تأثير إن عكاسية الاختبار على تعليم و تعلم الطلبه :الاثر والنتيجة

The Effect of Washback on EFL Learners' Performance: Impact and Consequences

L'effet du Washback sur les Performances des Apprenants: Impact et Conséquences

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Abstract:

Language researchers appear to steadily acknowledge that the field of language testing seems to be a relatively new trend that has entered the field of applied linguistics and didactics. Washback, or the impact of tests on teaching, has become a major area of research since it influences the way teachers teach, select materials, design courses, and test. In the quest of investigating what may be the causes of the low achievement rates within university students; this paper will be proposed to investigate the effects tests have on both the teaching of speaking and the overall learners' proficiency. This study is carried out to rise teachers' awareness of the washback phenomenon, and will accompany learners throughout the term with facilitating strategies that will help them develop their language performance. To this end, a case study will be conducted on second-year LMD students at Tlemcen University. Besides, teachers' questionnaire, and proficiency tests were employed. Results reveal that there is an ambiguity on how tests influence learners' oral proficiency depending on the teaching methodology followed by the teachers. Eventually, based on the results achieved a number of activities will be proposed for a better teaching/learning environment.

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Résumé

Les chercheurs en langues semblent reconnaître de façon constante que le domaine des tests linguistiques semble être une tendance relativement nouvelle qui est entrée dans le domaine de la linguistique appliquée et de la didactique. Le Washback, ou l'impact des tests sur l'enseignement, est devenu un domaine de recherche majeur car il influence la façon dont les enseignants enseignent, sélectionnent les matériaux, conçoivent les cours et testent. Dans le but d'étudier quelles peuvent être les causes des faibles taux de réussite des étudiants universitaires; cet article sera proposé pour étudier les effets des tests sur la compétence globale des apprenants. Cette étude est menée pour sensibiliser les enseignants au phénomène du washback, et accompagnera les apprenants tout au long du trimestre avec des stratégies de facilitation qui les aideront à développer leurs performances linguistiques. À cette fin, une étude de cas sera menée sur des étudiants LMD de deuxième année à l'Université de Tlemcen. En outre, des instruments de recherche seront utilisés, à savoir des questionnaires pour les enseignants et des tests de compétence. Les résultats révèlent une ambiguïté sur la manière dont les tests influencent la compétence orale des apprenants en fonction de la méthodologie d'enseignement suivie par les enseignants. À terme, sur la base des résultats obtenus, un certain nombre d'activités seront proposées pour un meilleur environnement d'enseignement / apprentissage.

الملخص:

يبدو أن الباحثين في مجال اللغة يعترفون بثبات أن مجال اختبار اللغة يبدو أنه اتجاه جديد نسبيا دخل مجال اللغويات التطبيقية والتعليمية. أصبح انعكاسية الاختبار، أو تأثير الاختبارات على التدريس ، مجالا رئيسيا للبحث لأنه يؤثر على طريقة تدريس المعلمين ، اختيار المواد ، دورات التصميم ، والاختبار. في البحث عن أسباب انخفاض معدلات التحصيل لدى طلاب الجامعة, سيتم اقتراح هذا البحث للتحقيق في آثار الاختبارات على كل من التعليم وكفاءة المتعلمين بشكل عام. يتم إجراء هذه الدراسة لزيادة وعي المعلمين بظاهرة انعكاسية الاختبار ، وسوف ترافق المتعلمين طوال الفصل الدراسي مع استراتيجيات تسهيل تساعدهم على تطوير أداء لغتهم. تحقيقا لهذه الغاية ، سيتم إجراء دراسة حالة على طلاب LMD في السنة الثانية في جامعة تلمسان. إلى جانب ذلك، سيتم استخدام أدوات بحثية وهي استبيانات المتعلمين ومقابلة المعلمين واختبارات الكفاءة. تكشف النتائج عن وجود غموض حول كيفية تأثير الاختبارات على كفاءة للمتعلمين اعتمادا على منهجية التدريس التي يتبعها المعلمون. في النهاية، بناء على النتائج المحققة، سيتم اقتراح عدد من الأنشطة من أجل بيئة تعليمية / تعليمية أفضل.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

تقييم - دراسة حالة - أدوات تربوية - نتائج الطلاب - جامعة تلمسان - انعكاسية الاختبار.

Introduction:

Considering the importance of High-stakes testing on teaching process, it has become pervasive in the current educational culture and stakeholders are all impacted by the pressure to succeed on standardized tests. While standardized tests may seem to offer an excellent way to accurately assess students, it is believed that high-stakes testing leads to numerous negative effects that impact not only the students who take the tests, but also parents, teachers, and schools. Therefore, preparing our students for an examination be it high stakes exam or low stakes is, in fact, a great responsibility that teachers are to assume pedagogically and educationally. It requires the implementation of a disciplined teaching rigorous time management and the inculcation of organizational skill. This is because the results obtained in such exams are so important and can in a determinative way, impact learners' future lives and prospective career.

1. **Washback in Language Assessment**

   Foreign Language Assessment

   Language testing at any level is a highly complex challenging phenomenon. Thus, language tests should be designed by teachers who have received previously an adequate training of test design or by curriculum developers or by language testing specialists in general. Designing an adequate language test is a daunting task that requires some efforts from the part of the teacher. In this sense, Brown (1994.253) states that: "one of the biggest obstacles to overcome in constructing adequate tests is to measure the criterion and not inadvertently something else'. To be qualified as a good test, it should contain three requirements that are self-evident to become certified a fine test, among these criteria: practicality, reliability and validity. If these criteria are met the test can be administered.

   Notwithstanding the importance of testing in language teaching, it has become all-encompassing in current educational culture. While testing may seem to offer an excellent way to accurately assess students' progress, it is believed that testing is affected by numerous factors that impact not only the students who take the tests, but also parents, teachers, and schools. Therefore, the quest to find the factors influencing teaching within testing can be a daunting task, and certain factors may be the result of the teaching strategy followed by the teacher in his classroom.

   Washback Phenomenon Defined

   Several definitions of the concept have been offered in the testing literature, for instance Shohamy, et.al, (1996:298) defines it very plainly as "the connections between testing and learning"; whereas Gates (1995:101) defines it as "the influence of testing on teaching and learning". Thus, The way in which high stakes exams affect largely the teaching process is called the back-wash or the wash-back phenomenon, test impact, curriculum alignment and test feedback. On his side, Pierce (1992:687), defines it as "the impact of a test *on classroom pedagogy, curriculum development and*

educational policy." Thus, there exist a number of factors influencing the impact of wash-back in language teaching.

The washback phenomenon is seen to be restricted to the unforeseen but unintended effects and not to the intended effect of tests (Spolsky, 1995). It is described as being any effect, be it positive or negative, intended or unintended, that influences the teaching/learning process as a result of an examination, be it a public examination or a high stakes exam. (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Hughes, 2003; Cheng *et al.*, 2004; Cheng, 2005; Bachman and Palmer, 2010; Hung, 2012). Early definitions of the same term may be displayed in the following table:

Authors	Definitions
Buck (1988:17)	*"Testing drives not only the curriculum, but also the teaching methods and students' approaches to learning."*
Alderson & Wall (1993:239)	*Concerns has long been voiced about the power of tests to affect what goes on in the classroom, the educational system, and the society as a whole – the so-called 'washback effect'."*
Biggs (1994:12)	*"influence of testing on teaching and learning."*
Cohen (1994:41)	*"a part of the impact a test may have on learners and teachers, on educational systems in general, and on society at large."*
Bailey (1996:259)	*"It is common to claim the existence of washback (the impact of a test on teaching) and to declare that tests can be powerful determiners ... of what happens in classrooms."*
Hugh (2003 : 53)	*" an intended or unintended (accidental) direction and function of curriculum change on aspects of teaching and learning by means of a change of public examinations'*
Cheng (2005:56)	*The influence of the test on the classroom ... this washback effect can be either beneficial or harmful."*

Table1. Selected Definitions of Washback

As mentioned above, conceptions of the washback phenomenon are numerous, these definitions range from simple and straight forward to very complex. Some view washback in terms of teachers and learners in classroom settings, while others insert inferences on educational reforms and even society in general.

In a clear definition about testing in an educational context, Buck(1988) describes the phenomenon as being a natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their classroom activities to the requirements of a test; especially high stakes exams which have a strong influence on the testers future lives and prospective careers. The focus here is on language learners as test-takers through "*the utilization of external language tests to affect and drive foreign language learning in the school context*"Buck (1988. 513). In the same line of thought, Shohamy (1993:4) summarizes some key definitions underlining the ambiguity of the washback concept:

- Washback effect refers to the impact that tests have on teaching and learning.
- Measurement driven instruction refers to the notion that tests should drive learning.
- Curriculum alignment focuses on the connection between testing and the teaching syllabus. Shohamy(1993)

1.1. Types of Washback

The impact of wash-back effect of high-stakes tests on teachers' performances is varied and diverse. According to the New York State Education Department (2004), there exist both positive and negative sides. On the positive side of the ledger, exams force lecturers to inculcate the curriculum with *standards-related content*, thereby creating a hierarchy of educational priorities (2004:67). Moreover, some claim that the wash-back effects force teachers to follow and draw an emphasis on "*drill and kill*" pedagogical techniques , teachers relate that more labs, discussion and critical thinking are occurring in classrooms (Clarke et al., 2002).

On the other *negative* side of the ledger, teachers confess of losing autonomy when focusing on exam-related-content test preparation. In view of this, Bailey (1996:269) states that " *... can be positive or negative, to the extent that it either promotes or impedes*

the accomplishment of educational goals held by learners". Herein, if a test has positive wash-back, '*there is no difference between teaching the curriculum and teaching to the test'.* Weigle & Jensen (1997: 205). However, if it has a negative wash-back, it may lead to the abandonment of instructional goals in favor of test preparation, what is generally known as the 'Teach-to-the-Test' Approach.

2. Methodology

The present research aims to investigate the impact of washback on learners' performance. It seeks to identify whether it has a positive or a negative impact on learners' outcomes, and the ways in which washback is perceived by teachers and learners. A case study on second year EFL learners was conducted to tackle such issue. The following research questions were invested:

1. What factors may influence teachers' classroom assessment?
2. How may teachers deal with high stakes testing?
3. How do learners perceive language testing?

2.1. Participants

The study was concerned with a group of second-year LMD students from Tlemcen University. Students of this group, males and females, were in the age group of 18 to 22 years old. They were all subject to a high-stakes examination. The sample was chosen randomly. On the other side, twelve teachers holding doctorate degree accepted to fill in the administered questionnaires.

2.2. Data Collection

The primary focus of this study is to investigate the effect of washback on learners' performance. Therefore, through the use of a case study, the researcher opts for a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data collection procedure. Herein, choosing a suitable instrument is extremely important. A questionnaire was administered to teachers. They were asked about their attitudes and perceptions about language learning and testing.

To investigate the effect of the teaching method on learning, a test was administered to learners to see the impact of washback on their outcomes, (test scores).

2.3. Teachers' questionnaire

The purpose of the teachers' questionnaire is to explore the impact of the washback effect on teachers' attitudes towards language testing in general, and their classroom practice in particular. In this questionnaire, questions varied between open ended, close and mixed questions. Here, Teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire containing three rubrics. Rubric one seeking to know general information about teachers profiles, teaching experience nodules in charge of, their post graduate degree and option. Rubric two three and four consist of eleven questions varied from open ended, close and mixed questions.

2.4. Students Questionnaire:

The questionnaire aims to seek learners' perceptions and attitudes towards tests and their impact on learners' outcomes. It contains two rubrics, the first rubric deals with general background information about learners; the second rubric consists of questions about learners' beliefs about tests and how these tests influence their test preparation.

3. Data Coding and Analysis

This part deals with data coding and processing. The objective of this part is to determine if there is any significant relationship between students' anxiety level and their performance. Thus, each research instrument will be analyzed separately in the coming section.

3.1. Teachers' Questionnaire Analysis

A structured questionnaire was administered to seven teachers in order to extort the required data in this study. It was composed of three rubrics: The first rubric was about learners' psychology which revealed a number of factors that may influence learners' psychology while being tested. Herein, teachers believe that the majority of learners witness a cognitive fatigue or cognitive load before the test is administered, fear, anxiety and

demotivation. When asked about the reasons behind such psychological state results show that it mainly due to the lack of preparation, stressful classroom environment and sometimes due to teachers' anxiety providing behaviors.

The second question revealed that all learners are anxious and frightened when the test sheets are distributed, only few learners feel reluctant and just a minority feel highly confident. The following bar-graph represents the findings:
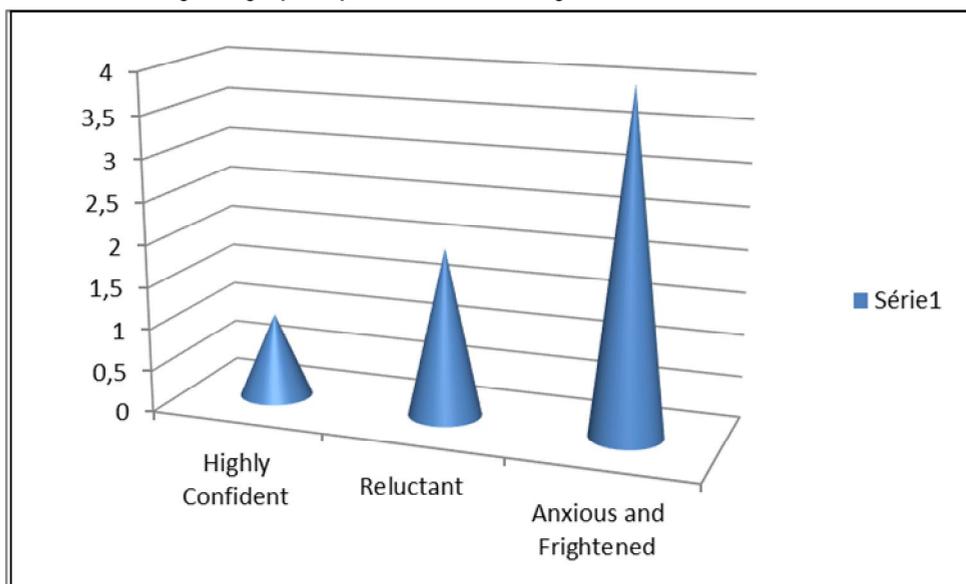
Bar-Graph 1. Learners' Psychological State When Being Tested

Moving to the following question which was about teachers behaviors' with highly anxious learners, teachers assume that the good preparation for the test will help learners build up a sound self-confidence level, some try to calm them down before the test would be administered through various techniques. They suggested that they can lower the anxiety level by telling them that the exam is about what has been previously done in the classroom.

The following question demonstrates that all teachers focus more on the appropriate teaching methodology to be adopted in their classroom to insure a good learning environment; four of them focus on the test objectives when delivering the lectures. Accordingly, only three of them do care about learners' psychology and their linguistic competence. The result is clearly demonstrated in the following bar-graph:
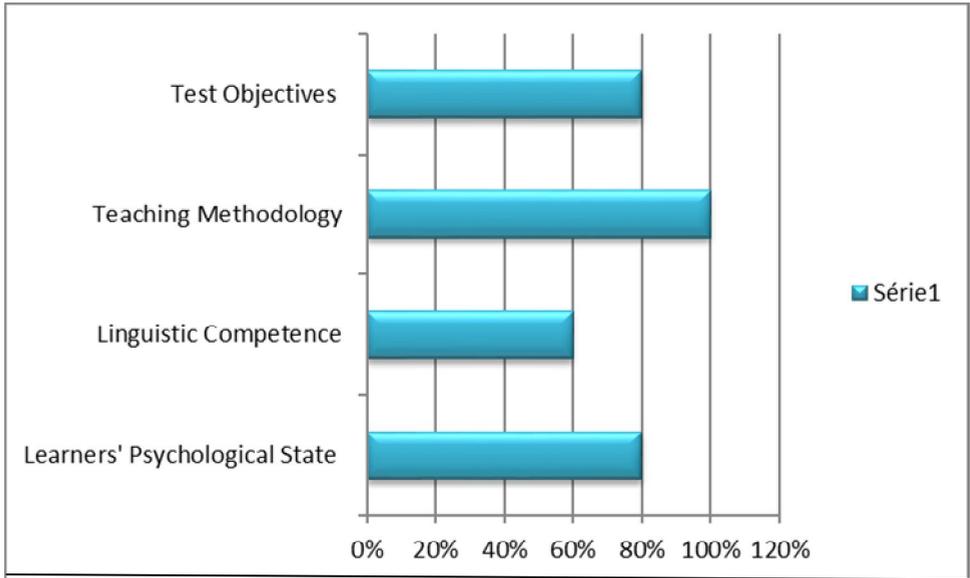
Bar-Graph 2. Teachers' Focus

The subsequent question was about whether teachers have ever experienced a situation where a student fainted because of the fear from the test, only one teacher has experience this situation, this was due to the test anxiety the participant has experienced.

The first question from rubric three was set to find out what criteria do teachers follow in the phase test design. Results reveal that one teacher did not answer the question stating that he had no previous knowledge about testing research. Other answers varied from one teacher to another as put below:

❖ Learners' levels and the content of the syllabus,
❖ The objectives of the lecture and the task familiarity
❖ Reliability validity and practicality

The second question revolves around whether teachers test things they have taught in the classroom or they prefer to ask challenging questions. The first teacher claimed that he tests aspects he taught in the classroom in a challenging way; while only one teacher tests no more than what has been done formally in the lectures; the remaining teachers claimed to

include both things that were taught in the classroom and taking into account challenging questions.

Coming to the third question, teachers were asked about the most challenging between the test design and the scoring phase answers are put as follows:
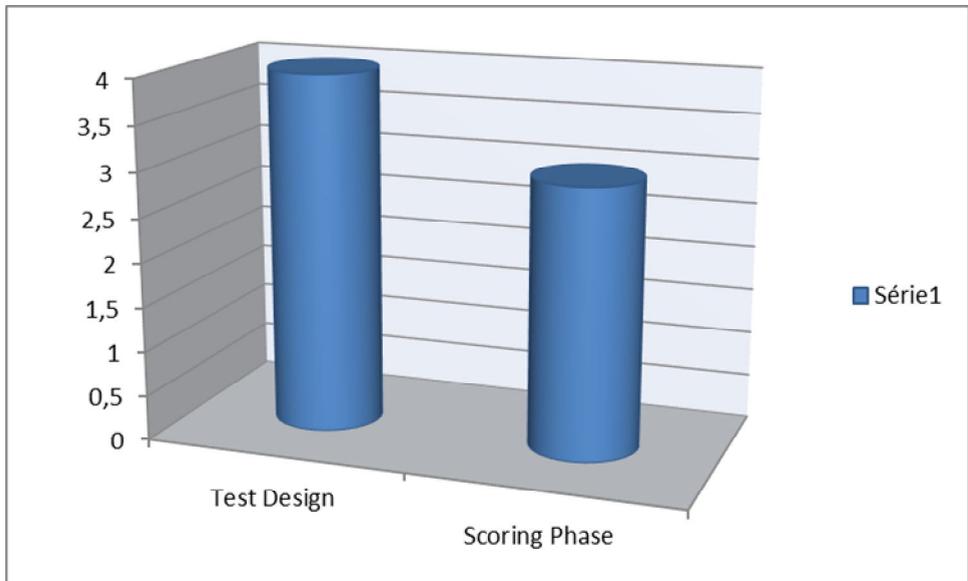
**Bar-Graph 3. Teachers' Perceptions**

Thus, when asked about the reasons behind their choice their answers varied as follows:

- ✓ *I find the test design more challenging because I must design a comprehensive test that meets students' needs and expectations*
- ✓ *I personally find the scoring phase challenging because I have to be fair and to read between the lines,*
- ✓ *I find the scoring phase effort demanding since we are working with overcrowded classrooms with too many students,*
- ✓ *I find them both difficult because we are never sure,*
- ✓ *Test design is the most difficult task because I have to implement the criteria for the preparation of a good test according to what you have taught.*

3.2. Tests Scores Analysis

The test took place among second-year students at Tlemcen University; it lasted one hour and a half to complete the questions. The nature of the questions asked varied between concept definition and essay writing. It is to be mentioned at this level that the majority of students have completed all the time allotted.

After being corrected by their teacher, students' scores varied from 02.5/20 to 16/20. The mean (the measure of central tendency) and the standard deviation (the measure of the dispersive tendency) were calculated and the following table demonstrates the students' scores:
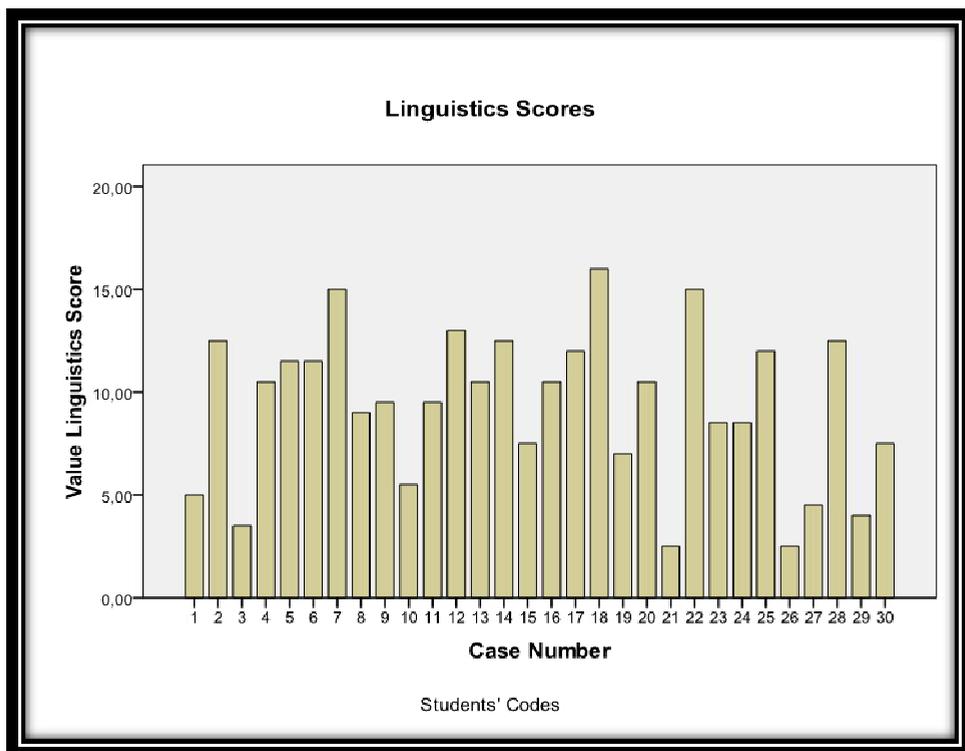
Bar-Graph 2. Learners' Scores

The mean of the total students' scores was 9,33 and the standard deviation, was 3,74.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Linguistics Score	30	2,50	16,00	9,3333	3,74933

Table.1. Learners' Scores Mean & Standard Deviation

This shows that learners' general performance was average.

4. Results and discussion

Regarding the first hypothesis, which revolved around teachers' attitudes and their classroom behavior, results reveal a number of factors that may influence learners' psychology while being tested. Herein, teachers believe that the majority of learners witness a cognitive fatigue or cognitive load before the test is administered, fear, anxiety and demotivation. When asked about the reasons behind such psychological state results show that it is mainly due to the lack of preparation, stressful classroom environment and sometimes due to teachers' anxiety providing behaviors.

Regarding the second hypothesis, results demonstrate that some teachers assume that the good preparation for the high stakes test will help learners build up a sound self-confidence level, some try to calm them down before the test would be administered through various techniques, for instance, by telling them that the exam is about what has been previously done in the classroom.

The following hypothesis demonstrates that learners feel comfortable with language tests because they assume that all teachers focus on the appropriate teaching methodology to be adopted in their classroom to insure a good learning environment; they also focus on the test objectives when delivering the lectures. Accordingly, this ensures good learning environment and help learners feel at ease preparing for the high stakes test.

5. Recommendations for learners and teachers

5.1. Overcoming Negative Washback

The feeling of fear and instability that learners generally sense, or what is called test anxiety, whenever the word test or exam comes into their minds is the result of negative washback. Test anxiety can create an obstacle interfering with students storing memory mental processes and their learning process in general. The pressure to perform well in the test make students experience a psychological instability and a loss of concentration all these factors and others are clear indicators of low score achievements.

➢ *Before the test*
  - ✓ Building a high self confidence
  - ✓ Time management through using checklists
  - ✓ Organizing what should be studied through scaffolding
  - ✓ Develop revision techniques
  - ✓ Approach the test with a high self esteem
  - ✓ Remain in a calm state of concentration
  - ✓ Get a good night sleep and maintain a healthy diet and exercise regularly.
  - ✓ Take some nourishments and surgeries before the test

➢ *During the test*
  - ✓ Read Quran verses to relax
  - ✓ Take deep breaths
  - ✓ Read instructions carefully
  - ✓ Do not panic
  - ✓ Divide test taking time

➢ *After the test*
  - ✓ use positive reinforcements
  - ✓ think positively and work for improvements
  - ✓ Do not compare yourself to others

5.2. Recommendations for Teachers and for learners

A number of researchers (Carter et al., 2005; Shmidit, 2004) proposed a set of strategies for teachers to help their students build a self confidence and overcome test anxiety; one way of doing so may be as follows

Test Taking Skills these skills are a set of strategies that help learners stay focused and relaxed having high expectations and motivation to do well on the tests. Teachers may also help students some tips on how to answer tests for instance multiple-choice items, true or false questions, open questions (Carter:2005)

➢ *Prompt the use of anxiety reduction strategies* it is recommended for teachers to prepare teachers prior the test both educationally and psychologically. One way of doing so is ensuring them that the test will be about items that were previously done in the classroom

➢ *Encourage students to have positive self esteem* and positive self talk and their confidence about their abilities before taking the test, replacing thoughts like am not good enough by I studies hard I can do it

➢ *Teach students relaxation techniques so* as to lower their heartbeats, teachers may do so by telling students to read some verses from Quran and try to stay calm and focused

➢ *Teach students how to tolerate anxiety* and invest this feeling to perform well because moderate test anxiety rates are helpful and may push learners perform better

➢ *Breathing tips are very helpful in minimizing heartbeats rates* bringing more oxygen to their bodies may help them relax and release the physical stress

➢ *Design stress-free tests* Rather than making sudden test preparing them psychologically would help them enjoy the period of tests and get rid of anxiety

➢ *Provide students with appropriate testing accommodations* thus providing students with appropriate seating room temperature delimiting lightning destructions.

➢ *Integrate technology based testing* this will ultimately help learners overcome anxiety especially with digital learners.

6. **Conclusion**

It is a truth generally acknowledged that the results of some standardized tests seem to be so important for students and for educational programs as well. There are clear indicators that the student is having some psychological state mainly test anxiety if he/she fails to recall knowledge that was previously done in the classroom, encounters problems while being tested, and eventually fails with low scores on tests. This appears to be preventing him from being an active performer, ready to overcome anything that gets into their way towards success.

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