

LANGUAGE ANXIETY AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF IELTS CANDIDATES IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *This study aims to better understand language anxiety among international students. Its goal is to convey the stress that international students experience when learning English, especially in preparation for the IELTS exam. Additionally, it is to observe how students handle and overcome strain and worry when getting ready for the IELTS exam. International students' actual experiences at Albukhary International University served as the basis for this study. Eight students from different countries were interviewed to understand in-depth their experiences in studying for IELTS. The respondents were questioned about how they prepared for the IELTS exam, the difficulties they encountered, how they dealt with their language anxieties, and their experiences while getting ready for the test.*

Keywords: *language anxiety, lack of experience, IELTS exam, international students.*

Introduction

English is a crucial language to learn since it makes it simple for us to communicate with people from different countries. It requires a great deal of energy, time, perseverance, and enthusiasm to become fluent in a language that is not our native tongue. Since anxiety is a major barrier to learning a foreign language, it has garnered a lot of interest from educators in the field of language education. Students must overcome (Wu, 2010; Zheng, 2008). For students learning English as a second language in particular, language anxiety is a key problem in foreign and second language studies. The background of this study is to grasp the experiences of international students or students who are not coming from an English-speaking country studying English, especially IELTS. The goal of this study is to determine

whether learning a new language poses a significant barrier for all students or if it merely involves feeling scared, insecure, and lacking faith in oneself. The aim is to investigate how students overcame difficulties and concerns when learning a foreign language. Student and teacher will converse in English, fluency in the language is essential in an international school or institution. International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a test of English proficiency used by college or universities to gauge a student's level of English competence.

Additionally, the IELTS exam is not straightforward, particularly for students who are not native English speakers. Due to the fact that majority of Albukhary University (AIU) students do not originate from nations where English is the primary language of communication and because they struggle with reading, writing, and speaking, international students at AIU experience a great deal of anxiety. English is a global language and it is much more crucial in communication. This is frequently utilized in business, education, travel, and meeting new people all across the world. However, some students may be concerned about learning a second language, which may stop them from reaching their goals. Nervousness, worry, and apprehension are common feelings for L2 learners. Anxiety has been the focus of research for several decades. It has been seen as a significant impediment to language learning and production. As a result, it is critical to consider what may be done inside the classroom to reduce anxiety and avoid its detrimental impact on students (Ilustre, 2021).

This study aims to explore the challenges and obstacles that students face when taking the (IELTS), examine students' struggles or with English skills and to investigate English language learners' anxiety.

Literature Review

An important problem and ongoing worry for learners is language anxiety. Many different terms are used to describe language anxiety, according to Lynn Chan in 2019, fear and anxiety is a typical emotion experienced when coping with the demands and problems of daily living. When these emotions are unmanageable, excessive, and illogical and interfere with a person's ability to function anxiety, however, becomes a problem. Some examples of the numerous anxiety disorders include phobias, panic and stress disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Anxiety is described as vague feelings of worry, nervousness, discomfort, and uncertainty that are not related to a particular situation.

Furthermore, MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) described "foreign language anxiety" as the anxiety and arousal of negative emotions that take place when learning or using a second or foreign language, or the sensation of tension and apprehension that is particularly connected to second- or foreign language-contexts, such as speaking, listening, and learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) asserted that Foreign Language Anxiety is "a phenomenon linked to but separate from other specific fears," which forms the basis of these definitions of FLA (p. 129).

IELTS Anxiety Among Candidates

In fact, worry for second language learners might be seen as a possible sign of success or failure (MacIntyre 2017). Investigating how language anxiety affects IELTS scores among students getting ready for the test is merely a small portion of a larger issue, namely language proficiency and language anxiety. Leaving aside the current proficiency levels of IELTS preparation, which involves both language learning and language testing, which causes both language anxiety and exam anxiety, English language universities or colleges may place more emphasis on the length of courses and exams (Memon, 2005).

Anxiety and fear are thought to be extremely harmful to the learning process. Their IELTS scores and performance suffered as a result of their anxiety. Additionally, students with lower incomes experienced greater language worry, but those who had previously taken the IELTS exam experienced less language anxiety than those who had not. (Nadia, 2020). Dobson in 2012 suggests that some academic work may cause anxiety and that teachers should be alert to learners' anxiety symptoms to support them in coping with their unpleasant emotions. As

a result, students with high levels of anxiety are more likely to have low self-efficacy or academic achievement. Several studies examine how linguistic anxiety affects learning. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) stated that anxiety may "interfere with acquisition, retention, and production of the new language," which could cause several issues for learners. As a result, numerous studies have investigated how foreign language anxiety may affect particular language abilities (such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing), and they have discovered a negative correlation between them.

Studies in the past have been done to investigate the various aspects that could cause emotions of anxiety when learning a foreign language. These elements are frequently categorized into two main groups: learner variables and situational factors. The attitudes, degrees of self-confidence, ages, races, personalities, genders, and levels of motivation of learners are only a few of the variables that affect them. On the other hand, environmental circumstances put "social interactions, course activities, course materials, education providers' conduct, and course level" in danger (Ismael, 2023).

Anxiety in Academic Writing

Academic writing is a difficult endeavor that necessitates "the development of a design idea, the capture of mental representations of knowledge, and experience with subjects" (Osef, 2001, p. 16). Anxiety and performance are intertwined in this process. Since they performed considerably better on grammar, mechanics, and bigger issues in writing abilities, Daly (1978) found that people with low levels of writing apprehension outperformed people with high levels of writing apprehension. On the other hand, students who were extremely anxious produced lower-quality work and failed to exhibit a solid command of writing techniques. By the same token, Hanna (2010) showed that students with higher levels of writing anxiety generated papers of worse quality than their less anxious peers. Saedpanah and Mahmoodi (2020) investigated the connections between L2 writing performance, L2 writing anxiety, and the employment of writing strategies in Iran. Their findings suggested that L2 writing anxiety was a more potent predictor of L2 writing performance and that there was a substantial negative association between L2 writing performance and L2 writing anxiety. When Rabadi and Rabadi (2020) investigated the severity, forms, and causes of writing anxiety in a foreign language, they found that medical students had particularly high levels of writing anxiety, particularly cognitive writing anxiety. They ascribed this to issues with language, a lack of writing practice, a lack of writing confidence, and a fear of writing tests (Khosravi, 2023).

According to Kurniasih (2017), anxiety is a problem that might hinder a writer's productivity. It significantly affects the writing abilities of EFL pupils. According to Rudiyanto (2017), anxiety makes learning a foreign language more challenging for many language learners. A little anxiety is occasionally required for learners' focus and accuracy throughout the writing process, even if the majority of it is believed to be one of the major obstacles in the language process. English writing is a crucial language skill to acquire if you want to communicate effectively in the age of globalization. as cited by (Mirza, 2023). Students had difficulty preparing writing projects, paraphrasing, composing abstracts, and synthesizing data or ideas (Shingh, 2015). As a result, pupils' writing abilities and academic performance suffered (Gibriel, 2019; Soleimani et al., 2020). Numerous researchers concurred that the phenomenon of writing anxiety may contribute to students' writing performance.

Methodology

Research Design

This research focuses on the IELTS exams recently completed by international students who have experienced language anxiety during the period of the exam. Eight international students from a private university in Malaysia were chosen for this study and took part in the interview session. They recently completed their IELTS exam, which served them well in addressing the research's issues and aims.

Sample of the Study

The Albukhary International University (AIU), which is situated in Alor Setar, Kedah, is the site of this study. The Eight students who took part in the interview came from different majors of study and various nations, which are Congo, Indonesia, Sudan, Bosnia, Eritrea, Somalia, Senegal, and Bangladesh. Eight international students were chosen for this study, and the researcher spoke with them about their stressful experiences, struggles, and anxiety with the IELTS exam. The table below lists the participants' backgrounds.

Respondents' Background

Respondent's	Nationality	First language	Age	Gender
A	Congo	French	23	Male
B	Indonesia	Indonesia Language	21	Female
C	Sudan	Arabic	22	Female
D	Bosnia	Bosnian, Croatian, & Serbian	22	Female
E	Eritrea	Tigrinya	23	Female
F	Somalia	Somali	24	Male
G	Senegal	French	23	Male
H	Bangladesh	Bangla	23	Female

In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed as the study's instruments by the researcher, who applied a qualitative technique. The respondents are free to share their ideas and perspectives about language anxiety, in particular as it relates to the IELTS and their personal experiences. Respondents are free to share their opinions and viewpoints in light of their own unique experiences.

As a result, the interview questions are separated into three sections: 1, 2, 3 and 4. Sections for the interview questions:

Section 1 is on the personal background of the respondent.

- Section 2 on the difficulties students encounter when learning English, particularly for the IELTS exam
- Section 3 is on the difficulties and struggles students have while studying for the IELTS, which might cause anxiety.

Section 4 is on the suitable way to overcome the challenges faced.

To find more accurate and thorough information, the respondents' voices were captured and converted into written words or scripts.

Findings

This chapter explores the interview's subject as well as the interviewees' inquiries and answers. Examining their experiences, educational methods, and viewpoints on the IELTS exams is crucial in order to understand the language anxiety of AIU IELTS students. It is also to investigate the cause of students' IELTS anxiousness and how some of them overcome it. Therefore, the interview was conducted, and the common themes were then identified and categorized using thematic analysis.

- Theme 1: Lack of interest in studying English because of anxiety.
- Theme 2: The challenges of practicing English skills, particularly IELTS skills.
- Theme 3: Most of the respondents go through stress, anxiety, and depression when preparing for the IELTS exam.
- Theme 4: the suitable way to overcome the challenges faced.

Lack of interest in studying English because of the anxiety

Respondent A: *"Yes I did face the challenges of losing interest in studying English, why just because English was very difficult for me and it was so far, so until now I think English is a bit difficult to learn because my country speaks French more than English. But thank god I managed to pass the IELTS"*.

Respondent B: *"Ooh my goodness, the more I think about this exam, the more I think it is true, because when you are studying IELTS, you must feel uncomfortable because it is all about theory, but it will have an impact once you understand about it and once you succeed for it, because if you are a beginner for IELTS and you know a little bit of English but still feel frustrated, this makes me lose interest in learning."*

Respondents C & D: *were indifferent to the question of Lack of interest in studying English because of anxiety and did not provide any answer to that.*

Respondent E: *"Yes, I did face challenges, and at times I even lost interest in studying English This is because, in my country, the people I am surrounded by all speak my country's language, which is Tigrinya, so I usually don't speak English at all, so preparing for IELTS was very difficult for me, which made me lose interest in learning English."*

Respondents F: *"Yes, I did lose interest in studying English. This is because the school I attended used to just teach us grammar, especially the tense, and I used to be confused and hate English at that time. So when I started studying for my IELTS exam, I found it because, to*

understand, this was because of the mindset I had earlier in my primary school, but thank God I managed to pass the IELTS."

Three out of eight respondents said that while preparing for the IELTS, they had lost interest in learning English. This is because they did not have any motivation to continue learning, and the fact that they didn't come from an English-speaking country so they thought they would never have the patience to learn and pass the exam. One of the most crucial factors in successfully learning a foreign or second language has been demonstrated to be motivation. Motivation and spent a decade trying to understand how much drive affects learning a new language (Gardner, 2006).

Challenges of Practicing English skills particularly IELTS skills.

Respondent A: "The most challenging skills for me was listening and speaking, why listening? Because it is really difficult to understand what you are trying to do or to say to you is really difficult because of accents, when they play the listening test for you to do is very difficult because of the accent the audio has and besides that you don't really understand English very well. You can overcome this, if only you practice and practice and practice, in that case you will be able to answer something during the exam".

Respondent B: "For me, the challenging skill I faced was reading. Sometimes we feel confident when we have the skills or the patience that we have after we do some practice with our teachers, and when we get the result, I am like, "Oh my goodness, how come?" because I feel like I have already studied hard for this, but look at this. From there, most of my friends feel that reading is the skill that challenged us."

Respondent C: "*The most difficult skill for me was listening; listening was extremely difficult for me because, due to my accent, I couldn't hear all of the lectures and audio we used for practice well*".

Respondent D: "*The most challenging skill for me was writing: in terms of the rules there are to follow and needing to be especially careful while writing.*"

Respondent E: "*To me, the most challenging skill was writing; in terms of you have to elaborate more, and spelling mistakes are crucial, so it was very difficult for me to elaborate in writing because I don't know English that much.*"

Respondent F: "*For me, it was reading and writing skills that I had challenges with; for writing, I had a big problem with my grammar and comprehension, so this made it challenging for me, and for reading, I had the problem of understanding some vocabulary in the passages, so this made it difficult for me to understand.*"

According to the interview, each respondent has the specific skill that is hard for them, it can be writing, reading, writing and listening. For the four English skills to be acquired, mainly for the IELTS, students need to work on their grammar, accent, and terminology. (Geta and Olango, 2016) noted that English majors and non-majors alike struggle with their bad writing in English, which may have an impact on how they learn, practice, and perform on the IELTS. (Muhammad, Almas & Muhammad, 2016) discussed the reasons why students who are learning English as a second language struggle with writing in general due to a variety of issues and the failures of the teacher to effectively instruct the students. In general, they recommended a few

remedies to address students' weaknesses, including: structuring thoughts, enhancing style, developing content, preparing for teaching and learning in the IELTS, and instructor accountability. Cited by (Le, 2021).

Most Of The Respondent Is Went Through Stress, Anxiety And Depression When Preparing For IELTS Exam.

Respondent A: “ yes I did suffer from stress and depression while preparing for my IELTS, it was like mmmmh stress of failure or fears of failure, it was something very frustrating, I didn't have any progress while I was studying, my English proficiency was so, so low and I didn't really get any improvement, my fears were only related to a fear of failure and the depression was related to the lack of progress in my English, even though I was trying my best to overcome this issue and this stress really affected my ability to find the solution in learning and preparing for the exam”.

Respondent B: “ *For me studying IELTS is sometimes a problem, actually I got this information and also the experiences from my friends, they also feel the anxiety and depression because of studying IELTS, because we do know that IELTS is very important for us, specially to peruse higher education, which means it is very crucial for international students, so we have to struggle and encourage ourselves to learn and to memorized the vocabulary and also the formula, be more fluent and think smart to solve and to answer the questions that our teachers give to us, so that is why sometimes we feel depression and anxiety”.*

Respondent C: “*Yes, IELTS is stressful and causes anxiety during the exam, and it is also very heavy because there is writing, reading, listening, and speaking, and it all comes together in a way that makes it a little difficult”.*

Respondent D:” *Yes I face a little bit of anxiety and also stress out regarding the writing because there are many rules we need to follow and it started appearing two weeks or one week before the IELTS exam.”*

Respondent E: “*Yes, I did face anxiety and stress as well because my English was very bad, and in writing, we needed to have a very good essay before you could get a good mark in writing.*

Because of this, I get stressed out and anxious as well. Mmmmmmmh, it was not easy at all.”

Since IELTS is not an easy task, most students might go through anxiety or depression because it is their first time and besides that it is their second language or some at all not even speak English in their respective country, so therefore there will be a probability that some student may get depressed or anxious during the IELTS exam. When students' writing is accompanied by the possibility that it will be evaluated, anxiety levels may rise since completing a well-structured written task demands cognitive methods and a suitable level of ability (Hassan, 2001; Ravali, 2020). Daly (1978) discovered that pupils with high levels of anxiety tended to generate texts that were of lesser quality and had shorter, simpler structures. According to Cheng (2002), nervous students avoided writing classes and opted for degrees that had less of a writing focus as cited (Hassan Soodmand Afshar, 2022).

The Suitable Way to Overcome the Challenges Faced

Respondent B: *“To me, the suitable way I used to overcome the challenges I faced was to practice, practice, practice, and practice. Since I had a challenge in reading, I designed my own timetable and made reading appear many times in my timetable. This is because I needed more time to practice it because it was the skills, I had difficulties with and the rest I was so good at, so that is why I spend more time practicing reading, and I also don't forget to pray as well.”*

Respondent C: *“To me, the suitable way I used to overcome the challenges I faced was by practicing every single day and free time. Since listening was the most challenging skill, I practiced and practiced and passed listening questions, so this made me get used to the ascent and I was able to pass my exam.”*

Respondent D: *“For me, the suitable way I came up with to help me overcome the challenges I faced was practicing and asking my lecturers for assistance whenever I didn't understand anything. Since writing was the skill I faced a lot of challenges on, I read many examples of writing in the past questions and I also used articles that can help me write good essays.”*

Respondent E: *“To me, the suitable way I used to overcome the challenges I faced was to practice and practice my vocabulary and elaboration every single day. since writing was the most skill I had a challenge in. I also go to my lectures for some help whenever I practice the past questions and I don't understand anything.”*

Respondent F: *“For me, the suitable way I used to overcome the challenge I faced was to practice, practice, and practice, and sometimes I ask my lecturers for help and my friends and seniors who did IELTS before me for help. This was what helped me pass writing and reading.”*

According to the interview, each respondent has a specific suitable way they used to overcome the challenge. These techniques are based on individual opinions and experiences, but they also follow the standard guidance for preparing for the IELTS. The keys to success include regular practice, asking for help from friends or lecturers, and comprehending the criteria of the exam. Language learning strategies (LLS) are divided into two primary categories by Oxford (1990): direct and indirect techniques. Indirect strategies are employed to facilitate and regulate language acquisition in tasks, whereas direct strategies entail the mental processing of language information. All learning tasks can be aided by these techniques:

Memory, cognitive, and compensatory techniques are examples of direct strategies. Memory techniques aid language learners in remembering new vocabulary, which is crucial for tasks like IELTS preparation. Cognitive techniques make it easier to comprehend and speak the language more effectively. Compensatory techniques assist language learners in getting past their language barriers and successfully using the language.

Metacognitive, affective, and social strategies make indirect strategies. Through planning, monitoring, assessing, and adapting their tactics, metacognitive strategies assist learners in managing their learning process. During the learning process, effective methods assist in controlling learners' attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and motivation. Social techniques encourage language use and comprehension while facilitating learning through interpersonal interactions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, IELTS test-takers from AIU experienced a substantial amount of language anxiety. Both learning a new language and picking up new information about the IELTS exam overwhelmed them. Despite having studied English in primary schools for a considerable amount of time, they had to start from scratch when they came here to study for the IELTS. This study showed that a variety of factors, including challenges with language acquisition, a lack of confidence contributed to language anxiety. In the process of conducting this research, the number of respondents were only three which may be too small. Therefore, it is recommended for future research to replicate it to a larger number. This research was also only conducted at private universities. Considering this condition, the future research direction suggests exploring and comparing the results between private and public institutions. And to obtain broader results, future research directions are also highly recommended to compare between locals and international students.

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