

## **Dixie Dixit: New Trends with Technology Test Anxiety: Fact or Fiction? (Part 1)**

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This column will not be about technology in the classroom. This time, I want to focus on a problem that I think is relevant to many teachers and students: test anxiety. In this first part, I will explain why I became interested in the topic and what test anxiety is. In the next column, I will discuss what I found when I set out to explore the topic more deeply.

My university, like many others in Mexico and other non-English speaking countries, has an English language requirement for graduation. Students must demonstrate their proficiency in English through any of the many standardized tests available nowadays. At my university, when students enter the program, they take a placement test. If they have already taken some kind of international test such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and they have obtained the minimum score their school requires, then they have complied with the requirement. If they have not taken the test, or if they have not received the score they need, then students are required to study English until they obtain the score they need.

The majority of the students finish their program having complied with the requirement. Every now and then, there are students who have not complied with the requirement for a variety of reasons. The most common is that they simply have not taken the test. Others have taken it, but have not obtained the score they require. They continue to study and take the tests until they pass. But sometimes it happens that a student, despite repeated tries, does not obtain the score. Of course, this has consequences. They cannot get their school diploma, and in some cases, this means they cannot get a job in their chosen field of studies. This is true of the students in the School of Pedagogy at my university.

A student from this school—let's call her Daniela— came to my office one day to pick up her exam score report. She was sad, but she accepted that she had not passed. I knew Daniela personally because I had been her teacher in a seminar on language acquisition. The course had been in English, and I had never noticed that Daniela struggled with the language. She was able to do the coursework without any apparent difficulty. I made an offhand comment to her: "You'll pass next time" or something like that, and asked how she had prepared for the exam. I must mention that Daniela had already finished her coursework. She just needed English to graduate.

Daniela told me that this was her fourth attempt at the exam, and that she had been taking private lessons to prepare. I told her I was surprised, because I always considered her English to be quite adequate. I asked about her background and this is what she told me.

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Daniela is the third of three children. Her sister and brother had also studied at the same university, and had had trouble with the English requirement. Her father did not want Daniela to go through the same thing, so when Daniela was in the last year of high school, he registered her at a language school. She did very well there, so well, that she had the highest scores among the students at the school. In recognition of this, the school offered her a scholarship for a summer course in Houston. She went and had a great time, and in retrospect she felt she learned a lot.

When Daniela came to our university in August, fresh from Houston, she took the English placement exam and placed in the pre-intermediate level. She felt that it was too low for her, but she started taking English at that level at the university.

During her first two courses at the university, Daniela felt that she was the strongest in her group. Then, she started to fail exams and to repeat courses. At this point she entered into a cycle of: take a course, fail it, repeat it, and finally pass it. She basically did this until she finished all the levels. She said: "I always seem to have trouble with exams, not only English, but any exams".

Here, I began to suspect that Daniela's problem was not necessarily with the language itself. I asked her more about exams, and what she felt. She told me her hands began to perspire. She said that the first few questions in the listening section were always lost, because of a sort of "roaring" in her ears. She told me her stomach hurt and it was hard to concentrate. I told her that I would look into what was happening to her and see if I could find solutions.

Some colleagues at the university are doing research in math anxiety (Eccius-Wellman, Lara-Barragán, & Freitag, in press), so I asked them if there was a similar phenomenon for exams. They sent me some literature on test anxiety (Furlán, 2006), together with a questionnaire on test anxiety for university students (Grandis, 2009).

What I found is that test anxiety is defined as an emotional reaction to situations involving evaluation of abilities. Characteristics include a repeated concern with a possible failure in a given task, and with the consequences of that failure (Furlán, 2006). I discovered that it is a specific type of anxiety; in other words, you can be anxious about other things, but not tests, or you can be anxious only about tests. Test anxiety consists of several elements. The most important are: emotional reactions, worry, and physiological reactions (Cassady & Johnson, 2002).

Because standardized tests are becoming more common, most people will experience test anxiety at some point in their lifetime. Anxiety can have a negative impact on academic performance in general (Cizek & Burg, 2006). Anxiety is especially strong in high-stakes exams, such as those needed for graduation.

Worry, or concern, is the principal component negatively affecting performance. A certain amount of anxiety can be useful, as it can lead the individual to adapt to a situation, or to solve a problem. However, too much anxiety can be debilitating (Sieber, 1980).

That semester I was teaching a seminar on research methods in education. I talked to my students about test anxiety and what I was finding out about it. They expressed

interest in doing a related research project, so we set out to do that, precisely. In the next column, I will explain what the research project consisted of, and what we found.

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