

THE WASHBACK EFFECT OF TESTING ON STUDENTS' LEARNING IN EFL WRITING CLASSES

Esma Şenel - Birsen Tütüniş

Abstract

This study displays the literature review that investigates what the drawbacks of exams are on learning in general, then gives a brief account of a small scale research conducted in two EFL writing classes. There has been extensive research in related literature on the impact of testing on students learning a foreign language. In practice most of the teachers assess their students with scheduled exams which they conduct in accordance with the syllabuses prepared at the beginning of the semester. The level and form of the negative effects change according to some factors such as gender, age, the aim and level of learning. This study investigated the negative effects of testing and their reasons on elementary level EFL students' writing. The results indicate that learners' anxiety level increase and their performance decrease when they know that it is an assessment.

Key words: *English as a Foreign Language, Testing, Washback, Anxiety.*

İNGİLİZCEYİ YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRENEN ÖĞRENCİLERİN YAZILI ANLATIM DERSLERİNDEKİ SINAVLARIN ÖĞRENME BAŞARISI ÜZERİNDE OLUMSUZ ETKİLERİ

Özet

Bu çalışma öncelikle sınavların genel olarak öğrenme üzerindeki olumsuz etkilerinin neler olduğunu inceleyen literatür taramasını göstermekte, sonrasında ise İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak gören 2 yazma becerileri sınıfında uygulanan küçük çaplı bir araştırma hakkında bilgi vermektedir. Sınavların yabancı dil öğrenen öğrenciler üzerindeki etkileri konusunda ilgili literatüre çok kapsamlı bir araştırma olmuştur. Uygulamada, öğretmenlerin çoğu dönem başlarında hazırlanan müfredatla uyumlu olarak hazırladıkları, zamanı belirlenmiş sınavlarla öğrencilerini değerlendirirler. Negatif etkilerin düzeyi ve yapısı cinsiyet, yaş, öğrenmenin amacı ve düzeyi gibi faktörlere bağlı olarak değişir. Bu çalışma İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak gören başlangıç düzeyindeki öğrencilerinin yazma becerileri üzerinde sınavların olumsuz etkilerini ve nedenlerini araştırmaktadır. Araştırmanın sonuçları, öğrencilerin sınav olduklarını bildikleri zaman kaygı düzeyinin arttığını ve performanslarının düştüğünü göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, sınav, olumsuz transfer, kaygı*

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language testing is an evaluation of measuring an individual's performance in that language. In many language classes, attitudes towards testing are highly negative. Recent studies (Jones et al., 1999; Smith, 1991) reveals the fact that tests have negative effects on learners and their learning. As an example, Yıldırım (2010) carried out a study to investigate whether 'The Foreign Language Examination' in Turkey exerts a positive or negative impact on test-takers and found that the exam had certain negative effects on students' foreign language competences. Teachers noted several negative effects of testing such as; narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, lowering teacher morale, increasing student and teacher stress etc.. The anticipation of a test is almost accompanied by feelings of anxiety and self-doubt along with a fervent hope that you will come out of it alive (Brown, 2004). Test anxiety, an apprehension towards academic evaluation, is a fear of failing in tests and an unpleasant experience held either by consciously or unconsciously by learners in various situations (Horwitz and Young, 1991). According to Horwitz (1986), there was a significant moderate negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and the grades students expected in their first semester language class as well as their actual final grades, indicating that students with higher levels of foreign language anxiety both expected and received lower grades than their less anxious counterparts. In a greater extent, language anxiety is a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) Researchers have found that high student anxiety can have detrimental effects on student performance (Everson, Smodlaka, & Tobias, 1994). MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) also found significant negative correlations between a specific measure of language anxiety (French class anxiety) and performance on a vocabulary learning task.

Ganschow and Sparks (1991) found that less anxious language learners performed significantly better on oral and written foreign language measures as well as on the Modern Language Aptitude Test. In a study conducted by Smith and Racine (2003) indicated that oral communication, writing and reading in the target language cause foreign language anxiety. In other words, test anxiety has negative effects on oral proficiency and writing skills. It is easy to conceptualize foreign language anxiety as a result of poor language learning ability. A student does poorly in language learning and consequently feels anxious about his/her language class. Conversely, a student might do well in the class and feel very confident. The challenge is to determine the extent to which anxiety is a cause rather than a result of poor language learning.

The results of the previous studies that focus on the relationship between test anxiety and foreign / second language learning indicate that test anxiety is a significant variable that affects learning process (Aydin, S. 2009).

1.1. Assessment and Testing

Assessment is a popular and sometimes can be realized as a misunderstood term in current educational practice. You might be tempted to think of testing and assessing as synonymous terms, but they are not. Tests are prepared for administrative procedures that occur at identifiable times in curriculum when learners master all their faculties to offer peak performance, knowing that their responses are being measured and evaluated.

Assessment, on the other hand, is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain. Whenever a student responds to a question, offers a comment, or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of the student's performance. Written work-from a jotted-down phrase to a formal essay- is performance that ultimately is assessed by self, teacher, and possibly other students. A good teacher never ceases to assess students, whether those assessments are incidental or intended (Brown, 2004).

Language testing both serves and is served by research in language acquisition and language teaching. Language tests, for example, are frequently used as criterion measures of language abilities in second language acquisition research. Similarly, language tests can be valuable sources of information about the effectiveness of learning and teaching. Language teachers intentionally use tests to help diagnose student strength and weaknesses, to assess student progress, and to assist in evaluating student achievement. Language tests are also frequently used as sources of information in evaluating the effectiveness of different approaches to language teaching. As sources of feedback on learning and teaching, language tests can thus provide useful input into the process of language teaching so long as the washback effects are not forgotten.

1.2.The Washbackeffects of Testing

The term 'washback' is a common indication in language teaching and testing literature. Washback or backwash refers to effects of language testing on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993)..A number of researchers, (Corbett & Winson, 1991; Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1986; Kellaghan & Madaus, 1991) using surveys of teachers, interview studies, and extended case studies, provided evidence that tests were having adverse effects on the quality of curriculum and classroom learning .Under the pressure to help students do well on such tests, teachers and administrators tend to focus their efforts on test content, and to devote more and more time to prepare students to do well on the tests. Studies showed that testing could have both over-all and specific negative effects on students. Primary grade teachers in Smith, et al's. study felt that 'tests injure the pupils' psychological well-being and

sense of themselves as competent learners.'(1987: 217). The negative effects of testing for students can include frustration and discouragement, competitiveness, and the devaluing of grades and school assessments. Students performance on tests also can cause increased level of anxiety and stress and this affects students motivation and success.

The results of the above mentioned studies indicate that language testing has negative effect on learning, arousing language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. To find out whether tests have washbackeffects a small scale classroom research was conducted in elementary level EFL writing class at tertiary level.

2.THE CLASSROOM RESEARCH

The sample group of the study consisted of 42 students at the English Preparatory School of Istanbul Aydın University. Of all the participants, 19 were male and 23 were female students. They all studied English during their high school education. The study took place for 2 weeks. 2 classes (21 students in each class) were chosen randomly as a control and an experimental group. A questionnaire was given to both groups to see their beliefs and attitudes towards writing exams. Firstly, free writing activities were done with both groups. Then, a writing assessment was given to both groups. The experimental group did not know that it was an assessment whereas the control group did. The writing test was given at the same hour by different teachers to avoid the spread of the news of test.

3. Results

According to the data gathered from the questionnaire, twenty nine of the participants suffer from anxiety while writing . Data are categorized according to answers given to the questions in the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, the participants were asked the reason why they do not write well in exams and %80 of the participants stated that they become anxious during and after exams and they experience testing anxiety. Only %20 percent of the students whose English is good state no anxiety.

After detecting which students become anxious, the researcher concentrated on the reasons of their testing anxiety by the help of third, fourth, sixth and eleventh questions in questionnaire

(see the appendix) and did observations during and after examination. The reasons of their testing anxiety are arranged according to their frequency among thirty participants who are anxious and some reasons occur more than once (Table 1). %90 (38) of the participants have said that they do not become excited and anxious when

it is not an assessment. The sources of language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation of foreign language learners were compiled according to the answers in the questionnaire. The findings about sources and levels of anxiety are presented in Table 2. These values indicate that EFL learners suffered from language anxiety because of certain anxiety-provoking factors. First, the findings reveal that learners experienced language anxiety when they developed the fear of failure. Second, fear of performing badly with regard to classmates and fear of making mistakes were considered as factors provoking anxiety. Third, for many of the students, fear of using wrong expressions was among the factors aggravating anxiety. As the values indicate, among other factors arousing anxiety were test anxiety and negative attitudes towards English courses.

In conclusion, the results of the study indicate that foreign language learners in the study suffer from language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation; that fear of negative evaluation is a strong source of testing anxiety, and that certain subject variables had significant correlations with the levels of language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. According to the findings of this study, first and foremost, the sources of testing anxiety included lack of word knowledge, lack of grammar and syntax knowledge, fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation, anxiety, and time limit, whereas the sources of anxiety were fear of failure, fear of performing badly with regard to classmates, fear of making mistakes, fear of using wrong expressions, test anxiety and negative attitudes towards English courses. Secondly, data showed that fear of negative evaluation is the source of language anxiety in EFL learning. Finally, data analysis obtained from the study indicate that fear of performing badly with regard to classmates is a strong source intensifying test anxiety.

Table 1. Reasons of test anxiety

Lack of word knowledge	23 participants (%54)
Lack of grammar and syntax knowledge	21 participants (%50)
Fear of failure	36 participants (%86)
Fear of negative evaluation	24 participants(%57)
Anxiety	34 participants (%80)
Time limit	28 participants (%67)

Table 2. Sources and levels of anxiety

Fear of failing class	35 participants (%83)
Fear of performing badly with regard to classmates	29 participants (%69)
Fear of making mistakes	26 participants (%62)
Fear of using wrong expressions	24 participants (%57)
Test anxiety	21 participants (%50)
Negative attitudes towards English courses	articipants (%38)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The number of studies on washback effect in language testing literature has been improving rapidly due to its critical impact on learning, learners and teachers, and the complete educational system. The testing formats across countries have led the scholars to concentrate on the consequences of such tests on students and teachers (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Yıldırım, 2010). This study aimed to examine the negative effects of testing on EFL students' writing and to find the reasons of these negative effects.

The results of this study indicate that students performance on tests cause increased level of anxiety. The results of the previous studies demonstrate that language anxiety has a distinctive feature from other types of anxiety (Horwitz, 1986). To put it another way, language anxiety is a distinct complex of self perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from uniqueness of the language learning process. Horwitz (1986) also states that there was a significant moderate negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and the grades students expected. Furthermore, language anxiety stem from many sources, such as fear of failure and test anxiety. Among these sources, test anxiety is one of the most prominent one. Test anxiety is a fear of failing in tests and an unpleasant experience held either by consciously or unconsciously by learners in various situations. Studies conducted in Turkey are too limited to draw conclusions on test anxiety. The sample group of this study consisted of 42 elementary level EFL students. The instruments used to collect data consisted of a questionnaire and writing tests. The collected data were used to provide a descriptive analysis to address the research question.

Three main results obtained from this study. The first one is that EFL learners experience of testing anxiety is aroused by some main factors, such as lack of word knowledge; lack of grammar and syntax knowledge; fear of failure; fear of negative evaluation; anxiety and time limit. Secondly, the sources of language anxiety consist of fear of failing class; fear of performing badly with regard to classmates; fear of making mistakes; fear of using wrong expressions. Thirdly, language learners feel more comfortable and unstressed when teachers do not let them know that it is an assessment. In other words, EFL learners will not be anxious and excited if teachers do not let them know that it is an assessment. Denoting the negative effects of testing on learners performance and learning, future research might well investigate the relationship between testing anxiety and other variables such as learner disability, gender role, age. Studies regarding to the level and source of testing anxiety could be of utmost importance.

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Appendix:

Questionnaire

1. I can not write well in writing exams because
- I get excited
 - I become anxious
 - I find writing as a boring activity
2. I get excited very much in writing exams because
- I do not feel myself confident enough
 - I fear of making grammar mistakes
 - I hesitate to use wrong expressions
3. I often feel nervous in writing exams because
- I find my vocabulary knowledge inadequate
 - I think of being unsuccessful
 - I do not have self-confidence in generating organized ideas

4.I feel anxious in writing exams because

- a)I hesitate to make mistakes
- b)I can not express my ideas easily
- c)I do not have enough self confidence

5.I write better when it is not an exam because

- a)I am less excited
- b)I have a chance to realize my mistakes
- c)I do not have trouble with expressing myself

6.I feel anxious after writing exams because

- a)I fear of performing badly with regard to my friends
- b)I fear of getting low marks
- c)I lose my self-confidence

7.I can not express my ideas easily in writing exams because

- a)I have trouble with time limit
- b)I feel anxious of using wrong words
- c)I can not concentrate on easily

8.I am less excited when it is not writing exam because

- a)My self-confidence increases
- b)I do not feel anxious
- c)I do not fear of making mistakes

9.I make many mistakes in writing exams because

- a)I feel anxious during exam
- b)I feel myself deficient about grammar knowledge
- c)I am not sure about which grammar rule to apply

10.I can not use my vocabulary knowledge enough in writing exams because

- a)I can not generate ideas fast and easily
- b)I am not sure of using appropriate vocabulary
- c)I fear of making mistakes

11.I think of being unsuccessful after writing exams because

- a)I think that I will make many mistakes
- b)I do not think I write appropriately on given topic
- c)I do not think of generating good ideas