

Test Anxiety and Performance Levels in Reading Comprehension among Grade 8 Students

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Abstract: *This study determined the test anxiety and performance levels in reading comprehension among Grade 8 students of five public secondary schools of Laoac, Pangasinan. This study utilized descriptive-correlational method of research. The researcher used test anxiety scale to determine the anxiety level of the students. Reading comprehension test was utilized in gathering the data. The data gathered were analyzed and interpreted using frequency counts, percentages, average weighted mean, and Spearman Rho. The study revealed that the level of text anxiety of the students is average. Among others, the students experienced very fast heartbeat while taking the test. They perceived that they could do much better on the test if they could take it alone and not be pressured by time limit and they panicked when taking surprise examinations. The performance of the one hundred eight (108) students in the literal level is high while the students' performances in both inferential and critical levels is low. The final model from the performance in literal level shows that the higher test anxiety of the students, the lower the performance that they yield and vice versa. It is recommended that teachers initiate reading remediation during independent cooperative learning to improve the students' reading comprehension and to enrich the curricula for activities on testing reading comprehension levels, especially on inferential and critical levels. A parent-teacher program may also be initiated and strengthened which may create support system among teachers, parents, and students particularly focusing on reading skills and lessening the test anxiety in classroom.*

Keywords - test anxiety, literal level, inferential level, critical level

1. INTRODUCTION

Comprehension is highly interactive, such that readers use a variety of skills and processes when encountering text. These processes are complex and consist of multiple components. A variety of cognitive models have been developed to lend support to the various skills and processes thought to impact comprehension (Middleton, 2011).

Current reading research shows that several key factors impede a student's reading comprehension. One of the most important skills is phonemic awareness, the ability to process the individual sounds of letters, which is needed for word recognition. For instance, when a reader hears the word "bug," he must discriminate the three distinct phonemes within the word. The reader then blends the sounds together to decode the word. Underdeveloped phonemic awareness and phonics skills, as well as poor working memory, interfere with a student's ability to read words fluently, which is linked to reading comprehension deficits (Sanford, 2015).

Sanford contended that during a student's first year in school, reading instruction focuses on decoding and fluency, which require both strong phonemic awareness and phonics skills according to the National Reading Panel's report of 2000. Further, compounding these reading problems, the emphasis of reading instruction shifts away from phonics

instruction to reading comprehension around the third grade. However, only a few studies focusing on secondary reading instruction were included by the NRP as the main research

focus centered on early identification of students at risk of reading failure, evidence-based instruction, and the role of teachers in teaching reading. It should be noted that since its release in 2000, this report has garnered criticism in how effect sizes were computed and the subsequent recommendations made by the panel based on these effect sizes.

Furthermore, numerous cognitive processes are used when reading that aid comprehension. Strong vocabulary skills are needed to aid a student's ability to read proficiently. Unfortunately, as students struggle to read, they often avoid reading. Reading influences vocabulary development; however, when students do not read fluently or regularly, their vocabulary skills are impacted. Vocabulary knowledge positively affects reading comprehension and academic performance. During reading, students continually process words to create meaning, and without a strong vocabulary base, students struggle to understand what they have read and is compounded for reading comprehension (Taylor et al., 2009).

Another factor linked to reading difficulties is low prior knowledge and lack of breadth in vocabulary. Prior knowledge is directly linked to reading comprehension and is a strong predictor of reading ability. When a student lacks prior knowledge about a topic, reading comprehension is impacted. Students who have a basic understanding of what they are reading about can connect new information to what they already know. Prior knowledge is formed through experience, by reading or hearing about a topic, or through

family customs. A student's general cognitive ability is also a contributor to prior knowledge. A student who reads, or who has been read to, is able to access this knowledge when reading related topics, which can increase comprehension. It is not known at this time, however, if there are mediating factors such as working memory, motivation and decoding that might impede prior knowledge and impact reading comprehension (Elbro and Buch-Iversen, 2013).

When students struggle to read, reading becomes demotivating and students avoid reading. Reading comprehension is hindered when students lose interest and disengage from reading. Many students begin to dislike reading because they struggle to gain meaning from what they read. While research supports a strong correlation between reading engagement and reading ability, students often do not read well because they do not spend time reading. A cycle of reading apathy begins, which makes it more challenging to support struggling readers (Guthrie, 2008).

(Cadias, 2013) stated that in the four macro skills, little attention has been paid to reading. Comprehension is a skill that is found to be difficult on the part of the students, which determines the weakness of most high school students.

On the other hand, a student's performance is usually assessed through assessment which is utilized to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students. It is a process of examining their knowledge and skills. Through assessment, teachers can find out what students are learning.

Furthermore, assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning (Huba and Freed, 2000).

Additionally, test is one of the instruments to assess students' grades for every quarter, test serves to divide students into separate learning tracks, so that students are paired with peers on a similar academic interest, test scores are important to determine students overall grade, it is considered extremely important to teachers and students perspective. Students experience levels of anxiety during examination, test anxiety can interfere with the students ability to perform adequately and prevent students demonstrate their knowledge on examination. It is the application and effectiveness of study skills can be improved through the study strategies (Malloy, 2015).

Moreover, test anxiety has a significant role in one's educational, professional and emotional life. Therefore, it is not surprising that the testing environment generates anxiety for a number of individuals. The issues provided in this article, present a detailed review of the current literature related to testing, including the conceptualization and components of test anxiety, the prevalence and negative consequences of test anxiety, possible sources of perception, gender differences in test anxiety, and treatment for test anxiety (Tsai, 2012).

Besides, test anxiety has the tendency to view and alarm with the consequences of inadequate performance in an evaluative situation, test anxiety occurs when students have poor performance in the previous test. Students develop a negative stereotype about test and have irrational perception in evaluative situations. These students might have unpleasant test experience from the class and they transplanted unhappy image to the class. Usually, situations where individuals are allowed personal evaluation is termed an evaluative situation, which will potentially result in performance efforts geared towards high standards that lead to high levels of performance but when placed in an evaluative situation, distress regarding normative assessment, comparative and competitive behaviors will lead to heightened anxiety and disrupt students from focusing on doing what is necessary to successfully complete the test (Xiao, 2013).

Premised on the above context and conditions, the researcher found the exigency to anchor the role of anxiety in reading comprehension of the students. Thus, the researcher is interested in exploring other ways to helped language learners to overcome their test anxiety and to improve the levels of reading comprehension (literal, inferential, critical) level.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This research determined the test anxiety and the performance level in reading comprehension among the Grade 8 students enrolled during the school year 2016-2017.

Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of test anxiety of the students in reading comprehension?
2. What is the level of performance of the students in reading comprehension along:
 - a. literal;
 - b. inferential, and
 - c. critical?
3. What model can be derived to describe the test anxiety level and the level of performance of the students in reading comprehension?

METHODS

The study used descriptive-correlational method of research where the result of the standardized test for the students was determined and collected by the researcher. Descriptive research was used because it was devoted to the gathering of information about prevailing conditions or situations for the purpose of description and interpretation. This type of research method was not simply gathering data and tabulating facts but it includes proper analyses. Meanwhile, the use of correlational research was appropriate in this study because the researcher collected the data and would be used to determine the degree of relationships and variability between students' test anxiety and the level of performance of the students in reading comprehension.

The subject of this study were one ninety six (196) Grade 8 students of five public secondary schools of Laoac, namely: Calmay Integrated School, Castusu Integrated School, Don Maximo G. Gombio Panaga-Tabao Integrated School, Cabilaoan Agro-Industrial High School and Laoac National High School, Laoac Pangasinan school year 2016-2017.

The students from five (5) Public Secondary Schools of Laoac, Pangasinan were chosen through stratified sampling technique (SST) which is a probability sampling technique wherein the researcher divided the entire population into different subgroups or strata, then randomly selected the final subjects proportionally from the different strata. It is a non-random technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of informants. Simply put, the researcher decided what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Lewis and Sheppard, 2006).

THE TEST ANXIETY LEVEL OF THE GRADE 8 STUDENTS

Educational tests are the major tools for measuring academic achievement. Although varying methods of evaluation are used in educational settings, tests will remain the most commonly used method of assessment. Estimates of the prevalence of test anxiety in students vary depending on a number of variables, such as the age of the student, parental and teacher expectations, and whether tests are high-stakes state assessments or local exams. The test anxiety level of the Grade 8 students findings relative to the levels of test anxiety of the students in reading comprehension.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Qualifying Statements	Mean	DE
1. We find ourselves thinking of how much brighter the other students are than we are	3.20	A
2. We think we could do much better on tests if we could take them alone and not feel pressured by a time limit.	3.65	H
3. After important tests we were frequently so tense that our stomach gets upset.	2.71	A
4. Thinking about the grade we may get in a course interferes with our studying and our performance on tests.	3.43	H
5. The school ought to recognize that some students are more nervous than others about tests and that this affects our performance.	3.27	A
6. Even when we were well prepared for a test, we feel very anxious about it.	3.27	A
7. After taking a test we always feel we could have done better than we actually did.	3.30	A
8. During a course examination we frequently get so nervous that we forget facts we really know.	3.29	A
9. While taking an important examination we perspire a great deal.	3.29	A
10. Getting a good grade on one test does not seem to increase our confidence on the second.	3.28	A

11. If examinations could be done away with we think we would actually learn more.	3.42	H
12. If we knew we were going to take an intelligence test, we would feel confident and relaxed, beforehand.	3.41	H
13. We start feeling very uneasy just before getting a test paper back.	3.23	A
14. If we were to take an intelligence test, we would worry a great deal before taking it.	3.22	A
15. The harder we work at taking a test or studying for one, the more confused we get.	3.22	A
16. We sometimes feel our heart beat very fast during important tests.	3.70	H
17. During exams we sometimes wonder if we'll ever get through college.	3.18	A
18. During tests we find myself thinking of the consequences of failing.	3.17	A
19. It seems to us that examination periods ought not to be made the tense situations which they are.	3.15	A
20. We wish examinations did not bother us so much.	3.14	A
21. We dread courses where the teachers have the habit of giving "pop" quizzes.	3.12	A
22. On exams we take the attitude "If we do not know it now there's no point worrying about it."	3.11	A
23. As soon as an exam is over we try to stop worrying about it, but we just cannot.	3.10	A
24. We were uneasy, upset feeling before taking a final examination.	3.10	A
25. We seem to defeat ourselves while working on important tests.	3.04	A
26. Before an important examination we find my hands or arms trembling.	3.01	A
27. We do not enjoy eating before an important test.	3.00	A
28. When taking a test our emotional feelings do not interfere with our performance.	2.99	A
29. We seldom feel the need for "cramming" before an exam.	2.97	A
30. During course examination we find ourselves thinking of things unrelated to the actual course material.	2.96	A
31. We really do not see why some people get so upset about tests.	2.96	A
32. We freeze up on things like intelligence tests and final exams.	2.92	A
33. We would rather write a paper than take an examination for our grade in a course;	2.91	A
34. We usually get depressed after taking a test.	2.90	A
35. Thoughts of doing poorly interfere with our performance on tests.	2.85	A
36. We do not study any harder for final exams than for the rest of our course work.	2.76	A
37. We get to feel very panicky when we have to take a surprise exam.	3.49	H
Average Mean	3.18	A

The table shows that among the qualifying statements, "The students claimed that they feel that their heart beats very fast during important tests" the students got a high level as shown in the mean of 3.70. This shows that among the measures of test anxiety, the students primarily experience physical manifestations of being nervous, thus faster heartbeat. As per observations of the teacher, manifestations of being nervous and tensed are apparent among students while taking periodic tests, particularly

reading comprehension tests. As a result, they find it hard focusing on interpreting meaning in the texts they read.

This finding supports the contentions of Harris, and Coy (2003) who claimed that test anxiety causes many stress symptoms. These include physical reactions such as stomach aches, headaches, increased heart rate and palpitations, shaking, sweating, and panic. Additionally, psycho-educational symptoms include a lack of self-confidence, overwhelmingly negative thoughts about academic ability, inefficient studying and test-taking skills, and difficulty interpreting information.

Closely related to the aforementioned item, the statement “they get to feel very panicky when they were to take a surprise exam also registered to “high” level (3.49). In the opinion of the English teachers being interviewed, this stems to the fact that the students lacked effort in reviewing prior to written tests, not to mention their weak study habits. Because of these, they panic before the important tests. Unsurprisingly, when the researcher administered the reading test to them, some of them seemed nervous and began being disoriented.

This supports the report of D'Arcy (2004) as cited by Osa-edoh and Okonta (n. d.) that it is normal to feel a little nervous and stressed before a test. For some people, this normal anxiety is more intense. The nervousness they feel before a test can be so strong that it interferes with their concentration or performance.

The statements “We think we could do much better on tests if we could take them alone and not feel pressured by a time limit” (3.65) earned “high” mean thus where the students felt high test anxiety. This area highlights the pressure brought about by time limit, the ‘cores to get to pass in the test, and the “surprise” nature of the test administered by the teacher. Similarly, Hill and Wigfield (2004) proved school tests, especially standardized achievement tests, make many unique demands on students. These include test time limits and time pressure, which create stress, especially among anxious children who prefer to perform slowly and cautiously. Similarly, test instructions emphasizing that the test measures ability and do lead anxious students to become overly concerned with the adequacy of their performance.

The statement “Thinking about the grade we may get in a course interferes with our studying and our performance on tests” (3.43) also earned “high” mean.

The finding corroborates with the report of the New York State School Boards Association led by Heiser (2015) that students with test anxiety view testing situations as personally threatening and exhibit high levels of anxiety in situations in which they are being evaluated. As previously discussed, these clearly highlight the physiological and mental anxieties that the students feel before and after taking not only the test given by the researcher but practically any test administered in the public schools.

The table further indicates that the statement “If examinations could be done away with we think we would actually learn more” (3.42) also earned “high” mean, signifying that the students felt “high” test anxiety.

Unsurprisingly, this finding is supported by the fact that had the students been given enough time prior to written tests, they have the perception that they would have performed better because they reviewed.

While Owens, Stevenson, Hadwin and Norgate (2012) suggested that the academic performance of a student who has test anxiety is determined by the strength of a student’s working memory (defined as the cognitive ability of maintaining task-related focus in complex cognition). That is, for students with high capacity working memory, higher test anxiety motivates them to do better on tests; students with high test anxiety and low working memory capacity do not perform well.

The table shows that the statement “If we knew we were going to take an intelligence test, we would feel confident and relaxed, beforehand” (3.41) also earned “high” mean. Aside from Harris and Coy (2003), many researchers support the fact that the students average levels of test anxiety particularly on their physiological and mental dispositions or behaviors. Reactions such as nervousness, perspiration, anxiety, uneasiness, worrying, confusion, being tensed, being bothered, being upset, trembling of hands and arms, weakened appetite, being frozen (or shocked), depression, and having upset stomach were then felt by the students on average level of test anxiety. The respondents registered “average” test anxiety in terms of thinking of how much brighter they are than the others, defeating themselves, thinking of unrelated things, and comparing themselves to others. The student’s cognitive perceptions of taking tests which contributed to their feeling of anxiety. They then began comparing themselves to others, not to themselves, on how much they can perform better. As observed by the researcher, students’ habit of comparing their performance with others originates from the fact that they envy the level of preparation of their classmates which resulted to better performance than theirs. Pecarora (2006) supports by saying that a student who is not well prepared for exam may have higher levels of task interfering worry during examination than those are better prepared. Meanwhile, because the students tended to think of ‘unrelated’ things while taking tests, they began being unmindful.

Further, the table also reveals that the level of test anxiety of the students was average, with an Average Weighted Mean (AWM) of 3.18. It indicates that majority of the students had an average level of test anxiety during examinations. This further shows that the anxiety level of the students boils down to average which may indicate that they are not very afraid in taking the test and can handle it smoothly.

The above findings support the study of Moinzade and Salari (2015) explain that most students experience average levels of test anxiety during examinations. When anxiety affects test performance, it becomes a problem. Test anxiety can interfere with the students’ abilities to perform adequately and prevent students from demonstrating their knowledge on examinations.

Trifoni and Salari (2011) claimed that whatever the level of anxiety is aroused in a student often depresses his/her test performance, the test taker's perception of the threat of evaluation turn out to be accurate, to a degree. That is anxiety causes a poor evaluation, which confirms the students initial perceptions regarding the unlikelihood of success which reinforces evaluation as a threatening event.

Table 2
Levels of Performance of the Grade 8
Students in Reading Comprehension

Descriptive Equivalent	Score Range	High Performance		Average Performance		Low Performance		Overall Performance	
		f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%
		Literal	8-10	108	55.1	42	21.4	46	23.5
Inferential	5-7	73	37.2	6	3.1	117	59.7	118	60.2
Critical	0-4	58	29.6	3	1.5	135	68.9	74	37.8

The students performed high under literal level for most of the questions are focused on recognizing, recalling facts, identifying the main idea, categorizing outlining. Some of the questions call for answers such as names of the characters, the places were the main character found the eagle and how the eagle acquired injury, which were all explicitly stated in the reading material. The students found it easier to comprehend the questions under the literal level.

This result corroborates with the findings of Moinzade and Salari (2015) which explained that test anxiety can interfere with the students' ability to perform adequately and prevent students from demonstrating their knowledge on examinations. Some students have the skills and knowledge to do very well in testing situations, but their excessive anxiety impairs their performance.

This finding, also supports the report published by the National Assessment Education Progress Report, the performance of the majority of the students is "high" it can be traced that they felt easy in answering test items related to identifying the names of the characters and setting of the story, and emotions of and circumstances of the characters in the story. This agrees with the stipulation of Goff (2010) who said that the components of literal comprehension are context, facts and sequence. Then, Neufeld (2006) and Mercurio (2005) as cited by Jude and Ajayi's (2012) contended that to achieve reading comprehension the reader employ skills such as identifying the main idea of a passage, summarizing the context of a text, generating questions about the information in the text and looking for clues that answer those questions.

Table 4

Correlation between the Test Anxiety Level and Performance of the Students in Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension	Correlation value	Sig.
Literal	-.221**	.002
Inferential	-.090	.212
Critical	-.005	.950

As seen in table 4, the relationship between level of test anxiety and the performance in the literal is highly significant and that a negative (inverse) relationship between the two variables. That is, those students who obtained high scores in the test for literal tend to have low level of test anxiety. Meanwhile, the significant correlation may also indicate that when the students generally have an "average" level of test anxiety, majority of them would register "high" test performance in the literal level. It could also be said that the generally average level of test anxiety had no impact to their ability in answering literal level questions, such as the same can be easily understood, therefore answered.

On the hand, correlation of inferential and critical to the level of test anxiety is found to be significant. This suggests that when the students' generally had an "high" level of test anxiety, they performed "low" in both inferential and critical reading. The same level of anxiety might have caused the students pressure or uneasiness while attempting to process the information they were reading.

Table 5
Regression Model of Test Anxiety Level and Performance of the Students in Literal Level

Variable	Coefficients	Standardized Coefficient	Tc	Sig.
Constant	8.78		9.779**	.000
Test Anxiety	-.881	-.221	-3.151**	.002

As seen in table 5, the correlation between level of test anxiety and the performance in the literal level is highly significant with 0.002 significance level that is less than 0.05 alpha level. This means that there is very high relationship between the test anxieties from the literal level performance of the student. In addition, it indicates that during the important examination their anxiety level might have an effect to their ability in recognizing and recalling facts, identifying the main idea, supporting details, categorizing, outlining, and summarizing and can answer facts, ideas, information gathering questions.

Table 6
Regression Model of Test Anxiety Level and Performance of the Students in Inferential Level

Variable	Coefficients	Standardized Coefficient	Tc	Sig.
Constant	5.185		5.336**	.000
Test Anxiety	-.379	-.090	-1.253	.212

Table exposes the correlation between level of test anxiety and the performance in the inferential level is 0.212 that is greater than 0.05 alpha level. Due to low performance of the students in inferential level, it shows that there is no relationship in measuring in the test of anxiety.

Table 7 reveals the regression model of test anxiety level and performance of the students in critical level.

Table 7
Regression Model of Test Anxiety Level and Performance of the Students in Critical Level

Variable	Coefficients	Standardized Coefficient	Tc	Sig.
Constant	3.801**		4.197	.000
Test Anxiety	-.018	-.005	-.063	.950

Table 7 above displays that the correlation between level of test anxiety and the performance in the levels of comprehension is 0.950 that is greater than 0.05 alpha level. In comparison to inferential level, there is a low performance of the student in critical level. It shows that there is no relationship in measuring the test of anxiety of the students.

In Table 5, it can be observed that the coefficient (slope) of the test anxiety is highly significant, this mean that the level of test anxiety is a significant predictor of the performance in the literal level. Interpreting this value, for every additional increase in the anxiety level, there is also a corresponding decrease of -.881 in the score in the test for literal. It can also be observed that the overall fit of our model is highly significant. On the other, about 4.95% of the percent contribution of the level of test anxiety to the variation in the performance in the literal.

Tables 6 and 7 describe the model for the inferential and critical levels. As seen on both tables, the coefficient of the constant is only significant to the model. Furthermore, the overall fit of the model also supports the results of the correlation discussed in table 5.

This result corroborates with the study conducted by Suleiman (2017) which showed a significant gainful relationship at 0.587 in literal level of reading comprehension. This is also in line with his finding that the correlation between reading comprehension projected a highly significant relationship at 0.553 and 0.01 leves (2-tailed).

Meanwhile, the correlation of the inferential and critical levels to the level of test anxiety is found to be insignificant.

This simply supports the statement written by Wu (2015) reading which revealed that reading comprehension performance did not differ significantly with test anxiety.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the foregoing findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The students manifested an average level of test anxiety during examinations.
2. The students possessed a high level of performance in the literal level of reading comprehension while registering low level of performance both in the inferential and the critical levels.
3. Average test anxiety experienced by the students is significantly related to their high performance in the literal level.

Based on conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are hereby presented:

1. Teachers should initiate school-based programs such as reading remediation during independent cooperative learning and interventions to improve students' learning environment, thus lessening test anxiety.
2. Enrichment curricula to enhance the reading comprehension levels especially on the inferential and critical levels.
3. A parent- teacher program may be strengthened which may create support system among teachers, parents and students particularly focusing on reading skills and lessening test anxiety.

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