
Original Paper

Topic: Students' Adjustment to Examination Environment and Its Influence on Their Anxiety Levels

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Abstract

Students' academic journey is characterized by a colossal of evaluative experiences intended to determine the level of students' learning, knowledge and skills acquisition. Examination anxiety is a set of behavioural, physiological and phenomenological reactions to concerns or worries over negative consequences of an examination. This study sought to investigate the influence of examination environment on students' level of anxiety. A sequential explanatory design was considered appropriate for this study whereby 30 first year male and female undergraduate psychology students of The University of Bamenda responded to both closed and open-ended questionnaire items aimed at eliciting their views on examination anxiety. A four-point Likert scale questionnaire was used. Data were analyzed by using frequencies and percentages, as well as thematic analysis for the qualitative data. The study was able to establish that the examination environment influences the anxiety level of students. The study further established that overcrowded environment, poor ventilation, poor lighting, and noisy examination environment were some of the factors influencing examination anxiety. Recommendations were made to educational authorities, teachers, students and invigilators. Educational authorities were called upon to make sure that examinations are written in well ventilated halls, with proper lighting, as well as ample space to prevent overcrowding in the examination hall.

Keywords: Adjustment, Examination Environment, Anxiety

1. Introduction

Zeidner (2008) defines examination or test anxiety as a situation whereby there is uneasiness or apprehension felt by the student prior to, during as well as post examination as a result of concern, worry and fear of uncertainty. Zeidner (2010) thus sees examination anxiety as a set of behavioural, physiological and phenomenological reactions to concerns or worries over negative consequences of an examination. Birjandi and Alemi (2010) on their part maintain that examination anxiety is not entirely a bad thing. According to them, a certain level of anxiety is necessary amongst students as it helps them maintain focus and galvanizes them to preparing and brainstorming on appropriate strategies that will yield success. Mavilidi, Hoogerheide and Paas (2014) as well as other researchers have maintained that a student's academic journey is characterized by a colossal of evaluative experiences intended to determine the level of student's learning, knowledge and skills acquisition. Concurring with this, Oladipo, Ogunbamila and Idemudia (2015) add that today's academic environment has become so competitive and tests, as well as exams, in both summative and formative formats are increasingly being used for decision making. In this regard tests and examinations are indispensable tools in the hands of teachers as far as evaluating and assessing the teaching and learning process is concerned. Hoe, Cheong and Yee (2013) posit that education confers learners with a colossal of cognitive and meta cognitive skills. Such knowledge and skills bestow learners with the latitude to become problem solvers in the society. Such skills and knowledge are usually assessed by examinations or tests.

In this regard, it is thus glaring that teachers regularly give examinations to students in the form of formative or summative assessment. Examinations or tests assess students' level of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities in a particular course or subject. Students often get anxious and worried when they are tested in conditions that are far from ideal. When this happens, it is difficult to understand

whether their performance is as a result of lack of knowledge and understanding of core concepts or other factors related to the examination environment. With the phenomenon of examination anxiety so pervasive in our schools today, the need for students to adjust to the examination environment becomes even more glaring.

2. Literature Review

Chamberlain, Daly & Spalding (2011) opine that examination anxiety is a condition that occurs when a person judges or perceives performance in an examination as threatening or menacing. According to them, such debilitating condition can be apparent before, during or after the examination or test in a cognitive or physiological form. Worthy of note is that the physiological element of examination anxiety can be evident as hyper-arousal and tension which inevitably causes the heart rate to beat faster, and muscles become tense as well. The cognitive aspect of examination anxiety on the other hand has two elements. These elements are persistent thoughts of failure and social evaluation. Thoughts of failure is often manifested when the student feels he/she is not yet ready for the examination, or thinks the test is too hard or has the believe that he/she has failed even without having seen the results. Social evaluation on the other hand exhibits a situation whereby the student is worried about how other people like friends, teachers, parents, siblings etc. will judge his/her test performance. Putwain (2007) posits that stress is inevitable in students experiencing examination anxiety and sees stress as a response that inevitably occurs when one feels that one is unable to meet expectations of performance. In this regard stress can be seen to bring about anxiety.

The theoretical underpinning of this study hinges on the cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) which maintains that there is an inevitable connection or link between our thoughts, feelings and behavior. In this regard thoughts about an examination that are negative bring about anxiety. CBT thus seeks to manage negative thoughts and emotions through cognitive restructuring as well as exercises that are relaxing. Cognitive restructuring has an agenda to change negative thoughts into positive ones. The individual is thus encouraged to change unjustified negative thoughts, perceptions and emotions into positive ones. James, James, Cowdrey, Soler and Choke (2015) are of the view that when CBT is invoked, it has the latitude to reduce such student related examination stress and anxiety, especially those linked to social evaluation.

Several researchers have sought to explore the relationship between examination environment, anxiety and performance level of students. Chapell, Blanding, Takahashi, Silverstein, Newman, Gubi and McCann (2005) posit that in every test/examination situation anxiety is evident as it gives rise to worry as well as emotional and behavioural response. Such anxiety is as a result of preoccupation with negative outcomes that relate to nervousness, apprehension and subjective feelings of tension. In this situation, the automatic nervous system is aroused. Nicholson (2009) was one of those who sought to explore the effects of examination anxiety on students' performance and found that there indeed was a relationship between test anxiety and performance. Hancock (2001), on his part was able to establish that high test anxiety students performed poorly during examination and were less motivated. Hancock (2001) goes further to say that fear, nervousness, and physical discomfort are the general physical reactions to testing situations which bring about anxiety and invariably affects students' performance. Some authors, on their part focus on the cognitive rather than the behavioural dimensions of testing situation. According to them, it is the cognitive worry about the testing situation or expectations that their performance will be below par that brings about anxiety (Humbree, 1988; Morris, Davis, & Hutchings, 1981; Depreuw, 1984).

A number of studies have been conducted to establish the relationship between anxiety and performance. Oludipe (2009) for example, found that anxiety is one of the major causes of students' underachievement and low performance in the academia which invariably affects students' ability to benefit from instruction. In a study conducted by Khalid and Hasan (2009) making use of 187 undergraduate students in their sample, they found that students who achieved high in the academia demonstrated low level of test or examination anxiety. In a similar study conducted by Chapell, Blanding, Takahashi, Silverstein, Newman, Gubi and McCann (2005) to find out if there exists a relationship between examination anxiety and text performance, making use of predominantly undergraduate and graduate students in their sample, they found that the relationship between test anxiety and performance was a significant one, although

negative. Cassady and Johnson (2002) on their part focused on cognitive factors as they sought to establish the relationship between cognitive test anxiety and achievement. They were able to establish that cognitive test anxiety had a stable but negative effect on performance. Cherry (2012) on his part has been able to establish that examination/test anxiety is not all that bad as students who exhibit moderate levels of anxiety are able to perform well in examination.

The point of departure for these authors who see a relationship between test anxiety and performance is that a certain level of worry or anxiously during exams create irrelevant thoughts as well as decreases the level of attention, concentration and focus of the concerned students, thus leading to poor performance (Driscoll et al., 2009). Digging deep into the thoughts of these authors, it is quite glaring, if not inevitable that a certain level of anxiety would be beneficial to students. Scholars like Vaz, Pothiyil, George, Alex, Pothiyil and Kamath (2018) have identified a number of factors responsible for raising the anxiety levels of students. These factors include but not limited to: the learning process, students' expectations related to the learning outcome as well as how students perceive the examination. Chapell, Blanding, Silverstein, Takashi, Newman and Gubi (2005) on their part mention factors like inefficient study habits, poor or inadequate content knowledge, fear of failing, previous experiences and beliefs as well as lack of confidence in one's ability. Duraku (2016) on his part focuses on factors like inadequate or lack of preparation, family factors and responsibilities, teacher characteristics and personality, poor time management skills and inappropriate study skills/habits. It is thus glaring from the above that a plethora of factors ranging from environmental, personal and psychological factors are responsible for examination anxiety. Looking at the environmental factors, Aremu and Sokan (2003) posit that poor ventilation, poor physical buildings as well as poor antics of the invigilators are responsible for increasing students' anxiety levels during examinations.

Looking at coping strategies to mitigate the factors of anxiety Hashemi and Mashayekh (2011) posit that the ability to work on diet, exercise and personal health are very primordial. They go on to talk about the need and necessity for improving levels of motivation, self-image as well as attitudes. Bensoussan (2012) on his part was able to establish that when teachers engage in revision and class discussion with their students prior to exams, students enhance their self-efficacy levels and this ultimately reduces their anxiety level. Teacher support in the form of teaching students study skills, revising with student prior to exams and giving them necessary hints as to the nature and structure of the exam will inevitably help in reducing students' level of anxiety (Maharajan, Rajiah, Tam, Chaw, Ang and Yong, 2017). Xiao (2013) on his part, adds that when the time table is strictly followed and any changes communicated early enough to students, in a context where students are not suffocated with too much academic workload but given the opportunity to relax via extracurricular activities, this helps to reduce examination anxiety. By providing timely communication to students on changes that have been effected concerning the examination, students are able to adjust in a timely manner to the new examination conditions.

2.1 Statement of the Problem

Examinations are usually given to assess students' level of understanding. Such examination or tests can be formative or summative. Tests or examinations are considered a powerful tool for decision making as it gives that latitude to education authorities and teachers to assess students' knowledge, skills, and abilities. Unfortunately, there are students who attend classes regularly, do their assignments, participate in classroom discussions yet fail to turn up on the day of reckoning. In other words, such students perform poorly during examination. One way to understand such poor performance would be to look at the examination conditions and environment. It is unfortunate that the conditions under which students write these tests and examinations are never ideal for them to concentrate and produce their best. Questions as to the examination environment and students' anxiety level remain pertinent issues. Most often, the environment in which students write exams are not the best.

The sitting arrangements, ventilation and lighting in the hall are not ideal. Students are often overcrowded in examination rooms with little ventilation making it uncomfortable for them. Moreover, the frequent movement and shouting by invigilators in the examination hall causes the environment to be tense and uncomfortable for the students. When examination materials are introduced late into the examination hall, it causes the students to be anxious. It gets worse when some students who have these

materials are asked to start writing while those without materials keep waiting. Most often than not, attendance is done when exams are ongoing which brings enormous distraction. Moreover, when cases of examination malpractice are not well handled, other students become frightened and tense causing them to be anxious in the midst of their examination. Students find it difficult to adjust to such debilitating and far from ideal examination related environment which thus pushes them into unmanageable levels of anxiety. Such increased anxiety levels definitely affect students' performance in exams. Based on this problem, this study sought to provide answers to the following research questions: 1) How does the examination environment influence anxiety in students?; 2) what factors influence examination anxiety and 3) What can be done to alleviate or limit the anxiety level of students during examination?

3. Methodology

A Sequential explanatory design was deemed necessary for this study. Explanatory designs are described as a two-stage design which sees quantitative data being used as the basis on which to build and explain qualitative data. The quantitative data informs the qualitative data selection process which is a great strength in that it enables researchers to specifically pinpoint data that is relevant to specific research questions. Allan (n.d.) points out that this design is commonly used in educational research, being referred to as a participant selection model. This design thus necessitated the researcher to design both structured (for quantitative purpose) and unstructured (for qualitative purpose) questionnaire items to seek answers to the research questions under investigation. The participants of the study were thirty (30) male and female second year Educational Psychology students from the University of Bamenda, Cameroon. The participants were randomly selected for this study.

4. Findings

Data were analyzed using simple frequencies and percentages. Each research question was analyzed on a separate table. It is important to recall that this study sought to provide answers to three research questions namely: 1) How does the examination environment influence anxiety in students?; 2) what factors influence examination anxiety and 3) What can be done to alleviate or limit the anxiety level of students during examination? These research questions are analyzed on tables, followed by brief explanations as seen below. On the table Strongly Agree is presented as (SA), Agree = A, Disagree = D and Strongly Disagree = SD. It should be indicated here that data for research question one was analyzed quantitatively as the table below indicates while qualitative analysis was used to analyze data for research questions two and three.

Table 1. Examination Environment and Anxiety

SN	ITEMS	SA & A	% of SA & A	D & SD	% of D & SD
1	The sitting arrangement in the examination hall affects my concentration level	15	50	15	50
2	The ventilation condition in an examination hall discomforts me	7	23.3	23	76.7
3	I usually get worried when an invigilator approaches me or stands by me in the examination hall	20	66.7	10	33.3
4	Shouting by the invigilator in the examination hall causes me to be worried	26	86.7	4	13.3
5	Invigilator's/examiner's verbal comments distract me	28	93.3	2	6.7
6	Frequent interruptions by examiners/administrators distract me	25	83.3	5	16.7
7	When the examination environment is noisy, I get worried	25	83.3	5	16.7

8	Poor shelter in the examination hall makes me to lose focus	20	66.7	10	33.3
9	Unavailability or lack of examination related materials causes me to be worried	24	80	6	20
TOTAL AVERAGE		21.1	70.3	8.9	29.7

From Table 1 above, it is quite glaring that 50% of the students strongly agreed and agreed that the sitting arrangement in the examination hall affects their concentration level. As far as item two is concerned, only 23% of the students strongly agreed and agreed that the ventilation condition in an examination hall discomforts them. Meanwhile, an overwhelming 66.7% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that they usually get worried when an invigilator approaches them or stands by them in the examination hall. Item four equally had a majority (86.7%) of the respondents agreeing and strongly agreeing that Shouting by the invigilator in the examination hall causes them to be worried. As far as item five is concerned, an overwhelming number (93.3%) of the students questioned strongly agreed and agreed that invigilator's/examiner's verbal comments distract them. This trend was similar with items six and seven where 83.3% strongly agreed and agreed that frequent interruptions by examiners/administrators distract them and that when the examination environment is noisy, they get worried. The consistency was maintained as 66.7% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that poor shelter in the examination hall makes them to lose focus. Finally, 80% of the students strongly agreed and agreed that unavailability or lack of examination related materials causes them to be worried.

In summary, therefore, looking at the items on examination environment and anxiety, 70.3% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively that the examination environment influences their anxiety levels. Only 29.7% of these respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with this view.

4.1 Qualitative Data

This section analyses qualitative data whereby recurring themes emerged from respondents' responses to the items. The qualitative data focused more on the factors influencing examination anxiety and solutions provided by the participants as to what can be done to reduce or alleviate students' level of anxiety during examination. Recurring themes of the respondents' views were put together as follows:

Sitting Arrangement, ventilation and Lighting in the Hall

The respondents generally were of the opinion that the examination halls should not be over crowded. According to them there should be ample spacing between the students and the examination hall, and benches should be well dusted and clean. When students are overcrowded on a bench, they are uncomfortable and this equally makes it difficult to write freely without touching or disturbing the other students. There should thus be enough spacing.

Looking at the issue of ventilation, the students unanimously agreed that examinations should be written in halls with enough doors and windows and these doors and windows should be opened to allow proper ventilation. Moreover, the students overwhelmingly agreed that the examination environment should not be dark. In this regard, proper lighting is required during exams with enough bulbs to light the different corners of the hall. There should be a standby generator to provide electricity in case there is power cut.

Reduction of Noise in the Examination Hall

Majority of the students were of the view that reduction of noise when examinations are ongoing is a sine qua non for them to concentrate or stay focus. They lament the fact that frequent movements in and out of the examination hall distracts them enormously and increases their anxiety level. They thus proposed that movement into and out of the examination hall should be limited to the invigilators concerned, and the teacher of that course who may come in to effect some corrections on the question paper. Such corrections, according to them should be done before they start writing. As far as checking of ID cards and school fee receipts in the course of the examination is concerned, the respondents

further said that by doing this when the students are writing further distracts them and increases their anxiety levels. They thus suggested that such exercise be done before they start writing. All necessary announcements should equally be made before students start writing.

Examination Materials and Instructions

The students were of the opinion that when they have to wait for long in the examination hall before writing or other examination related materials are provided, they immediately start getting anxious. It even gets worse in situations whereby some of their mates have their examination materials like answer booklets and question papers and are already writing while others are anxiously waiting. Writing materials should be prepared before time to avoid confusion and tension. When a student has to wait for writing materials to be brought while his/her mates are writing it makes that student to be anxious. As concerns instructions, it is important that the teacher of that course be present to give instructions in a clear and straightforward manner to prevent students fidgeting and asking questions regularly to the invigilator. Moreover, instructions should be dished out before the students start writing not when they are already writing. Finally, the students were of the opinion that if their teachers could revise with them prior to examination, their anxiety levels will be drastically reduced and they will adjust to the examination condition.

Role of the Invigilator

Majority of the students agreed that the invigilator has a big role to play as far as their anxiety level is concerned. According to them, frequent shouting by the invigilators frightens them and causes them to get anxious. Invigilators should speak in a low tone of voice, if possible, use nonverbal communication techniques. Examination malpractices should be handled in a diligent manner that doesn't cause distraction or frighten other students. The students further suggested that invigilators should, as much as possible limit their movements during examination and should avoid standing too close to a student. This frightens the student and causes him/her to lose concentration and start getting anxious. Attendance should be done before the exams begin or at the end. When the attendance sheet moves round during exams it causes distraction. They were also of the opinion that invigilators should behave in a gentle and polite manner. They should equally stop asking students who are fidgeting in examination hall to stand up for some time. They should be friendly and encouraging.

5. Discussion

From the results obtained in this study, it is very evident that 70.3% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively that the examination environment influences their anxiety levels. Only 29.7% of these respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with this view. This result is in sync with Aremu and Sokan (2003) who found that examination environment influences anxiety of students, hence performance. Aremu and Sokan were able to point at factors like dilapidated school buildings, unfriendly invigilators as well as poorly ventilated classrooms to be responsible for test or examination anxiety. Thus, the onus is on school administrators, teachers and those managing schools to create an environment void of stress, well ventilated with conducive atmosphere to prevent anxiety related issues with students. These results are also in synergy with Hancock (2001) who was able to establish that high test anxiety students performed poorly during examination and were less motivated.

Looking at research question two, qualitative data shows that the students identified factors such as overcrowded environment, poor ventilation, poor lighting, noisy examination environment, unavailability of examination related materials, shouting and other verbal comments by the invigilators as factors responsible for students' anxiety during examination. This finding is in accordance with Vaz, Pothiyil, George, Alex, Pothiyil and Kamath (2018) who concluded that the learning process, students' expectations related to the learning outcome as well as how students perceive the examination are factors responsible for examination anxiety. Also, in sync with this finding is Aremu and Sokan (2003) who found that poor ventilation, poor physical buildings as well as poor antics of the invigilators are responsible for increasing students' anxiety levels during examinations.

Finally, as far as research question three is concerned, the students unanimously agreed that availability of exam related materials, proper ventilation, revision with the teachers prior to examination, less distractions by invigilators during exams, ample spacing during exams are mitigating factors that can

be put in place to reduce examination anxiety. This finding is in line with Bensoussan (2012) who was able to establish that when teachers engage in revision and class discussion with their students prior to exams, students enhance their self-efficacy levels and this ultimately reduces their anxiety level. Also, in accordance with the present findings is Maharajan, Rajiah, Tam, Chaw, Ang and Yong (2017) who found that teacher support in the form of teaching students study skills, revising with student prior to exams and giving them necessary hints as to the nature and structure of the exam helps in reducing students' level of anxiety.

6. Conclusion

This study has been able to establish that there exists a relationship between examination environment, students' level of anxiety and ultimately performance. The study also established that factors that will influence the anxiety level of students include but not limited to overcrowded environment, poor ventilation, poor lighting, noisy examination environment, unavailability of examination related materials, shouting and other verbal comments by the invigilators. Finally, the study found that solutions to examination anxiety or coping strategies include availability of exam related materials, proper ventilation, revision with the teachers prior to examination, less distractions by invigilators during exams, and ample spacing during exams.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings above, a number of recommendations were made to educational authorities of The University of Bamenda, students, teachers and invigilators. To begin, educational authorities of the University of Bamenda should make sure that examinations are written in well ventilated halls, with proper lighting, as well as ample space to prevent overcrowding in the examination hall. Students on their part should make sure they cooperate with the examiners and have all necessary materials for the examination at their disposal before entering the examination hall. When this is done, they are able to adjust to the examination environment. Teachers should ensure that the scope of the examination is limited to what was taught in class. Invigilators on their part should avoid making phone calls and raising their voices in the examination halls as this often distract the students.

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