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How to help ELT students overcome test anxiety

by Katy Quinn (Teacher, Atlantic Language Galway)

A few years ago, I had the most wonderful group of Pre-Intermediate students. Their dynamism and passion for learning was infectious. There was a particular student who occasionally suffered from severe bouts of homesickness and watching the class band together to help her through this difficulty, every time it happened, was heart-warming. She consistently worked hard, was usually first to answer, pushed the class into speaking when they weren't feeling very motivated (her enthusiasm was contagious) and performed well with any task she was given.

Every Friday the class were given a test to consolidate all the material completed that week. She received an average grade for her first test and perked up quickly with my reassurances that it was only her first week and these things took time. The following week, she performed badly but told me that she had been working a lot and was probably tired. The third week, she cried. I gently coaxed her out of the classroom to calm her down and encouraged her to come and speak to me after class. We talked about her performance in class overall and how her test results were not reflective of her capabilities. That was when she said: "My mind goes empty when I look at the test". I realised then that expecting all learners to perform well in written assessments when the atmosphere equates to a tense exam is as unrealistic as expecting every student to learn in the same way and at the same pace. I told her that there were things we could do to combat test stress but first we had to think about why her mind was going blank. On discussion, she told me that she had to achieve a B2 level in the next four months to remain in her current career. The pressure of knowing that she had to perform well was enough to send her over the edge. I decided that a proactive approach would benefit more than any words of encouragement. This led me to really consider why my students were here and how to identify and deal with test anxiety.

What is anxiety:

Anxiety can quite simply be defined as feelings of stress or fear about what is to come and can vary in severity depending on the individual. According to Selami Aydin (2007), anxiety can be classed into three categories; trait, state and situation-specific. Trait anxiety is regarded as "a more permanent disposition to be anxious, [and] is viewed as an aspect of personality". State anxiety "is an apprehension that is experienced at a particular moment in time as a response to a definite situation". Lastly, situation-specific "is related to apprehension aroused at specific situations and events".

It could be argued that any scenario which causes the manifestation of anxiety to the detriment of performance may be classified as state or situation-specific i.e. tests or exams. When it comes to learners in a classroom suffering from test anxiety we can refer to it as either state or situation-specific.

Possible cause of anxiety in learners:

Anxiety can manifest as a result of several situations so it's a good idea to find out what motivates learners; why are they here to study English? Sometimes, this question is followed by an apathetic shrug and a muttered response of "for my job". I don't accept this answer from learners and usually ask: Are they making you take this course? Are they funding your studies? Have they told you that without this course you won't progress in your career? Often students' answers are all the same, they have an inherent belief that without English, progression in any form of the world is impossible. Some find their studies improve when they have this sort of outside pressure motivating them to work hard; for others, this burden leads to impaired performance because it creates feelings of anxiety.

Recognising the signs:

Once you understand a student's motivation for being here and you build rapport, you can identify the students who may struggle by focusing on their demeanour in class, their attitude when it comes to homework or studying and their general willingness to actively participate. For new teachers, it can be difficult to understand the difference between apathy and lethargy. In my experience, apathy isn't dependent on the day of the week or hour of the lesson and doesn't abate even when classes are varied and interactive.

Instead, notice the students who work diligently, complete tasks you set efficiently, collaborate well with their classmates and most of all participate actively in class but regularly under-perform in tests. For some, tests can bring up forgotten feelings of dread and anxiety that have long been buried with memories of school/college. It can make them feel inadequate and incompetent despite

“ State anxiety is an apprehension that is experienced at a particular moment in time as a response to a definite situation.”

repeated reassurance and encouragement. These are the students that need help focusing on the bigger picture and not allowing outside pressure to gain dominance since impaired test performance can often have overarching consequences. Students fall into a vicious cycle of needing to do well to achieve goals and subsequently failing to due to the anxiety such demands create.

What to do?

When I first began to research Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in ELT, I wasn't surprised at just how many articles existed on the topic. However, I found that I simply wanted a basic list of what to do in my classroom to reduce test anxiety, below are the points I've put together:

Learn the test

We know that in exam classes such as IELTS, CAE and FCE, we spend a lot of time simply educating our learners about what to expect in each part of the exam. However, when it comes to General English progress tests, we tend not to do the same thing. Why? Tests always follow basic patterns and often, as in progress tests, they include the same categories. Teach your learners the categories so that they know the areas that are bound to come up: lexis, grammar, revision of previously covered material, gap-fills, a reading, multiple choice grammar activities etc. Student's need to be aware of the time limits and that they don't need to follow a linear pattern when answering questions. Instead, they can be encouraged to start with an area they are confident with and will complete quickly. Easy marks are often missed out on purely because a student spends too much time on the areas they find difficult.

Activities to reduce stress

I have students clear their desks first, books go back into bags and phones remain in their pockets, I don't want any distractions when I'm trying to help them relax. Sometimes, I play a piece of music (any genre but I tend to choose classical) and have students close their eyes and listen carefully, focusing on the lyrics (if any), rhythm, melody etc. I tell them to empty their minds and focus only on what I am playing. Every time they feel their mind begin to race again with thoughts of the test, they must find a way to pull themselves back into the moment.

Stretching is almost miraculous in its effects, especially when it is first thing in the morning coupled with gentle breathing exercises. Have the students stand up when stretching to ensure they receive the most benefit. I also make a point of running through the exercise's students can do during the test if they find themselves spiralling into a state of anxiety. These include but are not limited to:

- 1) Putting your hands beneath your chair and pulling yourself down for five seconds while inhaling slowly, then releasing and exhaling. Repeat this as often as is needed.
- 2) Gently lowering your chin to your chest and then raising your head to look at the ceiling, breathing slowly and keeping eyes closed.
- 3) Correcting posture i.e. sit up straight, pulling back your shoulders and stretch your back as soon as you begin to feel yourself tensing up and crouching over the test paper.
- 4) Close your eyes and visualise all the things you will do once the test is over; reminding yourself that this is just a singular moment in your life.

Sometimes, if there is time before the test, I have the students tell their partner what they will do later that day when the test is a distant memory.

Positive Talk Statements

For some it doesn't matter how many times their Teachers, friends, parents etc. tell them they are smart/good enough, the message doesn't compute. It's important here that students learn to counteract any negative thoughts/statements with positive ones and some of this will have to come from having self-belief.

Every statement they make about the test needs to be countered e.g. I must pass this test, or I will never get into University can be countered with I don't need to pass this test for anyone else except myself and if I do badly on this one, I will do better on the next one. The best way to get students to do this is to have them write down their negative thoughts about the test and share them with a partner.

Sometimes simply sharing their fears or anxieties before countering them with positive statements, and without anyone telling them they are going to be fine, can be very cathartic. Often, students need the chance to voice all the things they think will go wrong and the impact on their lives if these things come to fruition. This is known as play the script until the end (<https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/cbt-cognitive-behavioral-therapy-techniques-worksheets/> accessed 24/10/18). Imagine the worst-



English Exam

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“ Every time they feel their mind begin to race again with thoughts of the test, they must find a way to pull themselves back into the moment.”

case scenario and play out the entirety of it aloud to a partner without any interruption. Usually, students will see that even in the direst circumstances, everything will work out. Afterwards, have students write a counteracting statement beneath their negative ones and share these with their partner too.

Thought-stopping

Generally, the easiest way to deal with anxiety is to learn how to control negative thoughts before they even begin. I tell students to shout the word STOP in their minds whenever they feel themselves falling into that chasm of self-doubt. It's a difficult technique to master but it does work. Every time they do this, they should follow it with a stretch, a few deep breaths, a change in posture to get themselves back on track and carry on with the task at hand. (<https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/cbt-cognitive-behavioral-therapy-techniques-worksheets> accessed 24/10/18)

Take Control

Students must often be reminded to take control of their own studies and that while you, as the teacher, are there to facilitate their learning you cannot take complete responsibility for it. As a result, in the past I have given a series of tasks to students looking to improve but who also struggle to perform well on their tests. These tasks have included:

- 1) Find five news words every week outside of the classroom by any means (e.g. scanning newspaper headlines, reading posters/advertisements in shops etc.), finding the definition and then presenting these words to the class by the middle of the week. The students must then find a way to incorporate these words into their vocabulary during the remainder of the week.
- 2) Create three questions about Ireland (or any topic of interest) and ask a member of the public. Report back on the answers to the class.
- 3) I gave them a list of songs and a website which would provide the lyrics for each one and told them to print the lyrics and cut them up into lines. Then listen to the song and put the lines into the correct order. I also told them to take ten, fifteen or even twenty words from the song and type them out, cut them up and then put them in the order they appear.
- 4) Keep a learner diary in which you write down everything you learned that day, new words you now know, grammar structures you went through and how you feel your learning is progressing. This will enable students who feel demotivated to go back and realise they are always learning.

It can be difficult to remain patient with students who regularly react emotionally to their performance and fail to heed your repeated reassurances and encouragement. However, it is important to continue to respond in this manner so that students know their issues are not going unnoticed. Attempting some or all the techniques mentioned in this article and incorporating stress reducing methods, will ensure that you are showing students how to take control over their own learning but also that the stress they are experiencing is manageable. It is important to remember that we all experience stressful situations outside the classroom and students are no different.

References:

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