

Lived Experiences of Students on Test Taking

Charlie A. Dayon¹ and Edmun Docena²

¹ Faculty, Agusan del Sur State College of Agriculture and Technology
Bunawan, Agusan del Sur

Corresponding e-mail: charliedayon2@gmail.com

² Faculty, Maragusan National High School, Department of Education,
Davao Region

ABSTRACT

Students' anxiety in taking a test was the issue of this qualitative phenomenological exploration. Using this research design, the primary intention of describing the experiences of 10 selected high school students in taking a test in General Education Subjects was attained. The results depicted the experiences of student participants in taking a test. In the analysis of information drawn from the interview, some dominant themes emerged. As regards the test paper which they received from their teachers in General Education subjects, emerging themes were the proper construction of the test questions and the provision of choices. This suggested that the test papers as viewed by the participants were easy to answer. However, during the interview for the second question, they seemed to have opposing views. Some told about their anxiety of the results of the test while others were seemingly glad of their performance because they found some test items easy to answer. Moreover, several actions were suggested to the stakeholders of the school. The school head might consider the proposal to improve the quality teaching and learning of the school. The teachers might also improve their teaching styles, classroom management system, and test construction. They might adopt Constructivist theory to facilitate students during the teaching – learning process. The future researchers might finally conduct similar study in a different setting or locale. They might further use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research design to capture a clear picture of the phenomenon of test anxiety.

Keywords: Educational Management, lived experiences, phenomenology, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

How would one feel if the outfit which a tailor had prepared for him is out of shape? Would he be excited to wear it? In the same manner, how would a student feel if the test paper which his teacher had provided him is unfitting to him? Would he get inspired to take it?

In the global setting, Triplett and Barksdale (2005) discover that there is a prevailing negativity in students' responses and anxiety on test. In response to their findings, they advocate for changing the overall testing culture and the teacher's role in test preparation. In 2006, Cizek and Burg also find it worth advocating to change the testing culture as they discover the harmful effects of a badly constructed/prepared test questionnaire primarily on students. So, they believe that there is a great need to help educators, parents, and students in addressing test anxiety and the problems it causes.

In the national setting, Cuizon (2013) discovers that his participants manifest negative impression and perception on test papers. The results of the interview and focus group discussion reveal that the participants perceptually describe test paper as exhaustive and arduous. For them, it is tough and unlikable. They feel that by taking the test they are being punished rather than being assessed. Some of them open up that there are a lot of traditional and linguistically-oriented type of test papers.

Nevertheless, advocating for change in testing culture is a challenging effort. Once a change is applied, it can bring about favourable effect to the psychic and mental health and development of the learners among many others. The urgency of pursuing it lies on the fact that the test and evaluative situations are emerging as a potent class of stressors in Western society. It is frequently cited as a cause of poor cognitive performance, scholastic underachievement, psychological distress and ill health (Weidner, 1998 as cited by Zeidner, 2007). Zeidner adds that this stressor also jeopardizes test validity in the cognitive domain and constitutes a major source of construct irrelevant systematic variance in test score.

In Maragusan National High School, this phenomenon has seemingly been prevalent too. My co-researcher and I have observed

in several occasions especially during the periodical examination that most of their high school students seem to manifest in their facial expression and bodily movement some clues of distress, anxiety, restlessness, and the like. When their test papers are checked by their subject teachers, we found out that some of them fail to get a passing score. This incident of getting a failing score in the examination does not only happen once but several times. As we find it alarming, we have taken the challenge of conducting a qualitative inquiry.

Research Objectives

In this qualitative phenomenological study, we primarily aimed to explore the experiences of selected student participants in taking a test in General Education Subjects in order to find emerging reasons which might be considered as the root causes of their poor test performance and psychological distress. The findings of this inquiry could be used as our bases in suggesting doable actions or activities which could somehow address test-related problems or issues. Additionally, the discussion of the results may espouse a new knowledge or confirm Constructivist theoretical lens.

In quest for answers, the following questions were formulated.

1. How do the student participants describe the test papers which their teachers in General Education subjects have prepared?
2. How do they describe their experiences when taking the test?
3. From their experiences, what insights can be drawn?

METHODS

Qualitative – phenomenological study was be used for the purpose of exploring the experiences of selected students at Maragusan National High School. In attaining this purpose, we adhered to Creswell's guidelines (2012) in which 'open-ended' questions for interview were applied to get authentic understanding of people's experiences. Furthermore, through this interview approach, we encouraged our participants to offer their own definition or meaning of the phenomenon.

In adherence to Silverman's guidelines (2006) as cited in Bryman (2008) for purposeful sampling, we set a criterion for the

selection of the 10 student participants to insure the authenticity of the information, and these included the three or four year of residence in school the Grade 9 and 10 in the Junior High School and Grade 11 and 12 in the Senior High School of Maragusan National High School.

To abide the research ethics, we considered the following issues. Prior to the undertaking of the study, we sought a research clearance permit from the Schools Division Superintendent of Compostela Valley Division, Nabunturan, Compostela Valley Province. Permission was also sought from the Principal of Maragusan National High School of the respective students and learners. Administrators of the respective schools were also asked for their permission. Since minors were involved in the study, permission of the parents was sought.

As qualitative researchers, we played some roles while conducting the study, such as interviewer and transcriber. As an interviewer, we gained first the trust of the informants before interviewing them. We assured them that their identity was hidden, and the information they disclosed to us was kept confidential. During the interview, we requested the assistance of a note-taker to note down their observation from the participants' actions or facial expressions. Likewise, when the informants did not understand some of our questions, we shifted to the local language for their own understanding.

As a transcriber, we decoded the data from recorded form to another including those noted non-verbal cues such as, facial expressions, vocal tone and manner of reactions or responses of the informants. If some information was incomprehensible to me, we referred to the records of a note-taker.

To ascertain the credibility of the information, we did not rely only on one source of information, but also on the data from extensive forms such as interviews, related literatures and studies and theories (Creswell, 2012).

Finally, in analyzing data, we adopted the processes such as, data managing, reading, memoing, describing, classifying, interpreting, representing and visualizing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984 as cited in Creswell, 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Students' Description of Test Papers

In pursuit of figuring out students' description of the test papers, this section presents and discusses the dominant themes. For better understanding, each of them is unpacked using Piaget's Constructivist theory.

The themes which emerge from the students' consolidated descriptions of their test papers are the test questions in a test paper are properly constructed and the correct answers are found in the given choices.

Proper construction of the test questions. The student participants say that their test paper, especially in General Education subject is constructed well by their subject teachers. When they are asked why, they seemingly point out that there is an existing mechanism to ensure the quality of test that is given to students. In this process, all test papers must pass through the office of the teachers' supervisor to check the content and structure of the test. After the scrutiny, these are endorsed for printing and production of copies. During the interview, the students disclose:

"Gi-preparar ug maayo sa mga titsters sa General Education subjects ang test" (The test prepared by our teachers for General Education subjects are properly made and prepared.) (R-IDI-01)

"Gi-ribyo pud sa mga akademik titsters ug skul administrator ang test paper." (The test paper is reviewed thoroughly by the concerned academic teachers and school administrator.) (R-IDI-02)

Why is there a need to review the content and structure of the test paper? According to Weare (2004), one of the most important aspects of test construction is accuracy: that the tests produced are free of defects. At least two studies cite the presence of defects in the test as particularly anxiety producing for students. Weare (2004) in her survey of adult learners returning to school, notes that "poor test construction ... coupled with poor scoring and grading practices, causes anxiety." Weare added poor test construction specifically due to vaguely worded essay questions and

"items not used to measure understanding ... in which the emphasis is placed on small details which are trivia." Madsen et al. (1984) likewise found their qualitative study of test anxiety in ESL students several exam defects which these students had cited as being anxiety producing for them. These included: unclear essay instructions, inadequate space to write responses, numbering errors on the test, and poor sound quality on audio tapes used on listening sections of language tests.

Provision of choices. In the test papers, the students find choices of answers. However, they cannot just simply pick out any answer to a question. They ought to recall their lessons and analyze the given contexts before picking out a chosen answer. What most of them say is that the test is both easy and difficult:

"Ang ubang pangutana sa test sayon ra, pero adunay uban nga lisud pud. Adunay test nga enumeration, true or false, ug multiple choice. Sa ilabang tanan, lisud ang modified true or false ug sayon ang multiple choice." (Some test questions are easy while

others are difficult. There are types of test: enumeration, true or false, and multiple choice. Among these, I find modified true or false as the most difficult while multiple choice is the easiest one.) (R-IDI-03)

Enumeration, Modified True or False, Multiple are types of examination which any teacher may prepare for his or her students. We argue that using a variety of test types can address the uniqueness of an individual learner. As long as the teacher knows of his or her students' diverse needs, he or she can use these types of test with a touch of creativity which stimulates students' interest, imagination, and critical thinking. Hence, this variety can be instrumental to activating the process of accommodation and assimilation which, for Piaget, enable the individuals to construct new knowledge from their experiences.

In the process of assimilation, the individuals incorporate new experience into an already existing framework without changing that framework. This may possibly occur when individuals' experiences are aligned with the internal representations of the world.

However, this may also occur as a failure to change a faulty understanding. For instance, when they may know that their answer in a test is incorrect, they come to realize that their understanding about the subject matter is faulty. Hence, such an experience serves as a lesson to them.

In contrast, when individuals' experiences contradict their internal representations, they may change their perceptions of the experiences to fit their internal representations. According to the theory, accommodation is the process of reframing one's mental representation of the external world to fit new experiences. Accommodation can be understood as the mechanism by which failure leads to learning: when we act on the expectation that the world operates in one way and it violates our expectations, we often fail, but by accommodating this new experience and reframing our model of the way the world works, we learn from the experiences of failure, or other's failure.

On the other hand, the theory of Social Constructivism explains that using a variety of test types does not only acknowledge the uniqueness and complexity of the learner, but encourages, utilizes, and rewards it as an integral part of the learning process (Wertsch, 1997). It seems that the test is motivating because the students who are taking it, are caught smiling. When they are asked of the reason why they are happy, they say, "*Halos lahat ng pinag-aralan naming ay lumabas* (All those we studied came out)." (R-IDI-05) So, what do they suggest? These students suggest that the teacher discuss the coverage of the examination. Or, during the session, the teacher facilitates the discussion of the lessons.

On this note, we argue that there is an interaction between the students and the teacher. We assert the point that through interaction, the learning capability of students is activated because they are given the opportunity to think, analyze, and assess whether their responses are right. However, while it is true that interaction takes place in the classroom, it cannot be denied that both the teacher and the students, who are equally involved in exchange of thoughts and opinions, learn from each other (Holt & Willard-Holt, 2000). Although in this learning experience they can be both subjective and objective of their ideas, what is essential is that the teacher's culture, values, and background interplay in shaping the facets of his or her students' cognition.

Description of Experiences in Taking the Test

As to the experiences of students when taking the test, the dominant themes which emerge are: (1.) anxiety and (2.) gladness.

Anxiety. During the interview, the students are asked of their experiences when they take the test. They say that they are worried of the results because there are some test questions which they can hardly answer. Although they study their lessons, those which come out in the test are not discussed nor taken up. They say:

“Gikul-baan ko kay akong gi-anseran ang ubang kwestiyon na dili part sa amohang diskasyon sa klase.” (I felt nervous because I answered some questions which were not part of our discussion in class.) (R-IDI-07)

“Ako ay naging kabado dahil hindi ko alam kung masasagutan ko ba lahat ng tama ang mga katanungan (I was nervous because I did not know if I could answer all the questions correctly.)” (R-IDI-08)

There are many causes of test anxiety. It is revealed in this study that one of them is the lack of preparation. The students presume that only those which are discussed in class would come out in the test, so they do not mind reading textbooks or even those recommended references by their teacher. In consequence, there are test items which they fail to answer.

In this scenario, the students seemingly manifest their immaturity. They seem unaware of their responsibility as students. On Social Constructivism, the teacher must help develop the sense of responsibility of his or her students. Likewise, he or she must have taught them how to construct their own understanding so that they do not simply mirror and reflect what they read. They must have helped them find meaning, regularity, and order in the events of the world even in the absence of full or complete information (Glaserfeld, 1989).

Gladness. Some students in this study show how happy they are because they find the test easy to answer. It may be true that the test is easy, but what makes it easy is the fact that they prepare for it by studying hard.

“Abi nako lisod, dili diay. Sayon lang diay anseran.”
(I thought they were hard, but they were actually
easy to answer.) *IDI-09*)

Finding the test easy to answer is due to adequate preparation of the learners for the examination. Such preparation is however dependent on how engaging and challenging the activities are that can enhance learners' skills and knowledge. According to Brownstein (2001), learners should constantly be challenged with tasks that refer to skills and knowledge just beyond their current level of mastery. This captures their motivation and builds on previous successes to enhance learner confidence.

Vygotsky (1978) further claimed that instruction is good only when it proceeds ahead of development. Then, it awakens and rouses to life an entire set of functions in the stage of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development. It is in this way that instruction plays an extremely important role in development.

Moreover, Derry (1999) explained that to fully engage and challenge the learner, the task and learning environment should reflect the complexity of the environment that the learner should be able to function in at the end of learning. Learners must not only have ownership of the learning or problem-solving process, but of the problem itself.

Where the sequencing of subject matter is concerned, it is the constructivist viewpoint that the foundations of any subject may be taught to anybody at any stage in some form (Duffy et al, 1992). This means that instructors should first introduce the basic ideas that give life and form to any topic or subject area, and then revisit and build upon these repeatedly. This notion has been extensively used in curricula.

It is also important for instructors to realize that although a curriculum may be set down for them, it inevitably becomes shaped by them into something personal that reflects their own belief systems, their thoughts, and feelings about both the content of their instruction and their learners (Rhodes et al., 1999). Thus, the learning experience becomes a shared enterprise. The emotion and life contexts of those involved in the learning process must therefore be considered as an integral part of learning. The goal of the learner is central in considering what is learned (Brown et al., 1989; Ackerman, 1996).

Insights from Experiences

The experiences of the students in taking the test somehow vary. However, despite this variation, these incidents become their turning points. Among these realizations include the learning of the English language through reading, the benefits of studying hard and following instructions:

“Napagtantoan ko sa aking sarili na dapat akong mabasa ng wikang Inglis at mag-aral ng maigi” (I realized that I should read in English and study well.) (R-IDI-11)

“We need to study well for the exams so that we can answer the questions. And, we must follow the rules so that we can catch up the lessons.” (R-IDI-12)

“I must study even before the exam. I should also study some related information to our topics especially in Mathematics.” (R-IDI-05)

After experiencing difficulties in taking the test as there are some test items which are not discussed in the class, they see how important it is to prepare for it by developing their study habits and testing skills:

“Nituo ko nga ang ang senior high maga-preparar kanamo padulong sa sunod namong dyorni pinaagi sapag imprub sa amohang estudi habits ug testing skills.” (I believe that senior high school is preparing us to our next journey by improving our study habits and testing skills.) (R-IDI-08)

“Na-realaiꝯ nako nga ang tama nga preparasyon bag-o mag exam makatabang gayod sa pag-tubag sa mga pangutana sa exam.” (I realized that proper preparation before the exam would help us answer the test questions.) (R-IDI-9)

Then, the other one is seeing the value of sacrifice, perseverance, and commitment to achieving success in life:

“Dabil mahirap lang ang aming bubay at maraming mga pagsubok na dumarating sa amin, ito ang aking naging daan.

Hindi badlang ang kahirapan upang susuko na tayo sa pagaaral.

Bilang isang mag-aaral, magsakripisyo ako upang maabot ko ang aking mga pangarap at matulungan ko ang aking mga magulang balang araw.” (Because we are poor and there is a lot challenges that came to our life, it is the only way. As a student, poverty is not the hindrance in achieving my goals and dreams in life in order to help my parents someday) (R-IDI-10)

“Kailangan kong seryosobin ang pagsagot sa mga pasulit dahil dito rin nakabase ang markang makukuba ko at sa markang iyon ang silbing kapalit sa mga pagbihirap ng aking mga magulang sa pagpa-aral sa akin at kahit na may mga pagsubok mang dumating hindi rin iyon ang maging badlang upang matupad ang aking mga pangarap na magsisilbing gabay at aabon sa amin balang araw.” (I need to take it seriously in answering the test because it will be the bases of my grade and that grade will be the reward of the sacrifices of my parents. Even though there is lot of challenges that I face it will not be the hindrance to achieve my goals and my dreams in life. It will be my guide and it will lift up our life someday). (R-IDI-02)

And, above all these is that they see the importance of prayers in their studies for guidance:

“Palaging manalangin at di-gumawa ng mali at pagbutihin ang pag-aaral. (Always pray, don’t do anything wrong and study well) (R-IDI-07)

Literature Cited

- Brown, S. I., & Nelson, T. L. (2003). Beyond the uniformity myth; A comparison of academically successful and unsuccessful test anxious college students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 30(3), 367-374
- Cuizon, J. C. (2019). Assessing applicant employability using social media for talent acquisition and recruitment in IT/BPM

- companies. *Recoletos Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 7(1), 37-45.
- Covell, C. L., Sidani, S., & Ritchie, J. A. (2012). Does the sequence of data collection influence participants' responses to closed and open-ended questions? A methodological study. *International journal of nursing studies*, 49(6), 664-671.
- Derry, G. N. (1999). *What science is and how it works*. Princeton University Press.
- Duffy, T.M. and Jonaseen, D. (Eds.). (1992). *Constructivism and the technology of instruction: A conversation*. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Erbil, D. G. (2020). A review of flipped classroom and cooperative learning method within the context of Vygotsky theory. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 1157.
- Glaserfeld, E. (1989). Cognition, construction of knowledge, and teaching. *Syntheses*, 80(1), 1210140.
- Holt, D.G. and Willard-Holt, C. (2000). "Lets get real – students solving authentic corporate problems". *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(3).
- Wertsch, J.V. (1997). *"Vygotsky and the formation of the mind"* Cambridge.