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## **INVESTIGATING ADVANCED LEARNERS' USE OF AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH TEST ANXIETY**

### **Abstract**

Language anxiety has been researched for many decades now and its significance for attainment cannot be questioned. In numerous research accounts anxiety related to learning a foreign/second language comes in different guises, as speaking anxiety, or communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and finally, test anxiety. In fact, developing linguistic competence in the formal setting is inherently fraught with the need to have one's skill and knowledge verified in the form of informal and formal, low- or high-stakes tests and examinations. Alleviating the negative consequences of anxiety seems imperative for effective learning, which in the opinion of the present author, will not be possible without gaining a deeper insight into the ways in which learners deal with negative feelings evoked by language study or use. Hence, an attempt has been made to explore the range of strategies employed by a specific group of learners – English majors in their final year of study – to cope with a stressful situation such as a regularly-scheduled achievement test in one of the components of the practical English course. What distinguishes this group of learners is their level of proficiency, which is C1 or nearing C2, but most importantly of all, their long-term experience of dealing with stress that has extended throughout formal education including the duration of MA studies in English Philology. Data collected by means of immediate reports and questionnaires revealed that the participants employed quite a limited scope of stress-reducing strategies and that there were characteristic trends, the analysis of which could serve as a point of departure for offering

effective strategy instruction capable of relieving the consequences of negative affective states.

**Keywords:** language learning anxiety, test anxiety, language learning strategies, affective strategies

**Słowa kluczowe:** lęk językowy, lęk związany z testowaniem, strategie językowe, strategie afektywne

## 1. Introduction

Tests, which are part and parcel of language instruction, provide insight both for teachers and learners on the effectiveness and validity of solutions taken and choices made. Indispensable as they undoubtedly are, language tests evoke negative emotions that may considerably impact on test scores and affect learners' future options as well as shape their learning experience. In the course of linguistic development, foreign language learners develop individual ways of dealing with negative affect in the classroom and outside it. Exploration of strategic behaviour which targets test-taking anxiety appears to be a viable aim, especially in view of the fact that it offers a promise that adverse consequences of stress can be diminished if not eliminated. The destructive role of negative affect in language learning calls for a search for measures that could support learners who, invariably, will be required to face the challenge of both formal examinations, and informal tests, performed in the course of everyday classroom interaction. Thus, interest in ways of relieving or reducing stress, which builds up in relation to language learning and use, appears a necessary and worthwhile option.

Language anxiety (LA) has been extensively researched for the last 30 years (cf. Horwitz, 2010) with most of the studies being quantitative in character. Insightful as they certainly are, they constitute correlational or factor analyses which marginalize the wealth of individual experience, characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes in instructed foreign, rather than second, language learning contexts. The present article is a modest attempt to bridge this gap, seeking to investigate the scope of stress-reducing strategies employed by English philology students in the course of a naturally-occurring language test administered to learners of English as a foreign language. The ecological perspective was chosen in order; the present author was familiar with the context of instruction and could control a wider spectrum of variables involved: the researcher was the participants' regular teacher, had taught the course, designed

the test, administered it and had known the respondents for the four and a half years prior to the study. Immediate reports and questionnaires yielded data whose analysis provided grounds for formulating tentative pedagogical recommendations and making some suggestions for further research.

## 2. Language anxiety

The study of LA commenced in the second half of the previous century (e.g., Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Horwitz and Young, 1991) recognizes the unique character of this type of anxiety, as it results from the nature of the language learning process. MacIntyre (1999: 27) defines it as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language”. Research conducted by Horwitz et al. (1986) has shown that LA correlates with three performance anxieties: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Negative emotional reactions might be intensified in the classroom context where learners' ability to deal with language tasks is evaluated by the teacher, who often appears to be the only proficient language user. Moreover, as Horwitz et al. (1986: 128) point out, students are clearly aware of the ongoing evaluation made by their peers. No less stressful are the tests and exams every learner is required to take at different stages of the learning processes. Results of numerous studies into LA reveal the debilitating impact of negative emotions; for example, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) and Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley (2000) argue that anxiety interferes with cognition at the input, processing and output stages. The impact of LA on learner cognition can be accounted for using Tobias's model (1979, 1986 as cited in MacIntyre, 1999), according to which highly anxious language learners experience a mental block which hinders the processing of information when it is first encountered, subsequently, when connections are made between new and already existing knowledge, and, finally, while demonstrating the scope of acquired knowledge at the production stage. Much in the same vein, assumptions made by Horwitz et al. (1986) concerning the existence of a relationship between higher levels of LA and lower language achievement have been corroborated in more recent studies (e.g., Dewaele, 2007; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993; Woodrow, 2006). Moreover, it has been established that language processing mechanisms can be affected at different proficiency levels, as shown, in the studies by Aida (1994), Daley, Onwuegbuzie and Bailey (1997), and Piechurska-Kuciel (2008) among others, with the caveat that higher levels of LA are mostly reported at lower levels of advancement, which has led to the claim that more proficient learners are less anxious (Chamot, 2004; MacIntyre, Noels, and Clement, 1997). Nevertheless,

as shown by MacIntyre et al. (2003) and also corroborated by Liu (2006), advanced students are also prone to feelings of anxiety because practice or communication opportunities increase and classroom challenges become more demanding, or simply because they are aware of higher standards.

However, a question arises at this junction, whether tension and worry related to language learning produce only adverse effects. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015: 177) note that anxiety appears to be “the most misunderstood affective variable of all”, as, following MacIntyre (2002), they observe that the effect of anxiety on performance might be positive since a common reaction to anxiety is increased effort, especially if the impact of it is perceived as mild. Oxford (1999), for example, pointed out that anxious students listened to instructions more attentively than their more confident peers, and Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) have even found a connection between anxiety and enjoyment in L2 learning. They posited that adaptive learning behaviour is a by-product of the interplay between these two emotions, since the creativity and engagement of active and successful learners are spurred in the presence of some degree of anxiety. The researchers observe that “Enjoyment and anxiety will cooperate from time to time, enjoyment encouraging playful exploration and anxiety generating focus on the need to take specific action from time to time” (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014: 262).

Dörnyei and Ryan (2015: 180) note that although LA appears to be one on the most extensively researched affective variables in SLA, its impact on the process of language learning is far from fully understood and it still requires attention; first, its dynamic nature should be taken into consideration, as well as the “types of adaptations that can lead the behavioural outcomes of anxiety both in the positive and the negative direction”. One such “adaptation” could be the employment of learner strategies since, perhaps, positive or negative consequences of anxiety are related to ways in which language learners deal with it.

### **3. Affective strategies**

No matter if referred to as *methods and techniques* (O’Malley and Chamot, 1994), or *attempts, actions, steps* (Cohen, 1996; Oxford, 2011), *thoughts and behaviours* (Cohen 2003, 2012), or finally, *learner’s contributions* (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003), language learning strategies (LLS) denote what learners do on the mental or physical plane to attain a desired goal, as opposed to what teachers require them to do to learn a foreign language. In the words of Cohen (2012: 136), LLS are “Thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of

tasks from the very onset of learning to the most advanced levels of target-language performance". Given the vast range of meanings the term LLS attempts to encompass and hence difficulty in offering a comprehensive definition, Macaro (2006: 320) proposed a list of characteristics of LLS which include: (1) their location: LLS are conscious mental operations in working memory; (2) size, abstractness and relationship to other strategies: describing of a strategy cannot be done by reference to subordinate strategies because they constitute aspects of the most basic level of cognition; (3) goals: LLS are implemented to achieve explicit learning goals; (4) tasks: strategies are both relevant to a particular task and transferable to others. The list of definitional characteristics compiled by Griffiths (2013), in turn, comprises six features: (1) strategies are active; (2) they are conscious; (3) are chosen by learners; (4) are goal-oriented and purposeful; (5) are employed to regulate learning, and (6) to achieve learning goals, as opposed to communication.

Reviewing O'Malleys and Chamot's (1990) and Oxford's (1990) strategy frameworks, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) divided LLS into four main groups: (1) cognitive strategies thanks to the application of which learners manipulate or transform the target language (TL) through identification, retention, storage and/or retrieval; (2) metacognitive strategies used to call upon higher-order strategies to monitor, analyze, evaluate, plan, and organize learning; (3) social strategies that contribute to increasing TL communication and practice, and finally, (4) affective strategies helping learners regulate their affect. Oxford (2011: 64) defines the latter as actions that enable learners to take control of emotional conditions and experiences. In her more recent revision of the previously advanced taxonomy, Oxford (2011) proposes a division into three main categories: cognitive, affective and sociocultural-interactive but also comes up with three meta-strategies: meta-cognitive, meta-affective and meta-sociocultural-interactive which operate at a higher or "meta" level acting as guides in their respective categories. Meta-affective strategies are envisaged by Oxford (2011: 62-63) as the "electricity manager" capable of "sparking" emotions, motivation, beliefs and attitudes, whereas affective strategies play the role of "electricity workers" that take action when their manager points at an affective need or problem. Affective strategies include: (1) activating supportive emotions, beliefs and attitudes, and (2) generating and maintaining motivation and comprise a whole host of tactics that help learners deal with individual problems and obstacles, as is the case with the challenge of a test that a group of advanced students of English is required to take. The study in the remaining part of this article is an attempt to shed more light on the employment of affective strategies to reduce the stress evoked by a high-stakes language test.

## 4. Aims and research questions

The study aimed to investigate the application of affective strategies (ASTs) among advanced learners of English as a foreign language in the course of an authentic high-stakes achievement test which was taken as a component of an official summative assessment procedure. More specifically, an attempt was made to address the following research questions:

1. What is the level of anxiety related to test-taking among advanced learners of English, as reported before, during and after the test?
2. What ASTs do students use before, while performing, and after the language test?

### 4.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 25 students, 15 females and 9 males, belonging to two separate groups,  $n = 12$  and  $n = 13$ , respectively, all of whom were English majors in the final year of their 5-year MA programme. On average, their learning experience amounted to 14 years with a little variation as indicated by a low SD of 1.33. Although, according to the official academic course requirements, they should have reached C1/C2 level in terms of the *Common Framework of Reference for Languages*, there was a certain degree of variation with respect to language level, with some students representing a lower or higher level of control over specific skills and subsystems. The average grade achieved in the end-of-the year practical English exam was 3.66 (SD = .62) on a scale from 2 (fail) to 5 (very good). The grade average for the semester for the course which culminated in the test under investigation was 3.94 (SD = .60). The comparatively low standard deviations testify to the uniform character of the sample with respect to both formative and summative evaluation of their linguistic competence. Apart from attending classes in speaking, writing, and grammar throughout the duration of the academic course and phonetics and use of English at one of its points, the respondents were required to participate in courses in literature and culture as well as linguistics and foreign language methodology, in all of which English was used as the language of instruction. Besides the numerous hours of instruction and individual study necessitated by the course, the respondents enjoyed contact with English outside the educational system mainly through the Internet: watching films, reading, playing games or contacting foreigners thanks to the benefits of computer mediated communication.

## 4.2. Data collection and analysis

The data collection procedure took place in a regularly-scheduled use of English class taught by the researcher on a weekly basis. The course, spanning two semesters, comprises 60 hours focusing on grammar and lexis and, given the proficiency level and demands of the learner group, consists in performing mainly communicative tasks with the focus placed on rendering subtle shades of meaning thanks to the use of various grammatical structures. Another focal point of the use of English course is “word grammar”, understood as the grammatical information carried by a lexical item itself and the ways it affects both the structure and meaning of an utterance. The test during which the data were collected was the first of three tests administered each semester, the average of which comprises the end-of-the-semester grade, and so it can be considered high-stakes, as its result will importantly affect the final grades of the students. The test was constructed by the groups' regular teacher for the purpose of checking the students' degree of mastery of the part of the material covered in the first month of the second semester. It was intended to be an achievement test reflecting the scope of material and types of activities which had been performed in class. The test targeted the use of modal verbs and pronouns in academic discourse and its completion took 30 minutes, which makes one third of the whole class. The total number of points was 26 and the average score in both groups was 22.04 (SD = 1.31), which indicates a homogenous level of the participants who appear to be highly experienced and motivated learners.

The objectives and design of the study were presented to the participants beforehand and their filling in a short background questionnaire was considered as giving their consent to take part in the study. Moreover, they were informed they could withdraw from the procedure at any of its stages, but none of them did. The data concerning test anxiety and strategies used were collected, with a view to using them for research purposes, by means of immediate reports in the form of a grid and a questionnaire. The grid consisted of three scales from 1 (least anxious) to 10 (most anxious) where the respondents were to indicate their level of anxiety before, during and after the test. The questionnaire, which was open-ended, inquired into the ways they dealt with tension and negative feelings before the commencement of the test, when the test was in progress, and immediately afterwards. The survey included the following questions:

1. What did you do to relieve stress before the test?
2. How did you deal with tension during the test?
3. If you felt anxious after the test, how did you deal with negative emotions?

It should also be noted that instructions and items in the data gathering tools were worded in the students' mother tongue; however, participants were instructed the answers could be provided both in English and Polish, with Polish being preferred by all but one student. It turned out that in the majority, quotes presented in the subsequent part of the present article had to be translated by the present author. Respondents completed the grids and answered the questions in less than 15 minutes. The numerical data were analysed by calculating means and standard deviations and performing *t* tests. The answers provided in open-ended items were analyzed qualitatively, by identifying recurrent themes, labelling and grouping.

### 4.3. Findings

The reason for which the respondents were requested to assess the level of anxiety related to test-taking was to establish whether, if at all, English majors at such a high proficiency level and in their final year of education experience anxiety in relation to tests held regularly in the course of classes they attend. This decision was made to establish the presence of anxiety before an attempt to tap into strategies employed to cope with it. The highest degree of anxiety was reported before the test with a mean of 5.64 on a scale from 1 to 10, which seems relatively mild; the SD was 2.65, which indicates a moderate degree of variability within the sample. Language anxiety when the test was in progress was only slightly lower at the level of 5.0, ranging again from 1 to 10 (SD = 2.48). As expected, the lowest level of anxiety was reported for the time after the completion of all the tasks in the test and reached the level of 2.6 with the smallest range from 1 to 8 and lowest value of SD at 2.0, suggesting a greater homogeneity of responses within the group. The difference between values reported before and during the test was found to be insignificant ( $t = 1.376, p = .181$ ), whereas the difference between anxiety indicated during and after the test proved significant ( $t = 9.537, p = .000$ ), as indicated by the results of dependent samples *t*-tests. Interestingly, not all of the students felt less anxious when the test began, as 6 of the participants (24%) reported higher tension during the test than before, while two (8%) experienced the same degree of tension on the two occasions. In none of the cases was the level of anxiety higher after the test than during or before.

The main part of the survey was intended to investigate the repertoire of strategies respondents used to relieve stress or ease the tension originating in the stressful situation of a test. In reply to the first question, which dealt with anxiety before the test, the respondents most frequently mentioned repeating the material on their own, looking through their notes, or talking to

other students on issues that were unrelated to the challenge they were to face. Such tendencies are illustrated in excerpts such as: "I kept repeating the phrases", "I repeated important aspects and key vocabulary", "I spent the time before the class in the cafeteria laughing and talking about funny things". Many students revealed resorting to self-encouragement and positive thoughts which was intended to help them alleviate negative affect related to the assessment by convincing themselves that "the test will not be difficult", "there is nothing to worry about", "I am well-prepared", or reminding themselves that "there is always a retake". Responses to the first question also included reference to concentrating on the goals to be achieved, which was perceived as a way of avoiding or dispersing negative emotions. Two of the participants reported eating something delicious just before the lesson and many of them declared that they performed some form of physical activity to release tension – they walked, fiddled with a pen, or breathed deeply. Another two students said that listening to music helped them cope with test anxiety. Unlike those who could relax interacting with others, there were students who disclosed that they avoided talking to their peers as in "I came just in time not to talk to anybody". Two of the respondents declared that they did nothing at all because they did not experience any negative feelings: "I wasn't nervous so I didn't need to do anything". A different reason for not taking any action was mentioned by another student, who appeared helpless in the situation: "I did nothing because I know that nothing helps". What is interesting is that some of the students made comments related to dealing with test anxiety in general and not only with reference to this particular test. Such responses stressed the importance of regular study, having a good-night's sleep, or a nutritious breakfast before coming to school on the day of the test.

With respect to strategies employed during the test, the majority of the students declared that staying focused on the tasks they were performing enabled them to relieve tension. The following comments illustrate this point: "I didn't think about being stressed but read the instructions carefully", "I tried to calm down and concentrate", "I wasn't really anxious when I concentrated . . .", "I tried to stay focused on the test only", "I tried very much to analyze the tasks calmly and let my thoughts drift away from negative sensations". Comments on dispersing pessimistic thoughts through motor activity involved only reference to "breathing in and out deeply" or "slowly." One of the participants reported that they could feel anxiety diminish with time as subsequent tasks were solved and added a general comment that "much depends on the teacher; with this teacher, in a nice and stress-free atmosphere, there was nothing to worry about, and nothing serious could happen".

Although most of the respondents indicated a decrease in the anxiety they experienced on completion of the test, its level remained higher than the lowest point on the scale for 62% of the sample. Relief was the dominant feeling the majority of the participants declared immediately afterwards, as if an automatic reaction was triggered when the test ended, thus there was no need to apply any strategy to cope with tension. Nevertheless, even if anxiety was less severe, it persisted for the time spent on completing the survey and some of the students identified ways they dealt with it. Some disclosed that they tried not to think about what had just happened and the possible mistakes they had made. A few talked to other students on topics that were not directly related to the test, or just thought about something that would direct their attention away from their worry, as indicated by the following comment: "I felt a little tense because I was not sure whether I did well or badly but I tried to think about pleasant things and forgot about the stress". One of the students reported that he treated himself to something delicious, presumably sweets.

#### **4.4. Discussion**

In general, the study offers valuable insights into the use of ASTs in the course of a language test administered during a class which is part of the final year academic course designed for students majoring in English. As regards the first research question concerning the level of anxiety experienced immediately before, after and during the test, it should be first emphasized that the level of negative feelings provoked by the situation was not very high, with ratings placed somewhere in the middle of the scale for the measure before and during, and a significantly lower level for the measure after the test. Surprising as it may seem, despite years of training and having written an innumerable number of tests, students still feel anxious when facing evaluation. The highest level of anxiety, which was reported as being before the test, might be attributed to a degree of uncertainty about the design and requirements of the test. However, once the test started, most of the students' tension decreased; nevertheless, the reduction was not significant, which vividly demonstrates the anxiety-provoking quality of a formal test. The few rare cases of rising anxiety levels, when compared to what was felt before the onset of the procedure, are students who might have become discouraged when they saw the demands the tasks posed, or realized that they had not prepared well enough to meet the challenge. Further analysis of these students' test scores showed that two of them had results in the lowest quartile, but the results of the other two were very high, which probably testifies to the role of self-confidence in assessing one's chances in a situation like this. Another possible

explanation may be that these two differ in personality types or in feelings of self-efficacy. As expected, the degree of language anxiety reported by the participants on completion of the test was the lowest; since many of them declared they felt immediately relieved which can be understood by anyone who has accomplished a demanding, difficult task.

With respect to the second research question, concerning the scope of affective strategies used by students, it was expected that the list of such tactics applied by students might not be too extensive, as it would consist of behaviours that had been adopted over the years because they had been proved useful. The decision to investigate strategic behaviour among advanced adult learners was not accidental as it was hoped that establishing which strategies are applied by experienced and proficient language learners would offer an opportunity to tap into tactics that have proved to be truly effective. It was expected that this unique and largely autonomous group of students after years of instruction and self-study would demonstrate a reliable range of strategies that had been refined and tested in the course of study. The list of strategies employed by learners before the test turned out to be the longest, as it included behaviours related to different spheres of activity: in the cognitive domain positive thinking, autosuggestion, and self-encouragement, on the social plane by intensifying contacts with others or avoiding them and in the physical domain: walking and playing with objects, or eating something. The application of such a relatively large scale of strategies prior to the testing procedure might have been necessitated by high levels of anxiety and the fact that immediately beforehand there was nothing else the students could concentrate on that would disperse fearful thoughts.

A considerably smaller repertoire of ASTs was compiled from responses to the second questionnaire item: *How did you deal with tension during the test?* A majority of the students admitted that they had no time to deal with fear since they were so preoccupied with test tasks and activities. Thus, it can be concluded that concentrating on the task in hand may ease tension and so it appears to be the most commendable tactic. Although a mild degree of anxiety persisted on completion of the test, most of the participants declared that their negative feelings disappeared automatically. Still, there were a few participants who intentionally diverted their thoughts from the unpleasant experience, or chose to interact with others in order not to contemplate what had just happened.

In spite of its contribution to the understanding of the role of stress-reducing strategies, the study suffers from some weaknesses that may account for the difficulty experienced in identifying more definite trends and pinpointing a larger number of tactics, which might perhaps lead to formulating some recommendations for strategic instruction. First, the small number

of participants and the fact that they comprise a relatively unique sample makes generalizing from the conclusions highly problematic. Had the study involved learners at different levels of proficiency, recruited from various age groups, the analysis might have yielded more diverse results and a more comprehensive list of possible strategies that help students overcome anxiety. In addition, it would seem that considering a wider range of individual differences might have offered a greater insight into strategic behaviour targeted at relieving stress relating to language learning. And thus, investigating the learners' motivation, belief systems, or learning styles might have provided a richer pool of data which might have disclosed more intricate patterns of interrelationships underlying the generation and control of language anxiety. Finally, the use of additional tools of data collection, such as interviews with some of the participants, (or all of them given the small size of the sample), would have allowed the present author to probe deeper and perhaps reveal with a greater degree of precision what underlies the choice of certain ASTs.

## **5. Conclusions, implications and directions for future research**

The value of the present study lies mainly in the fact that it explores strategic behaviour relating to anxiety in the course of an authentic high-stakes test in the presence of the regular teacher and as part of the usual classroom procedure. Adopting an ecological approach allows, in the conviction of the present author, a deeper understanding of the processes involved in instructed language learning to be gained. Departing from laboratory procedures or large-scale data-gathering schemes renders a finer-grained picture of the learner in their environment, not as "abstract bundles of variables," in the words of Ushioda (2011: 12), but as individuals whose actions are very much dependent on the functioning of the context which they themselves shape to a large extent. Undeniably, the results of the present study are far too tentative to serve as a basis for far-reaching pedagogical recommendations; however, it seems evident that effective application of ASTs might have a special bearing on the success rate of every learner who is required to take tests and exams of various types and at all levels of instruction. Certainly less experienced students at lower levels of advancement might benefit from being made cognizant of how more proficient learners deal with negative affect. However, for more concrete and reliable recommendations to be offered, further research is needed into the ways ASTs are used to relieve stress effectively. Such investigations could look into the impact of other individual differences, or take into account different types of tests, such as oral interviews, for example, which are considered most anxiety-provoking of all. When it comes to research

methodology, further explorations of the use of strategies which mitigate test anxiety should take into consideration accounts of individual learners in the form of stimulated recall, think-aloud protocols, interviews, or narratives, alongside quantitative larger-scale investigations to show wider tendencies and patterns.

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