

Navigating Test Success: An Exploration of Effective Test-Taking Strategy Use and Coping Mechanisms for Test Anxiety of Intermediate Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract: Test-taking can be a significant source of anxiety for learners, impacting their performance and overall educational experience, and effective test-taking strategies are essential for students to enhance their performance and manage anxiety during assessments. The present study explored the use of test-taking strategies, test anxiety, and the coping mechanisms employed by intermediate Iraqi EFL learners while taking English tests. For this purpose, six intermediate Iraqi EFL learners were selected and interviewed on their use of test-taking strategies, sources of test anxiety, and coping mechanisms. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and analyzed by constant comparative method. The findings revealed that rereading parts of a passage, guessing based on background knowledge, reading the options/questions before listening, formulating ideas and thoughts in Arabic and translating them into English, and organizing thoughts and ideas before starting to talk were the most frequently employed strategies when taking an English test. Furthermore, fear of low grades, losing concentration, lack of proper time management, praying, deep breathing, speaking, and writing were the seven themes obtained from the interviews about test anxiety and its influential factors. The study underscores the need for targeted support in developing effective test-taking strategies and coping mechanisms to help intermediate Iraqi EFL learners navigate test anxiety and improve their performance. The implications and limitations of the study are discussed as well.

Keywords: Coping, EFL Learners, Test Anxiety, Test-taking Strategy Use

Introduction

The utilization of tests has emerged as a dominant mechanism for informing decisions within our competitive society, whereby individuals are appraised based on their performance on tests. Consequently, the outcomes of language tests may wield substantial influence over test-takers trajectories, determining their admission into preferred academic programs or acquiring desired employment opportunities (Al-Fraidan & Al-Khalaf, 2012). Thus, enhancing test performance has

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become a primary concern for students and educators. Tests necessitate that learners engage with directives, interpret instructions and inquiries, operate autonomously, and articulate accurate responses (Amer, 1993).

Cohen (2018) delineates two principal rationales for test-taking strategies research. Firstly, such research can ascertain how tests accurately reflect their intended constructs and provide empirical support for their validity. Secondly, it is imperative to scrutinize the language learners' proficiency levels, which adeptly crafted responses from test-takers may obfuscate. Therefore, strategies, particularly those about test-taking, have been recognized as a salient component of both assessment performance and validation.

According to Anderson (1991), the outcomes of students' tests are predominantly shaped by the strategies they employ during the evaluation process, which may elucidate the persistence of many students who fail to succeed in proficiency assessments despite repeated attempts exceeding five occasions. This claim is verified by Allan (1992) and Amer (1993), both of whom found a significant relationship between students' test performance and their competencies in test-taking strategies, with each factor influencing the other.

In general, test-taking strategies assist learners in effectively converting the knowledge acquired through educational instruction (Dodeen & Abdelmabood, 2005). Well-developed test-taking strategies or competencies positively impact test skills and scholarly performance. Empirical research suggests that students equipped with test-taking strategies (1) had a more positive view of examinations, (2) experienced diminished levels of test anxiety, and (3) attained superior academic outcomes. Furthermore, individuals with enough background knowledge might still underperform on tests due to insufficient test-taking skills or other contributory factors such as anxiety (Sweetnam, 2003).

Test anxiety is a critical variable as it significantly influences the likelihood of test success (Putwain & von der Embse, 2021). Sarason (1975) characterizes test anxiety as a phenomenon of self-preoccupation, marked by self-defeating thoughts and uncertainty regarding one's competencies. Such anxiety frequently precipitates negative cognitive evaluations, undesirable physiological responses, and a deterioration in academic performance. Consequently, there exists a negative relationship between anxiety levels and test performance. A multitude of studies reported a substantial and consequential impact of test anxiety on the academic achievement of learners.

Harris and Coy (2009) characterized test anxiety as a 'severely debilitating' condition that 'paralyzes' students' cognitive processes and obstructs their performance in tests, notwithstanding their elevated cognitive capabilities. Yousefi et al. (2010) underscored the interconnectedness of anxiety, worry, and subjective stress with memory impairments among students. Datta (2013) reported the same among students with special needs, observing that test anxiety resulted in elevated distress levels and a concomitant decline in their academic success.

The study addresses important gaps related to test-taking anxiety, coping mechanisms, and strategies among intermediate Iraqi EFL learners through its qualitative methodology, including in-depth interviews and the constant comparative method to identify recurring themes. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of individual experiences and effective test-taking strategies while highlighting unique cultural contexts of Iraq. Expected outcomes include the identification of specific strategies to manage anxiety and improve performance, insights into the sources of anxiety that can inform educator practices, and the development of coping mechanisms that enhance learners' resilience. Ultimately, the findings might inform targeted support initiatives and create a foundation for future research on test anxiety across different populations, thereby contributing significantly to educational practice and learner support.

Literature Review

Test-taking Strategy Use

The way test-takers perform on test tasks can be affected both directly and indirectly by the test-taking

strategies that they employ. Test-takers employ certain types of strategies directly when they take a test, as these strategies help students perform well in tests by using their test conditions, effort, and time effectively (Hirano, 2009). Applying test-taking strategies that are appropriate to the test task can indirectly affect other important factors, such as encouraging test-takers' positive attitudes toward tests and reducing test anxiety (Dodeen, 2015).

As cited in the literature, the employment of test-taking strategies is categorized under strategic competence, among the non-linguistic dimensions within Bachman and Palmer's (2010) framework of communicative language ability. Bachman and Palmer stated that "strategic competence is articulated as the mental capacity for implementing the components of language competence in contextualized communicative language use" (p. 106). This construct is comprised of two fundamental components: strategic knowledge and strategic processing. Whereas strategic knowledge is characterized by its relative stability and is retained in long-term memory (Phakiti, 2008), strategic processing—referring to how an individual employs a strategy to accomplish a designated task—is significantly influenced by contextual factors and mirrors the individual's immediate information processing, thereby rendering it relatively unstable. Within language testing, strategic knowledge pertains to test-takers' awareness of test-taking strategies, while strategic competence reflects their practical application of these strategies across diverse testing scenarios.

Phakiti (2006) is one of the pioneering researchers who differentiated between knowledge of test-taking strategies and their actual application. He taught EFL learners to engage with a questionnaire that required them to introspect on their strategies and the frequency of their utilization while undertaking a reading test. His findings indicated a significant correlation between the use of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies and test performance. Furthermore, he observed that high-achieving students tended to employ metacognitive strategies with greater frequency than their moderate-achieving counterparts, who, in turn, exhibited a higher frequency of metacognitive strategy use than low-achievers.

Han (2018, 2023) studied the test-taking strategy utilization among children. The study was conducted within an authentic testing environment and encompassed four distinct language skills. The confirmatory factor analyses revealed that the test-taking strategy utilization among EFL learners was composed of cognitive and metacognitive dimensions across the four skills.

Test Anxiety and Coping Mechanism

EFL learners encounter significant stress levels during language assessments, which may adversely affect the validity of these evaluations as indicators of EFL learners' linguistic competencies. Consequently, test anxiety may engender construct-irrelevant variance (Messick, 1996), as it hampers learners' capacity to exhibit the degree of language proficiency attainable in non-assessment contexts. It has been determined that learners experiencing test anxiety tend to achieve lower performance outcomes on examinations compared to their less anxious counterparts (Putwain, 2008).

Students with test anxiety are distinguished by a heightened sensitivity to potentially anxiety-inducing characteristics inherent in evaluative contexts. Consequently, when subjected to evaluative circumstances, these individuals frequently manifest anxiety-related cognitive and affective responses, including diminished self-efficacy, self-deprecating thoughts, adverse emotional states, and physiological arousal that decline performing on a test (Sarason & Sarason, 1990). Therefore, test anxiety may limit the opportunities of students who would otherwise have the ability to achieve a passing grade. Further, society suffers a loss of capable students who have the potential to contribute to the community (Zeidner, 1995).

Coping is the array of processes an individual employs in response to a performance-evaluative scenario, such as future tests (Zeidner, 1995). Taxonomies of coping differentiate among: (a) strategies focused on problems and tasks (e.g., active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, and threat control through study); (b) emotion-focused strategies (e.g., seeking emotional and instrumental support from others); and (c) avoidance strategies, which encompass the suppression of thoughts and feelings or self-distraction (Endler & Parker, 1990).

Students employ various coping strategies to mitigate examination anxiety, including modifications in daily routines like sleep patterns, soliciting social and familial support, relaxation techniques, engaging in prayer, exercising, and adjustments in dietary habits like increased consumption of energy and caffeinated beverages. Furthermore, some students have resorted to pharmacological interventions before examinations to alleviate stress and anxiety (Zheng et al., 2023). Additionally, Adelian et al. (2024) documented preparation strategies, positive cognitive reframing, and relaxation techniques as coping mechanisms Iranian EFL learners utilize.

Aydin et al. (2020) studied the causes of test anxiety among EFL learners and found that the fear of failure on examinations, parental expectations, and the lack of study skills were the major causes of test anxiety while breathing exercises, talking with friends, family members, and counselors, and listening to music helped them reduce their anxiety. Alfaini (2022) also investigated the reasons for language test anxiety among EFL vocational school students and reported worry, fear of bad grades, and forgetting as the most frequent causes of test anxiety.

Considering the above-mentioned effects of anxiety on test performance, researchers should take a closer look at this issue, especially in EFL contexts. Also, even though many researchers around the world are studying test anxiety, coping mechanisms, and beneficial test-taking strategies, the importance of this study stems from the fact that this area of research is under-investigated in Iraq, where this study takes place, and most studies conducted on test-taking strategies merely focus on the learners' perception of the strategies, not the strategies used in reality to deal with language tests. Hence, this research adds to the existing literature by addressing this gap.

Research Question One: What test-taking strategies do intermediate Iraqi EFL learners use when taking an English test?

Research Question Two: How do intermediate Iraqi EFL learners deal with test anxiety when taking English tests?

Method

Participants

The participants comprised six intermediate Iraqi female (n=4) and male (n=2) EFL learners of language schools in Baghdad, Iraq, who were selected by convenience sampling and whose ages ranged between 20 and 30 (M=24.5). Their native language was Arabic, and they had no experience studying in English-speaking countries. The OQPT was run to select intermediate EFL learners.

Instruments

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT)

OQPT was administered to select intermediate EFL learners. OQPT is a flexible measure of English language proficiency, consisting of 60 multiple-choice items on vocabulary (30 items) and grammar (30 items), and learners with scores ranging from 0 to 10 are considered beginners; the learners with scores of 11 to 17 are deemed breakthrough; learners with scores of 18 to 29 are considered elementary; Pre-intermediate students have 30 to 39 points; intermediate students have 40 to 47 points; advanced students have 48 to 54 points, and; proficient students have 55 to 60 points.

Test-Taking Strategies Interview

Five questions were designed to inquire about the participants' views of test-taking strategies they commonly adopt when taking an English test. The questions were modified and adapted from Bumbálková (2023) and included issues such as using strategies when taking English tests in general, and then four questions specifically dealt with the strategies taken to respond to the test of four English language skills tests, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing tests in English. Four experienced

EFL teachers checked the validity of the interview questions to ensure the appropriateness of the questions concerning the purpose of this study.

Test Anxiety Interview

Four questions were designed to inquire about the participants' views of test anxiety and coping strategies they commonly adopt when taking an English test. The questions were modified and adapted from Yan and Horwitz (2008) and Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) and included issues such as the factors causing anxiety when taking English tests, whether these factors affect test scores and performance, ways to reduce or deal with test anxiety and whether test anxiety is influenced by the language skill tested (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Four experienced EFL teachers again checked the validity of the interview questions to ensure the appropriateness of the questions concerning the study purpose.

Procedure

All participants in the study were assured from the outset of their confidentiality and the security of their information, ensuring that access to the data was restricted solely to the researchers and the panel reviewers. The participants' identities were anonymized by removing names, which were substituted with a combination of letters and numbers (for this investigation, the letter S denotes students, while the accompanying numbers indicate the specific learner's response among the six participants). Furthermore, a debriefing protocol was instituted to facilitate participant inquiries, guaranteeing no confidential information was revealed and no harm was incurred. Additionally, all participants retained the prerogative to withdraw from the study or to request that any data pertinent to them not be utilized.

The decision to conduct face-to-face interviews, as opposed to online or telephonic interviews, was made to ensure that the immediacy of reactions, intense emotional expressions, non-verbal cues, and facial gestures, which often convey meaning more effectively than verbal communication, were not overlooked by the researcher (Merriam, 2016). Data saturation was achieved after the interviews with six EFL learners. The interviews were conducted at their respective language institutions, ranging from 20 to 35 minutes. In terms of linguistic expression, participants were permitted to articulate their responses to interview inquiries in either Arabic or English or to employ a combination of both languages. The majority of participants predominantly utilized English when responding to the interview questions. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Upon transcription, the texts were provided to the participants to verify that the recorded data accurately reflected their thoughts, and subject matter experts also reviewed them.

The validity of the research was corroborated by three university lecturers specializing in TEFL, a process commonly referred to as peer examination or peer review which involves having colleagues or experts in the field evaluate the research process, methodologies, and interpretations, providing constructive feedback and ensuring that the analysis is thorough, unbiased, and reflective of the data. This collaborative scrutiny helps to identify potential biases and strengthens the overall integrity of the study. These scholars scrutinized the research to evaluate whether the data were employed logically and appropriately to substantiate the research findings. They further examined portions of the raw data and assessed the plausibility of the findings about the data. Another method employed was respondent validation (Merriam, 2016), which involved soliciting feedback from several participants regarding the emergent research findings to identify any biases or misunderstandings by the researchers, thereby enhancing the representation of respondents' perspectives. This process not only empowers participants by involving them in the validation of their experiences but also helps to refine the data analysis by clarifying misunderstandings and ensuring that the researchers' interpretations resonate with the participants' perspectives. Together, these processes contribute to the trustworthiness and robustness of qualitative research outputs.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis primarily focuses on the identification of themes, categories, patterns, or answers, ultimately leading to a logically defensible conclusion that aligns with the data and remains consistent with the research objectives (Fraenkel, 2005). A constant comparative method was employed to facilitate the analysis of data. This method, characterized as both comparative and inductive, was initially proposed as a strategy for the development of grounded theory and has since gained widespread application in qualitative research to generate substantive findings (Merriam, 2016). The fundamental approach of this method is encapsulated in its nomenclature: constant comparison, which entails the juxtaposition of one segment of data against another to ascertain similarities and discrepancies. Data are categorized based on a shared dimension.

The dimension is provisionally assigned a name, evolving into a category. The overarching goal is to discern patterns within the data. These patterns are systematically organized in relation to one another (Merriam, 2016). Applying the constant comparative method in data analysis typically involves three distinct coding phases: open/descriptive coding, axial/analytical coding, and selective coding (Merriam, 2016).

In the open/descriptive coding phase, researchers remain receptive to the data, identifying any meaningful segments that may be pertinent to addressing the research questions. In the subsequent axial/analytical coding phase, researchers consolidated open data that appeared to be interrelated and refined the categorical framework. In the selective coding phase, researchers designate one category as the central concept, around which the other categories derived from the axial coding phase are organized to elucidate the phenomena that have been observed.

Findings

The first research question of the present study sought to find the test-taking strategies intermediate Iraqi EFL learners perceive as the most effective. Therefore, six interviews were held with six randomly selected EFL learners, and the responses to interview questions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed by the constant comparative method. The results revealed that five themes emerged from interview analyses dealing with the test preparation and test-taking strategies intermediate Iraqi EFL learners perceive as the most effective, which are discussed in the following. Each interview question is presented along with the themes that emerged from the interviewees' responses to that question.

Do you have a strategy for working with English tests?

When the participants were asked whether they utilized strategies in dealing with English tests, they all responded in the affirmative.

Yes, time is passing. This makes me look for the answer in the fastest way possible. The options are very similar. (S1)

Yes, for example, about listening, Americans speak very fast. I can listen to some words but not the whole sentence. I do not have time to keep up with a conversation. (S5)

How did you go about answering the question in a reading test?

Regarding the strategies adopted to deal with a reading test, the respondents referred to rereading parts of a passage and guessing based on background knowledge. Regarding the first theme, i.e., rereading parts of a passage, the respondents stated that,

When I get to a point in reading, I forget the previous part, so I should read it again. (S4)

I go in circles. I go back to the part I have already read and somehow reread it. (S6)

Guessing based on background knowledge was the next theme which can be seen in the following quotations.

I will answer questions as far as I know or by guessing based on what I know rather than understanding the passage. I am not sure of the answers. (S2)

I guess. I cannot explain it. I suddenly get distracted by a long reading passage. (S1)

How did you go about answering the question in the listening test?

When the respondents were inquired about the strategies for answering listening comprehension questions, nearly all mentioned reading the options/questions before listening as the most frequently used strategy.

One has to read questions and options first because we do not hear and understand all the words. (S4)

Well, the questions and options and then listening, and when I think I have found the right answer, I look at the options again. (S3)

How did you go about answering the question in the writing test?

As stated by the respondents, the writing test is the most challenging and difficult English test due to their insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. To compensate for their language deficiency, they formulated ideas and thoughts in Arabic and translated them into English.

I feel nervous because writing is difficult. I lack linguistic resources (grammar and vocabulary). I think in Arabic and translate it into English. (S2)

Arabic translation is good for writing. The only problem is that I cannot be sure that I can provide English words that match the Arabic ones in my mind. (S6)

How did you go about answering the question in the speaking test?

Speaking test is the second most difficult test in English, and as with the writing tests, insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary hinders students' expression of ideas in this test. Therefore, they mostly organized their thought and ideas before starting to talk as a strategy to deal with English-speaking tests.

I think I should, for example, talk about the reasons for studying English. So, I first tell myself that I should mention three points, and then I start from point one and tell the teacher who is taking the test that it is the first point or reason. (S5)

I know that I should, for example, cover two points at a given time. So, I tell myself that I should do my best and also avoid using collocation or making pronunciation problems because if I have such problems, I cannot express my thoughts. (S1)

The second research question of the present study was intended to find the way intermediate Iraqi EFL learners deal with test anxiety when taking English tests. In so doing, six interviews were held with six randomly selected EFL learners, and the responses to interview questions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed by the constant comparative method. The results revealed that seven themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews dealing with test anxiety when taking English tests, which are discussed in the following. Each interview question is presented along with the themes that emerged from the interviewees' responses to that question.

What factors cause anxiety for you when taking English tests?

When the respondents were asked about the anxiety-provoking factors, the majority referred to the fear of low grades as the main factor.

I am worried about making mistakes in English tests and getting a low grade. I am sure that my low grades will disappoint my parents and teacher, so my anxiety will be exacerbated. (T5)

Anxiety makes me study harder for the test to get a good grade. I know learning English is necessary for my future job and study, and I know that low grades will ruin my future. (T3)

How does anxiety affect your test score and performance?

Two themes emerged from the interviewees' responses to the question of the way anxiety affects test scores and performance, namely losing concentration and lack of proper time management.

Regarding the theme of losing concentration, the interviewees mentioned that,

Sometimes, even though I have studied hard for the test and the test seems easy to me, I cannot focus my attention. Sometimes, I misunderstand some questions, or I should read some questions more than once. (S6)

For example, about writing tests, the pressure to perform well, and negative thoughts about my language abilities can disrupt my focus. This lack of concentration often results in struggling to maintain a logical flow in my writing and revisiting the same ideas multiple times. (S4)

Regarding the lack of proper time management, respondents stated that

I spend too much time on each question because of anxiety. I ran out of time, and this makes more anxious. I cannot stop it. (S1)

Test anxiety can sometimes hinder my ability to manage my time effectively. When I feel anxious during a test, my focus shifts from answering questions to worrying about running out of time or making mistakes, leading to spending too much time on one question, causing me to rush through the rest of the test. (S2)

How do you reduce and deal with English test anxiety?

Praying and deep breathing were the two most frequently mentioned ways to reduce and deal with English test anxiety.

Regarding praying, the respondents asserted that,

Praying before an English test helps me let go of my anxieties and trust a higher power to guide me through the exam. It brings me a sense of peace and inner calmness. (S3)

Prayer becomes my source of hope in moments of doubt and anxiety before and during an English test. It helps me approach the test with a clear mind and a positive attitude. So, I quietly recited some Quranic verses before and during the test. (S4)

Taking deep breaths was another way of dealing with the test anxiety. The respondents mentioned that,

When I get anxious during or before the test, I take a deep breath through my nose and let it out slowly through my nose. It helps me a lot. (S5)

During the English test, I make a conscious effort to practice deep breathing whenever I feel anxious. By taking slow, deliberate breaths, I am able to regulate my emotions, center myself, and improve my concentration on the test questions. (S1)

Is your test anxiety influenced by the language skills tested (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)? If yes, which language skill test makes you the most anxious?

When the participants were asked about whether test anxiety is influenced by language skill tested, the majority responded in the affirmative. Speaking and writing English tests were the two tests that made Iraqi EFL students more anxious.

In terms of the writing test anxiety, the respondents asserted that,

The fear of making grammatical errors, using the wrong vocabulary, or not being able to structure my writing effectively makes me anxious when taking a writing test. Additionally, there is a constant worry about whether my writing will meet the test standards and my teacher. (S5)

As a non-native student whose alphabet and grammar are totally different from English, I am anxious to take an English writing test. While I strive to express myself clearly and effectively in written English, the fear of not being able to fully express my ideas in a coherent manner often ruins my confidence. (S4)

As for the speaking test anxiety, respondents mentioned that,

Whenever I want to speak, my heart starts beating very fast, and I feel as if I am going to faint. Because of this, I lose my concentration and enthusiasm to talk and express my ideas. (S6)

I think the speaking test is the most anxiety-provoking test. When I start speaking, I get anxious and make numerous mistakes. I get so anxious that I cannot complete my sentence and become silent. (S2)

Discussion

The first research question of the present study found the test-taking strategies intermediate Iraqi EFL learners use when taking an English test. Therefore, six interviews were held with six randomly selected EFL learners, and the results revealed that rereading parts of a passage, guessing based on background knowledge, reading the options/questions before listening, formulating ideas and thoughts in Arabic, and translating them into English, and organizing thoughts and ideas before starting to talk were the most frequently employed strategies when taking an English test.

Lestari and Syaifullah (2017) demonstrated that test takers utilize strategies such as predicting, skimming, scanning, and rereading. Furthermore, Samad et al. (2017) indicated that skimming, the foundation of prior knowledge, translations, and rereading are the predominant strategies employed in addressing the reading comprehension section. Suyatman and Rachman (2017) articulated the strategies for responding to vocabulary items within the reading segment of the TOEFL test. The findings revealed that students implemented a comprehensive array of strategies in tackling the vocabulary test related to reading comprehension, with the most frequently employed approach was identifying contextual clues to ascertain the meanings of unfamiliar terms.

In accordance with the Compensatory-Encoding Model (Walczyk et al., 2007), it is posited that test takers resort to compensatory strategies like decelerating their reading pace or rereading sections of texts when their processing skills—either lower or higher—do not suffice to attain the desired comprehension level. Employing compensatory strategies can enhance understanding and permit students who exhibit deficiencies in specific skills to engage in alternative reading processes, thereby achieving test scores comparable to those attained by students with superior comprehension abilities (Walczyk, 2000). Additionally, in an eye-tracking investigation scrutinizing students' test-taking strategies, Ardoin et al. (2019) stated that a significant proportion of elementary participants engaged in reading at least a segment of the passage prior to addressing the questions: 17.5% read the passage and subsequently answered the questions without rereading the texts, while 79% read some or the entirety of the passage and reread portions of it when responding to the questions.

The cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) also suggests that learners have a limited capacity for processing information. Strategies like rereading parts of a passage and organizing thoughts help manage cognitive load, allowing learners to focus on essential information and avoid overwhelming their cognitive resources.

Another strategy used by the participants was reading the options/questions before listening. Listening assessment tasks generally encompass a brief interval preceding the commencement of the audio file, thus allowing test candidates to preview the contents of the multiple-choice items. This aspect of the assessment aids in the establishment of objectives, provides crucial information regarding the subject matter of the input texts, and enables candidates to focus their attention and listen selectively (Wagner, 2013). An unintended result of this preview is that it enhances the opportunity to engage in lexical matching strategies between the contents of the multiple-choice questions and the audio file (Field, 2019).

Koyama et al. (2016) studied the effects of varying the extent of information accessible during the preview phase by administering questions that included only the preview of the question stem, a comprehensive preview comprising the full question along with answer options, and a condition devoid of any preview. The results of this research demonstrated that participants achieved superior scores when any preview form was incorporated into the evaluative task. A detailed analysis of both the content of the questions and the audio files revealed a considerable degree of overlap and repetition of significant lexical items and phrases between the questions and the corresponding input text, thereby

enabling test takers to employ lexical matching strategies in the preview condition effectively. Furthermore, Yanagawa and Green (2008) expanded the investigation of question preview by contrasting the scores of test takers recorded subsequent to the preview of only the question stem and the preview of only the options while juxtaposing these outcomes with scores obtained from a complete preview that included both the stem and options. The results indicated that participants attained higher scores in tasks that featured a preview of both the question stem and the associated options, whereas the lowest scores were observed in the option-only preview case. The researchers interpreted these findings as indicative of the notion that the preview of stems provides contextualization for the audio material, whereas an option preview may inadvertently lead to detrimental lexical matching strategies that could be mistakenly adopted when the contents of the distractors, rather than the key answer, coincide with the contents of the audio file.

Regarding the writing strategy of formulating ideas and thoughts in Arabic and translating them into English, a salient characteristic of second-language writing is the utilization of the first language during the composition process. According to Manchón et al. (2007), the employment of L1 in L2 writing manifests in various forms (e.g., generating concepts in L1, producing text through translation from L1 to L2), contingent upon the specific demands of the writing tasks and individual learner characteristics. Findings from additional research (e.g., Van Weijen et al., 2009) have suggested that novice and proficient L2 writers tend to engage their L1 to a certain degree to address challenges encountered in L2 writing tasks. Scholars (Manchón et al., 2007) have further concluded that L2 writers rely on their L1 not solely during the planning phase but also throughout the text generation process. Moreover, it has been reported that L2 writers revert to utilizing their L1 to facilitate a more rapid, efficient, and clear expression of their ideas, subsequently minimizing disruptions in cognitive processing (Qi, 1998).

Cohen (2006) also documented that the practice of composing an L2 essay in the L1 initially before translating it, as opposed to writing directly in the L2, emerged as one of the thematic elements in his interviews with participants. Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001) discovered that while two-thirds of a group of intermediate L2 learners of French at the tertiary level experienced improved ratings on their essays when composed directly in French (accompanied by only sporadic mental translation from English), the remaining one-third of the group performed better when they first authored their essays in English and subsequently translated them into French.

Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001) also indicated that the utilization of the first language contributes to a reduction in the cognitive load on working memory, as L2 writers initially articulate their ideas in L1 before subsequently translating them into their second language. Aligning with the findings of the present study, Guo and Huang (2018) observed that their participants employed L1 during the execution of the L2 writing assignment. They discerned three distinct individual strategies that incorporated the use of L1: translating text from L1 to L2, converting the L2 task question into L1, and utilizing L1 to structure their thoughts.

Finally, organizing thoughts and ideas before starting to talk was the last strategy reported by the participants. This strategy can be explained by planning time before a speaking task. The allocation of pre-task planning time has been deliberated as a mechanism to create an equitable environment for examinees, acknowledging that planning time aids in managing the cognitive demands associated with potentially unfamiliar subject matter and empowers them to achieve their optimal performance (Field, 2011). L2 speakers might access their declarative knowledge through the process of planning, hence retrieving the necessary lexico-grammatical information (Kaplan, 2010). Ellis (2009) asserts that when L2 learners have time to plan prior to doing a task, their performance tends to exhibit greater fluency and complexity.

Li et al. (2014) found that the provision of pre-task planning significantly enhanced the performance of their participants, both in quantitative and qualitative measures. They also identified accuracy as the discourse attribute that gained the most advantage from pre-task planning. Furthermore, Li et al. (2014) noted that fluency and lexical diversity enhanced with the implementation of pre-task planning while structural complexity was variable across different planning durations. The influence of

pre-task planning was also scrutinized by Nitta and Nakatsuhara (2014) in a paired-format speaking assessment. In contrast to Li et al. (2014), Nitta and Nakatsuhara reported that pre-task planning exerted minimal positive impact on the performance of L2 speakers in interactional decision-making tasks.

More recently, Inoue and Lam (2021) examined the effects of extended pre-task planning on the performance of iBT test-takers during the academic listening task of the TOEFL speaking subsection. The potential ramifications of the experimental planning duration (90 seconds) were evaluated through scores, content accuracy, the CAF measures, and the self-reports of the test-takers. Upon comparing the oral performances of candidates under the standard preparation time (20 seconds) and the extended planning condition (90 seconds), Inoue and Lam (2021) did not identify any statistically significant differences between the two planning scenarios concerning assigned scores, content accuracy, and discourse features. Nevertheless, the general consensus indicated that planning time was advantageous.

The second research question of the present study aimed to find the way intermediate Iraqi EFL learners deal with test anxiety when taking English tests and the factors that cause anxiety. Fear of low grades, losing concentration, lack of proper time management, praying, deep breathing, speaking, and writing were the seven themes obtained from the interviews about test anxiety and its influential factors.

Ohata (2005) delineates two antecedents of test anxiety: the fear of receiving poor academic grades and the pressure imposed by time constraints. The majority of participants in his study, comprising five Japanese university students in the US articulated their apprehensions regarding examinations, which induced anxiety concerning the detrimental fear of obtaining unsatisfactory grades. Additionally, they occasionally experienced the compulsion to organize their cognitive responses rapidly within a limited timeframe. Hedge (2000) posits that the fear and apprehension concerning negative evaluations directly result from adverse experiences, specifically those associated with educators' feedback, classroom participation, and remarks from peers.

Furthermore, Horwitz (1986) identified a negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and the anticipated grades in an introductory language course and the final assessments, suggesting that individuals exhibiting elevated foreign language anxiety both anticipated and achieved lower grades compared to their less anxious peers. Similarly, Saadi (2009) elucidated various determinants contributing to anxiety in EFL classes, including the fear of negative evaluations, the potential for humiliation by classmates, apprehension regarding low academic grades, anticipated adverse assessments from instructors, challenges associated with oral production in front of large audiences, and inherent shyness.

In relation to losing concentration due to anxiety, Goonan (2003) found that learners may misinterpret questions, encounter difficulties in comprehending test items, and struggle with the organization of their thoughts. Respondents frequently deliver incorrect or incomplete responses during oral assessments despite having relevant knowledge. In this context, test anxiety significantly obstructs the accurate reflection of actual performance and comprehension in test scores. Sellers (2000) studied the interplay between language anxiety and reading comprehension. The findings indicated that anxiety adversely impacts the reader's focus on reading tasks and their overall understanding of the text.

Stober (2004) asserts that test anxiety detrimentally influences learners' academic performance, quality of life, and intrinsic motivation, thereby hindering their ability to concentrate effectively. Also, Aydın et al. (2006) sought to ascertain the levels of test anxiety of EFL learners and uncover its underlying causes, effects, and implications for foreign language acquisition. The findings demonstrated that test anxiety harmed motivation, concentration, and achievement while concurrently increasing learning in the process of learning. They also observed that test anxiety inhibited students from accurately representing their academic performance on tests and studying effectively, thereby diminishing their interest in language acquisition.

In terms of lack of proper time management, research revealed that time management strategies are thought to ensure that students can attempt all questions within the given time frame, while question

analysis techniques may help students better understand and respond to complex items (Nourdad & Ajideh, 2019).

Hong et al. (2006) asserted that within the spectrum of management strategies, time-related strategies pertain to allocating time to various items or sections of an assessment, taking into account their associated difficulty or complexity. During an examination, candidates frequently check their watch at predetermined intervals to ensure they remain within the allotted time frame (Dembo, 2004); subsequently, they may distribute their time across the test items based on the significance of each item (Priestley, 2000). Time management allows them to prioritize easier items initially, subsequently allocating any remaining time to more complex and time-intensive items. Behnam et al. (2014) also determined that training in time management positively influences test anxiety among EFL learners.

The participants of the present study stated that they used praying and deep breathing to deal with text anxiety. This is also reflected by Nasiri et al. (2014), reporting the positive impact of Tavasol prayer on lowering learners' anxiety. Cizek and Burg (2006) posit that teachers can instruct students experiencing test anxiety in the application of relaxation techniques aimed at alleviating anxiety; such techniques include (a) meditation, (b) prayer, (c) intermittent breaks and deep breathing, (d) positive self-talk, and (e) focusing on previous successes.

Sokolová and Šuplatová (2018) articulated that relaxation serves as a mechanism for students to disengage from the assessment and rest. The primary purpose of this strategy is to mitigate the tension and stress that students encounter when faced with challenges. Students can readily engage in deep breathing exercises to attain a state of calmness when confronted with difficulties during examinations. Furthermore, Perciavalle et al. (2017) indicated that relaxation through deep breathing could facilitate a reduction in stress levels among students. Based on the interview findings, this strategy enhanced students' concentration during assessments. In general, students are encouraged to practice deep breathing exercises repetitively and continuously when experiencing anxiety and tension during examinations, as this self-regulatory exercise has been shown to diminish anxiety (Bhagat et al., 2017).

Finally, participants stated that speaking and writing were the most stressful English tests. Speaking is widely regarded as the most anxiety-inducing component of foreign and second language education (e.g., Jaya et al., 2022). The prominence of speaking as a significant source of apprehension, tension, and stress is underscored by the classification of communication apprehension as a facet of foreign language anxiety. Additionally, empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a correlation between language anxiety and performance in oral assessments (Sparks & Ganschow, 2007).

Research conducted on this issue by Kitano (2001) revealed a correlation between speaking anxiety and test anxiety, indicating that students experienced heightened anxiety during oral performances as their fear of negative evaluations intensified. This anxiety was exacerbated by the prospect of traveling abroad and engaging in conversation with native speakers. The researcher further noted that students' anxiety levels escalated when they made comparisons between their speaking abilities and those of their peers and native speakers. Herwitt and Stephenson (2012) examined high-, medium-, and low-anxiety students and their oral performance during assessments. The findings indicated that students with high anxiety exhibited markedly inferior performance on the speaking test.

Writing anxiety was also of interest to researchers (e.g., Prasetyaningrum et al., 2022; Cheng, 2002; Heidarzadi et al., 2022). Masny and Foxall (1992) elucidated that students who exhibited low and high anxiety levels placed a greater emphasis on the structural elements of their compositions rather than the substantive content; nevertheless, the former demonstrated a heightened focus and orientation towards the stylistic aspects of their written outputs. Furthermore, a pronounced degree of anxiety was found to be associated with a reluctance to engage in additional writing courses. Finally, Cheng (2002) established that anxiety associated with second-language writing was notably distinct from that related to the first language, with the former being more significantly shaped by the writers' self-perceptions regarding their writing proficiency rather than their actual writing performance.

Conclusion

This study highlights the diverse test-taking strategies and coping mechanisms utilized by intermediate Iraqi EFL learners in the face of test anxiety. The findings underscore the importance of effective preparation techniques, such as rereading passages and organizing thoughts, which can enhance performance during English tests. Additionally, the identified sources of test anxiety, including fear of low grades and concentration issues, reveal the psychological challenges these learners face. By understanding these strategies and coping methods, educators can better support Iraqi EFL learners in developing effective approaches to testing, ultimately fostering a more positive testing experience and improving their overall language proficiency.

As for the implications of the study for EFL learners, they should be encouraged to recognize their emotional responses and develop self-regulation techniques, such as deep breathing or positive self-talk, to manage test anxiety effectively. Learners can benefit from understanding the impact of goal orientation on their performance. Setting mastery-approach goals can help them focus on personal growth rather than solely on grades.

Besides, students should practice and incorporate effective test-taking strategies, such as organizing thoughts before speaking or writing and utilizing background knowledge, to enhance their test performance. Forming study groups can provide emotional and practical support, helping learners share strategies and reduce worry and anxiety.

To alleviate anxiety, test designers should consider incorporating elements that allow students to demonstrate their understanding without excessive pressure, such as open-book formats or flexible time limits. Providing clear instructions and a structured format can help reduce uncertainty, thereby minimizing emotional responses and improving test-wiseness. Also, including various assessment methods (e.g., oral presentations and written assignments) can cater to different learners' strengths and reduce the focus on high-stakes testing, exacerbating anxiety.

Finally, educational materials should include sections on affective strategies, which help students recognize and manage their emotions about testing. Materials should encourage mastery-oriented learning through activities that promote self-reflection, goal setting, and personal growth rather than competition.

Regarding limitations, the sample was limited to Iraqi EFL learners, who may not be representative of the broader population of EFL learners. Variability in language proficiency, cultural backgrounds, and educational contexts can influence the strategies employed and their effectiveness.

The study did not account for external contextual factors, such as classroom environment, teacher support, and institutional policies, which may significantly influence learners' experiences of test anxiety and their choice of strategies. Future research should consider these factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

While the study identified several strategies used by EFL learners, it did not explore the effectiveness of these strategies in different testing contexts or their impact on actual test performance and did not critically assess the efficiency of coping strategies. Further investigation is needed to determine which strategies are most beneficial for reducing anxiety and improving test outcomes and critically evaluate their effectiveness. Additionally, the qualitative themes derived from interviews regarding test anxiety, test-taking strategies, and their influential factors may be subject to interpretation biases. Different researchers may draw varying conclusions from the same data, highlighting the need for triangulation with other data sources in future studies.

Conducting longitudinal research could provide insights into how test-taking strategies and anxiety evolve over time, particularly as learners gain more experience and proficiency in English. This could help identify effective interventions that lead to long-term improvements in performance and anxiety management.

Investigating the perspectives of educators regarding test anxiety and strategies in future studies can provide insights into how teaching practices and assessment methods can be adapted to support learners better.

Future researchers can investigate the effectiveness of teaching self-regulation strategies to EFL learners, focusing on how these strategies can mitigate test anxiety and enhance test performance and test-taking strategy use. The role of peer support groups in helping EFL learners manage test anxiety can also be investigated in the future. Research how collaborative learning environments can promote emotional resilience and positive test-taking strategies. Besides, examining how different test formats (e.g., multiple-choice, open-ended) affect test anxiety levels among EFL learners needs investigation to see if certain formats lead to higher emotionality or worry and how this can inform future test design.

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