

# DISCUSSION

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## Teacher trainees' comments on test anxiety

The comments quoted below are a selection of opinions expressed by the students of the Foreign Language Teacher Training College at the Jagiellonian University, who participated in the TEFL methodology seminar I conducted in 2007/2008. The students were asked to read Vita Kalnberzina's research paper and answer the following questions:

1. What is the article about?
2. What is the aim of the study?
3. What concepts are investigated? Enumerate and explain them.
4. What research methods are applied to investigate the main issue?
5. What is the conclusion of the author?
6. If you had an opportunity to meet the author, what questions would you like to ask her (e.g. about the research tools, the subjects of the study etc.)?
7. Comment on the article. You may write about the aim of the study, the research method or your experiences as a learner and as a teacher.

I hoped that this assignment would enable the students to practice reading a research paper, i.e. that they would familiarize themselves with the organization of the text and, after having reported on the study, they would be better prepared to design and conduct a similar study of their own. I also believed that the students would be keen to relate Vita Kalnberzina's study to their own experiences, which could enhance their awareness of factors that influence teaching and learning foreign languages.

The comments below are a selection of the students' answers to # 7. I am glad to see that the teacher trainees were able to reflect on their own classroom practice and develop a dialogue with Vita Kalnberzina. The authors of the comments are: 1/ Katarzyna Wilczek, 2/ Anna Mroczka, 3/ Anna Kłębek and 4/ Katarzyna Wiązowska.

### Comment 1.

"The more difficult the readers found the reading process, the more anxious they were." I find this quotation relevant also to other skills in FL learning. Students' attitude towards FL lessons and learning a FL is the key issue. In my opinion, enthusiasm, and not being afraid to make mistakes, learning from both your mistakes and those of oth-

ers, together with self-confidence, are crucial. Learners benefit more from the lesson and perform better when they feel confident. In turn, when performing successfully they are perceived by others as competent learners. This is why the teacher should be full of empathy and understanding and should praise even the smallest success of his/her students. All in all, when the teacher wants to teach something, he/she should not only explain different things clearly, but also look into the souls of his/her students and try to instill in them positive attitudes and the belief that they CAN learn.

#### Comment 2.

I do not have enough teaching experience to comment on a level of anxiety among students from a teacher's perspective, but being a foreign language learner myself, I agree with Vita Kalnberzina's conclusions. When I compare two situations – being in a foreign language classroom and writing a test – I must say that the former causes much more stress than the latter. When participating in a foreign language class, we are constantly exposed to the judgment of our teacher and that of other students, we are compared to other learners, who also bear witness to our weaknesses and errors. When taking a test, the prospective judgment is more “limited” – only the teacher will find out how much we know and do not know. Our peers are not involved in this process, and therefore the level of anxiety is not as high, even though the results of the test are much more important.

The author says: “teachers often use tests in the class thus creating anxiety among the learners; test anxiety combines with [...] a threat to the individual's self-concept. This becomes part of learner's and later test-takers' foreign language use experience that will be activated every time the foreign language is used.” If this is so, we could ask the following question: would eliminating tests change the situation? Would language learning be more effective? A long-term study would be needed to examine this problem further. We could compare the foreign language performance of students in two groups – those who have tests from time to time, and those who never have any tests. However, in our school reality tests are unavoidable and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to change the situation. Therefore, I think that teachers should be more concerned with looking at ways to reduce classroom anxiety, which may lead to a more positive attitude among students towards learning a foreign language, and in improved performance.

#### Comment 3.

The findings of the study may help teachers shift their attention from a test-taking situation to a classroom situation, and to view the learner as a prospective test taker. Surprisingly, the results of the study indicate that the anxiety associated with a test-taking situation is not the greatest obstacle for test takers. It is the classroom anxiety itself. This anxiety shifts the attention of the test-taker from what happens during the test to their own weaknesses and problems associated with a particular language skill used in the classroom situation. In other words, a particular test task may evoke memories of a similar situation from a lesson in which the learner did not succeed.

**Comment 4.**

The conclusions were quite surprising as they showed that although students feel anxious during a test, their anxiety almost does not affect their performance. What is more, students get better test results when they have a good relationship with their teachers and peers in the classroom. I did not expect that foreign language classroom anxiety can affect students so much and impact student test performance to such a great extent. Another thing I found interesting is that in the questionnaires a lot of students admitted that foreign language classes worry them more than other classes, even though they are well prepared for the lesson.