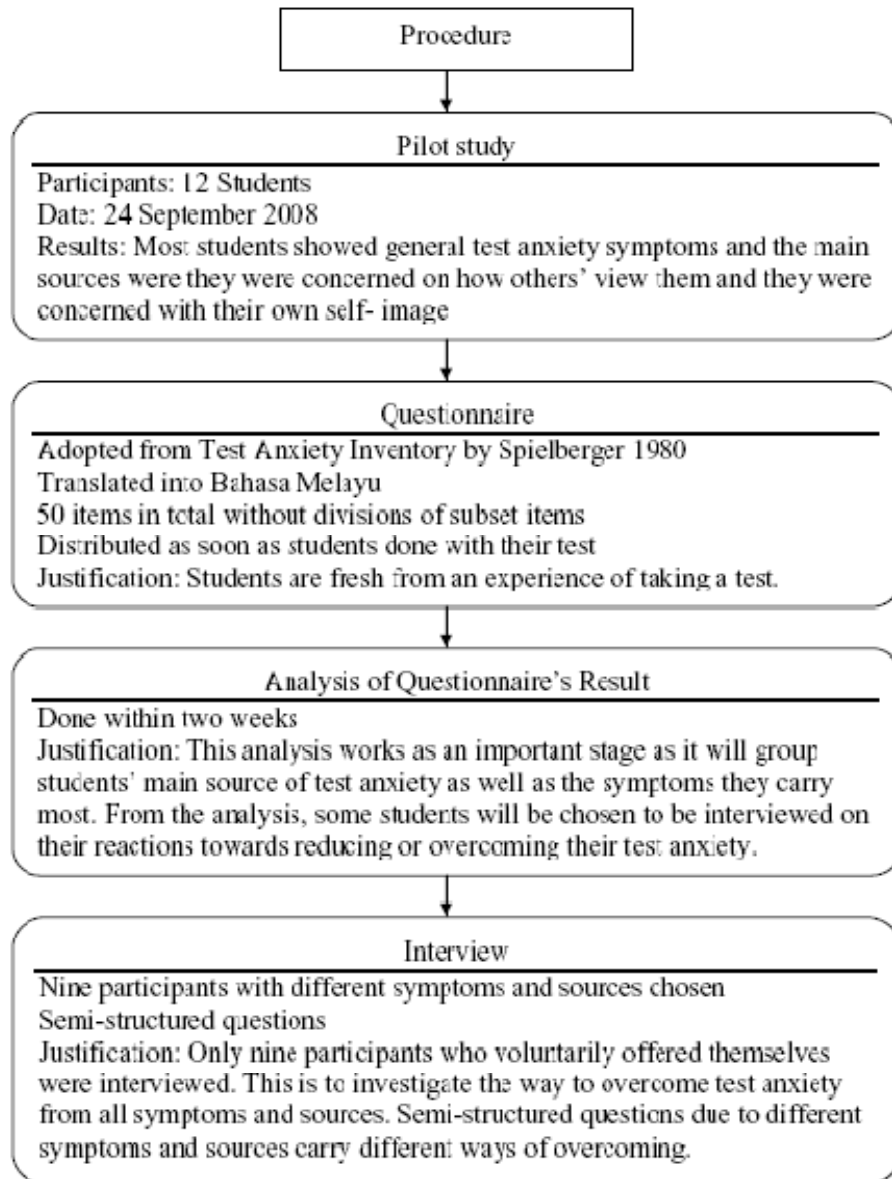
There were 50 questions adopted from Test Anxiety Inventory composed by Spielberger in 1980, and translated into Bahasa Melayu. This inventory is adopted as it has been established as a good test anxiety inventory. Beside, it reflected much on the view that this study governs which is test anxiety that happened as a result of one's perception.

Semi-structured Interview : A semi-structured interview was conducted with nine volunteered students. The interview was scheduled two weeks after the participants had answered the questionnaire. From the interviews, the data gathered will provide input into how the participants overcome test anxiety. It is a one-to-one and face-to-face interview and involved students who put up their name for follow-up research investigation. Specific questions regarding symptoms, sources and ways of overcoming test anxiety were asked.

RESEACH PROCEDURE

A pilot study was conducted on 24 September 2008 to test the validity of the questionnaire. A total of 12 participants from various courses of the Faculty of Education were given the questionnaire. The researcher was together with the participants when they answered the questionnaire. This was done to entertain questions that the participants might have. The participants took about 15 minutes to answer the questionnaire. One participant was chosen to test out the interview questions, too.

For the real study, as soon as the students had taken the test, the questionnaire was distributed. This questionnaire clarified the students' own feeling at time when they took the test. Interviews were done after an analysis of the questionnaire which was completed in two weeks. Interview sessions were carried out individually.



Rajah 1 : Procedure to conduct the study

DATA ANALYSIS

There are altogether 23 questions in the questionnaire that are referring to three different kinds of expression of anxiety; body expressions, thought disruptions and general test-taking anxiety. Writer must state here that previously the word symptoms are used to present the word expressions of test anxiety. But starting from this chapter it will be stated as expressions of test anxiety rather than symptoms of test anxiety.

all 23 items regarding expressions of test anxiety are listed according to its categories. The divisions are as follows:

1. Bodily reactions: 7 items
2. Thought disruptions: 10 items

3. General test- taking anxiety: 6 items

Almost 90 percent of participants agreed on the statement that after taking a test, they often felt that they could have done better than they actually did. 81.3 percent felt that test sessions should not be made in tense situation. Between the ranges of 70 to 80 percent of participants agreed that they were really distracted by room noises and wished that teachers understood that some people are more nervous than others when taking test and they were hoping that teacher could take that into account when marking the test.

A range of 60 to 70 percent of participants realized that they started to feel anxious just before they were getting test results. They too got so nervous that they forget the facts that they knew and would rather be bombarded by assignment or write-up report than were to be evaluated through test. Within that range too, participants agreed that they cannot stand to have people walking around watching them while taking a test.

There were 58.2 percent of students who felt more confused if they work harder on some test items and 50 percent of participants agreed on another three statements which are; they often find that their fingers tapping or their legs jiggling while taking a test, they sometimes found themselves having trains of thought that have nothing to do with the test and they think that they could do better on tests if they could take them alone and or not feel pressured by a time limit.

It seems like UTM senior students from the Faculty of Education always resort to express their anxiety through thought disruptions and general test- taking anxiety. Seven out of ten questions from thought disruptions questionnaire items are among the highest items ticked by the respondents. Thus, anxiety that they felt cannot be seen by observing them. So, the means of this questionnaire had really helped in proving the anxiety that were felt by the participants.

Overall view of participants' main sources shows that preparation is the main concern of UTM Faculty of Education senior undergraduates as eight participants agreed on all of the items questioned on that. However, as stated previously too that the research will cover at least 50 percent of items agreed, thus the results are as follows.

Schwarzer (2004) stated that the inability of one to find alternatives is the reason of cognitive interference and this is were to perform due to the fact that one cannot escape from a situation physically because of social constraints or lack of freedom to move. Thus this statement supported UTM senior students' way to express test anxiety which is through the act of thought disruptions.

For the point of the norm environment of a test session that reduce the possibility of test anxiety expression through body reactions it can be seen from one of the questionnaire items which is item number 7.

The item which carry the statement 'It seems to me that test sessions should not be made the formal, tense situations they are', 81.3 percent of participants agreed to it. Categorized as general test- taking anxiety it proves that participants are likely to express their uneasy feeling through a not so obvious response.

SUMMARY

This study meant to look for ways of overcoming anxiety from the perspective of UTM senior students. The study started off with the search of UTM senior students' expressions of test anxiety and the sources of test anxiety. The Test Anxiety Inventory was adopted as a questionnaire to achieve these two purposes.

The inventory consists of 50 items which are divided into seven groups. Items are not arranged according to their group. Three groups of 23 items from the inventory are meant to show expression of test anxiety. While there are four groups of 27 items to answer questions on sources of test anxiety. Students had only to tick the items that they agreed with.

Participants who answered the questionnaire and agreed to be interviewed were called to do so. From the interview, data of how the participants overcome their anxiety were collected.

As the title of the research is Overcoming Test Anxiety: Perspective of Senior Students of the Faculty of Education, ways of overcoming test anxiety presented in the findings chapter are totally based on the respondents real actions stated by them as collected from the interviews.

Participants were senior students of the Faculty of Education from UTM. All of them at the time of the study were taking subject SPM 3112, Programming Language II: Microsoft Visual Basic. Participants who participated for the interviews voluntarily offered themselves. To serve for the need to make assumptions of all senior students of Faculty of Education, this research needs to have participants from various courses.

Other than faculty subjects such as Psychology and English classes only computer subject classes consist of students from various classes. Thus, this group of UTM Faculty of Education students was chosen. Choosing any English classes will be in favour for the TESL students while faculty subjects usually test students using objective types of questions which were not so challenging to them.

In total, 91 participants responded to the Test Anxiety Inventory while 9 participants volunteered to be interviewed. They are all taught by the same lecturer even though were separated into two different classes.

The findings showed that thought disruptions is the main expression of anxiety among senior students of UTM. The main source would be because most of them are concerned about their preparation. These two results showed based on the inventory analysis.

Meanwhile, from the interview, the writer managed to see two types of reactions taken by UTM senior students of Faculty of Education to overcome test anxiety which are physical reactions and mental reactions. These two ways to overcome anxiety are suggested by the writer herself from the data collected in the interview. Thus, the way of presenting it found in other research or academic book might somehow differ.

REFERENCE

- Brigham, J. (1986). *Social psychology*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
- Che Rogayah Desa, (1997). *Persepsi di kalangan pelajar SPT terhadap faktor- faktor yang menyebabkan kebimbangan ketika menghadapi peperiksaan*. Projek Sarjana Muda, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai

- Cizek, G. J., and Burg, S. S., (2006). *Addressing Test Anxiety in a High- Stakes Environment*. USA: Corwin Press
- Dictionary of Language Testing* (1999). University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate
- Franken, R. (1994). *Human motivation* (3rd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co
- Hallam, R. S., (1992). *Counselling for Anxiety Problems*. London: Sage Publications Ltd
- Mohd Ghazali Borhan, (2003). *Kebimbangan pelajar yang akan menduduki peperiksaan UPSR di daerah Tangkak, Muar, Johor*. Projek Sarjana Muda, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai
- Schwarzer, R. (Ed), (1984). *The Self in Anxiety, Stress and Depression*. Netherlands: Elsevier Science Publishers B. V
- Schwarzer, R., Jerusalem, M. and Faulhaber, J., (1984). Test anxiety development in West German Schools: A Structural Equation Analysis. In Schwarzer, R (Ed) *The Self in Anxiety, Stress and Depression*. V Netherlands: Elsevier Science Publishers B.
- Shamril Wan Shahril Ridzuan, (2005) *Anxiety among students during oral presentation*. Projek Sarjana Muda, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai
- Sieber, J. E., (1977). *Anxiety, Learning and Instruction*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers