

High-Stakes Test Pressure and Anxiety in the Nepalese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners

Saraswati Dawadi

Abstract

Despite a growing body of research on language test impact, little is known about the impacts of a high-stakes test on students in the Nepalese context. This paper reports on a study that explored the impact of an English as a foreign language (EFL) test on students in Nepal. The data generated through a student survey (n=247), oral diaries (n=72) and semi-structured interviews (n=24) with students and parents indicate severe impact of the English test on students. The majority of students reported that they were under tremendous pressure to perform well on the test and they had a high level of anxiety associated with the test. There were several indications that students had test related anxiety mainly because of their perception that poor performance on the test has negative effects on their social prestige and on career prospects. Additional reasons of their anxiety included high expectations from their parents and teachers. Finally, some of the pressing policy, pedagogical and research implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: *High-stakes test, test anxiety, test pressure, English as a foreign language*

Introduction

Test anxiety (TA) and test pressure (TP) have become serious issues in this contemporary society because of the widespread use of assessment. TP usually refers to a situation in which students are forced to work hard for a test whereas TA is an intense psychological state experienced by test-takers concerning the evaluation of their test performance and possible consequences that would happen in their personal or academic lives after test results. It is students' apprehension over their academic evaluation which is usually a fear of failing in test contexts. According to Sommer and Arendasy (2015), TA comprises two components: cognitive components (such as worry and test-irrelevant thinking) and affective components (such as emotionality and bodily symptoms). While the cognitive component worry refers to test-takers' negative thoughts about the possibility of failure on a test and its consequences, the affective component emotionality comprises physiological reactions (such as headache and increased heartbeat) and feelings of nervousness and tension. Failure in this context does not only refer to the doubt over securing the minimum required grade or pass mark but also to the failure to meet the requirements for their career progression or to meet parents' expectation and so on (Joy, 2013).

1 Parts of this article are taken from the author's unpublished PhD thesis: Dawadi, S. (2019). Impact of the secondary education examination (English) on students and parents in Nepal. An unpublished PhD thesis, The Open University, UK.

Kleijn, van der Ploeg and Topman (1994 cited in Birjandi & Alemi, 2010) present three models to explain possible causes of TA. The first model is termed as the ‘learning-deficit model’, which mentions that the problem lies in preparing for a test, but not in taking the test. Students with high TA tend to have inadequate learning during the preparation phase. According to the second model called the ‘interference model’, students with TA focus on task irrelevant factors during tests which negatively affect test performances. Two kinds of distractions are reported during test tasks: physical distraction (that indicate heightened autonomic activity such as sweaty palms and muscle tension) and inappropriate cognitions (includes comparing themselves with other test-takers and feeling bad during the test). Both distractions are supposed to negatively affect test performance. The third model includes students who think they have prepared very well for a test but in reality, did not. Those students have anxiety after the test that creates anxiety during the next test (Birjandi & Alemi, 2010).

In the context of the SEE English test, the major focus of the study, it is likely that the test creates a high-level of pressure and anxiety as it is a high-stakes test. High-stakes tests refer to any measurement of student attainment which carry significant consequences (either positive or negative) to test-takers, their teachers, parents and schools/educational institutions. Most people in Nepal believe that good performance in the SEE creates more career opportunities and leads to a better life. Therefore, parents, irrespective of their educational and social background, contribute to the development of such psychology in their children’s minds so that their children consider the SEE to be everything in their life; “failure in the exam equating to failure and meaninglessness in life” (Bhattra, 2014, p.70). Nevertheless, almost no research has explored the psychological impact (pressure and anxiety) of the test on students. Hence, this study aimed to fill the gap in research.

Empirical background to the study

Previous studies have reported that students overwhelmingly become test anxious. For instance, Takagi’s (2010) study indicated that students experienced a psychological burden while preparing for and taking the University Entrance Examination in Japan; they also suffered from extreme pressure to perform well on the test. Similarly, Triplett and Barksdale (2005) found that the elementary students in the USA were overwhelmingly stressed, worried, anxious and isolated as a result of high-stakes testing. Reports of high-level of anxiety related to high-stakes testing are not confined to these two countries. Test-takers from several other countries or social and educational contexts are also reported to be test anxious. For instance, test-takers in China (Li, Zhong, & Suen, 2012; Xiao & Carless, 2013), India (Joy, 2013), Iran (Aliakbari & Gheitani, 2017), Turkey (Basol & Zabun, 2014), USA (Segool, Carlson, & Goforth, 2013) and UK (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain & Daly, 2014) were found to be test-anxious.

Some studies have also reported psychological, physiological and behavioural changes in students. For instance, Kirkpatrick and Zang (2011) reported that high-stakes testing in China led to inadequate psychological development, self-hatred and repressed personality, and a general lack in the development of other abilities. In Newspoll’s (2013) study, parents reported that National Assessment Programme-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) had negative impacts on their child’s self-esteem and their child showing signs of stress and anxiety due to NAPLAN; the children had a fear of freezing up during the examination. Similarly, the majority of students in Wyn, Turnbull and Grimshaw’s (2014) study reported the feelings of stress associated with NAPLAN and a smaller number also revealed some physical reactions, such as nail biting, hyperventilation, headaches, profuse sweating, migraines and stomach aches. Furthermore, Aydin (2013) found that the EFL test-takers in Turkey had some negative physical effects, such as rapid heartbeat, trembling, anorexia, panic, worry, depression and apprehension about the future.

Previous studies indicate various factors that might cause TA in students, such as test format, test techniques, test environment, test difficulty (Aydin, 2013), students' attitudes towards tests (Aydin, 2012), teacher attitudes, time limit, test length, (Gursoy & Arman, 2016), parental expectation (Peleg, Deutch, & Dan, 2016) and academic buoyancy (Putwain, et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the factors that cause anxiety to students vary from person to person and from situation to situation (Basol & Zabun, 2014).

Indeed, students in a high-stakes test context are usually forced to work hard for the test by their family members and teachers. For instance, the test-takers of General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) in Taiwan (Shih, 2007) experienced pressure because of the exams. Similarly, the Greek students in Loumbourdi's (2014) study stated that they suffered much pressure from parents and teachers to perform well on high-stakes tests. Kirkpatrick and Zang (2011) further reported that the Chinese students felt moderate pressure to excel in school. Shohamy (2007) has beautifully presented her own personal narrative to indicate how high-stakes tests create anxiety and pressure on students.

However, almost no research has explored the extent to which the Secondary Education Exam (SEE) creates pressure and anxiety in Nepalese students. Therefore, this study aims at addressing the research gap in the literature. To be more specific, the study addressed the question: 'To what extent and in what ways, do SEE students suffer test pressure and anxiety?'

It is worth pointing out that the major focus of the study is on the impact of the SEE English test on students. It explores the extent to which the test creates pressure and anxiety in students.

Theoretical background to the study

The study was guided by critical language testing theory (Shohamy, 2001) which argues that tests have power in society. Shohamy presents some examples that indicate how tests can manipulate human behaviours and their lives suggesting that tests sometimes have detrimental effects on test-takers because the results obtained from those tests often determine high-stakes decisions for individuals. Indeed, tests have been widely used without considering their possible effects on students. Shohamy (2001) rightly argues:

“Test-takers are the true victims of tests in this unequal power relationship between the test as an organisation and the demands put on test-takers; they do not have the right actively to pursue or understand the inside secrets of tests. It is rare for a test-taker to protest, complain or claim that the test did not fit their knowledge; the authority of tests has been accepted without question (p.386).”

Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) views that tests are instruments of symbolic power which set a major criterion of individual worth and they contain a competitive element which is illustrated by the fine line between success and failure. The use of tests for control and power can be seen as a top-down educational change strategy that is undemocratic, unethical and detrimental to test-takers.

The study

Participants

The participants in the study included secondary level students (n=247) studying at Grade 10 in rural public schools and their parents (n=6) in Nepal. The students had been learning English as a foreign

language for 10 years and their age ranged between 14 and 16 years old. All of them were Nepali native speakers and they were studying at Grade 10 in state schools. Participants for the survey were selected by using a random sampling procedure from eight public schools which were purposively selected for the study.

Among the six parents, three were with high education (at least SLC/SEE graduates) but the rest parents were not able to read and write. Their age ranged between 35 to 62 years and they had different professions: teacher (n=2), farmer (n=2), shopkeeper (n=1) and stonebreaker (n=1). They could represent different socio-economic classes.

The test

The SEE English test, being a summative test, mainly aims to record the achievement of the SEE candidates in the SEE English curriculum (Dawadi & Shrestha, 2018). The total mark of the SEE English test is 100 and it is divided into two: speaking and writing. The SEE is a high-stakes test in the Nepalese context as it carries significant consequences (either positive or negative) to test-takers. For instance, in order to be eligible to study certain courses in higher secondary level, students must get a good grade on the test and the test is used as a basic licence to find most official jobs in Nepal. Most people in Nepal believe that good performance in the SEE creates more career opportunities and leads to a better life.

Data collection

This study featured a mixed-methods design with a survey and six case studies. Since a convergent parallel mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) was employed, both qualitative and quantitative data were concurrently collected (but independently).

In order to collect quantitative data, a questionnaire survey was carried out with 247 students. A sub-sample of the survey participants (n=6) were asked to record oral diaries once a week intermittently for three months: first during the usual classes (i.e. in the fifth month of their academic year), second during the test preparation (i.e. around two months before the test) and final during the time they were waiting for the test results. All the diary students were interviewed twice: around six weeks before the test and two months after the test results publication.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2018) were followed to maintain the ethics in this study and informed consents from children and their parents were obtained before collecting any data from them.

Data analysis

The data gathered through the close-ended questionnaire was analysed using SPSS version 25 and descriptive statistics were calculated. Qualitative data was looked at through the lens of critical language

testing theory and a thematic analysis approach was employed. As thematic analysis is an iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), several procedures (such as familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for main themes, and reviewing themes) were followed.

Findings

The findings of the study have been organised into two sections. The first section presents the findings related to the test pressure on students whereas the second section concerns the test related anxiety in students.

Test pressure on students

The data indicates that almost all the students (234 out of 247) reported that they were under tremendous pressure to perform well on the test. Students' responses to the questionnaire have been summarised in Figure 1.

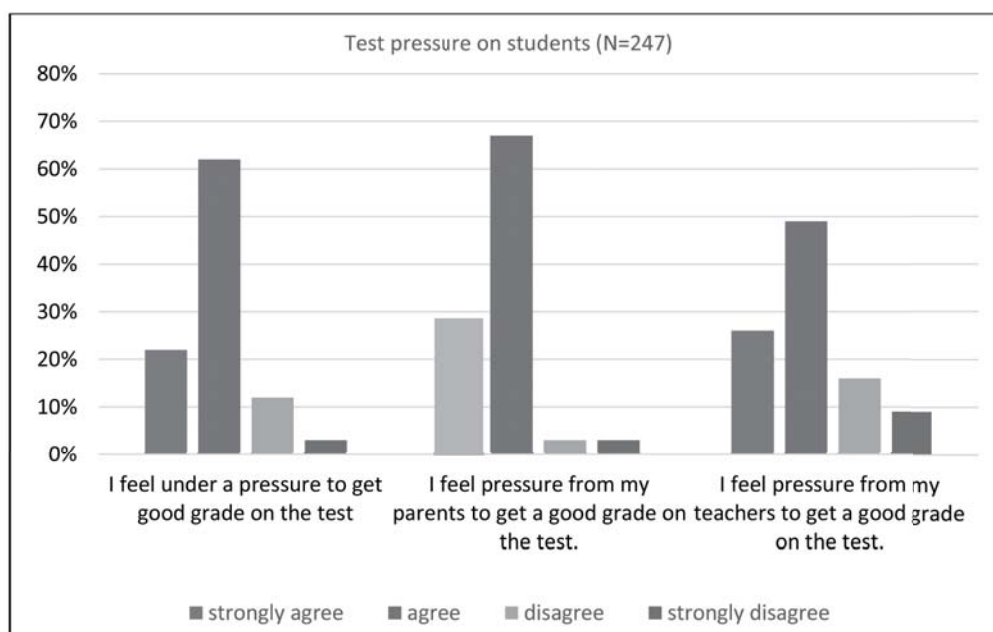


Figure1: *Test pressure on students*

The vast majority of students reported that they felt under pressure to get good grades on the test. The results also indicate that they received more pressure from their parents than their teachers.

The quantitative results were supported by the qualitative findings as all the diary students (except S6) reported that they were under enormous pressure to work hard for the test. However, contrary to the quantitative results, students reported that they got more pressure from their teachers than their parents:

“I got more pressure from my teachers than my parents. Our teachers made a very strict rule that we all had to stay in the school accommodation for three months. So, I am staying in the school accommodation nowadays (S5).”

The findings also indicated that the test increased workload for students. All the diary students reported that they had to study till late at night:

“My parents do not allow me to go to bed early. I have to study till 11pm” (S1).

“When the examination was very close to him, he was working so hard that he did not even have enough time to have food” (P3).

Indeed, there were several indications that the test increased workload pressure both for students and their parents. When the researcher went back to the field for the second phase data collection in mid-January, it was very hard to find diary students at their home. Two of them were staying in the school accommodation and would come home only on Friday evenings and go back to school on Saturday afternoons while four others would leave home at 5:30 am and come back home around 7.30 pm (Sunday to Friday) as they were taking extra classes in their schools in the mornings and evenings. Then, they were guarded by their parents for a few hours at home to ensure that they study till late at night. Similarly, the students who were staying at the school accommodation reported that they had to work very hard for the test.

Test related anxiety in students

Almost all the students reported that they had test related anxiety. The quantitative results, summarised in Figure 2, indicate that students had test related anxiety mainly because of their perception that poor performance on the test has negative effects on their social prestige and on career prospects. Additional reasons of their anxiety included high expectations from their parents and teachers.

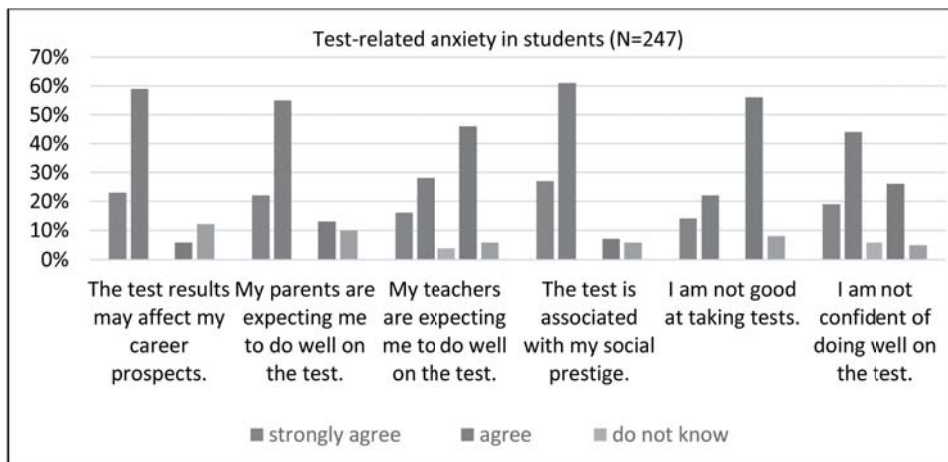


Figure 2: Test anxiety on students

Similar findings emerged through qualitative data. Test anxiety was one of the most recurring sub-themes in the qualitative data analysis. All the diary students (except S6) were found to have test related anxiety because of the possible test consequences to their career prospects and social criticism associated with poor performance on the test:

“I am very much worried about the test as it is very important for my future. If I cannot do well on the test, I will not be allowed to study science at Grade 11. I think, my future will be dark

(S3).”

“One of the main reasons of my worry is that everybody in my village will know my test results and if in case I cannot do well on the test, they will criticise me (S1).”

Furthermore, the diary students (except S6) reported that they had the test related anxiety because of their parents’ high expectations from them:

“My parents are expecting me to do well on the test. They have spent a lot of money hoping that I can do well on the test. If in case I cannot do well on the test, they will be very much cross with me. Therefore, I am very much worried these days because of the test (S5).”

Although the quantitative results indicated that half of the surveyed students (46% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed) were not worried because of their teachers’ expectations, all the diary students (except S6 and S2) reported that they had test anxiety because of their teachers’ expectations from them:

“I am worried thinking that if I cannot do well on the test, my teachers would not be happy with me (S4).”

“My teachers are expecting me to do well on the test as I usually get the highest scores in my class tests. However, I am not very sure whether I can get A+ on the test. So, I am worried these days” (S1).”

An additional reason for the test anxiety in four of the diary students was a lack of test-taking skills: *“I do not feel comfortable with any kind of test. I do not know what happens to me. Something goes wrong with me when I start taking a test (S2).”*

Furthermore, students had test related anxiety because they seemed to have low level of confidence in doing well on the test: *“I am quite petrified about the SEE as I think the test will be very difficult for me” (S2); “I am very much scared of the English test as I know that the test will be very hard for me. I do not really think that I can get good grades on the test” (S5).* However, it was found that teachers did nothing to support students tackle the test anxiety as indicated in the following excerpts from pre-test interview.

Researcher: Does your teacher tell you not to worry much about the test?

S3: No, he just asks us to work very hard for the test.

It was also found that students’ anxiety increased nearer the test. In comparison to the first phase diaries, second phase diaries indicated more anxiety and nervousness in students. S2 in particular felt so stressed that she was demotivated to expend any effort in improving her performance when the test grew closer.

Students’ anxiety was also accompanied by their bodily reactions such as loss of appetite, headache and fever:

“He did not even have good appetite. He would tell me that he was feeling like his mouth was completely dry and he was not able to swallow food properly. Actually, he had fever just the day before the test (P3).”

Furthermore, waiting for the test result was very much stressful for the students: *“I am very much*

worried about the test results these days. So many things come to my mind. Sometimes, I cannot even have a good sleep at night” (S1), and the anxiety continued even after the test results: “Last week, I was very much worried because of the test results. I was feeling bad. I would just be thinking about why my grades were lower than I had expected” (S3).

However, the personality of individual student needs to be considered. It was found that 12 of the surveyed students and one of the diary students (S6) did not have test-related anxiety.

Discussion of the findings

The findings of the study are consistent with the findings of previous test impact studies that EFL students experience an intense level of anxiety of taking high-stakes tests. For instance, the findings that SEE candidates had pressure associated with the English test are consistent with some previous findings (e.g. Cheng, 1997; Li et al., 2012; Xiao & Carless, 2013) that EFL students feel enormous pressure to perform well in a high-stakes test. Kirkpatrick and Zang (2011) also report that high scorers in China garner praise while low scores lead to punishment. The situation seems to be worse in Singapore as so many students in Singapore commit suicide because of high-stakes test pressure and “two-thirds of Singaporean parents have punished their children for performing poorly by caning them” (Gregory & Clarke, 2003, p.71). However, none of the students in the current study reported that they were punished by their parents though many of them could not perform well on the test and I did not hear any news about suicide cases associated with the SEE during the time of my study.

High pressure on students both from their parents and teachers suggest that, very similar to the Chinese parents and teachers (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011), the Nepalese parents and teachers consider test scores to be the only criterion to judge students’ abilities. The exam-centric education in Nepal evaluates students’ quality and skills based only on test scores. Parental pressure on children might have also resulted from the perceived importance of the test along with their poor economic condition and hope for future through good education. Most parents in Nepal seek their children’s secure future through education (Bhattraï, 2014). Consequently, they put pressure on their child for high achievement on the test.

Schools’ pressure on students to perform well on the test might be associated with the accountability use of the test. In other words, the main reason why schools pressurise students for better achievement would be because of the increased use of the SEE scores by the Nepalese government as the sole criterion to judge the quality of school education. The public schools in Nepal are rewarded or penalized and also supported with funding based on students’ performances in the SEE and it is obvious that every school wants to have good results to be rewarded or to save their reputation and prestige (Bhattraï, 2014). The SEE results have also been used to judge the quality of individual teachers. Therefore, the fear of poor results in the SEE and the associated punishment, shame, or embarrassment might have led teachers to strive for high SEE scores. Consequently, they might put pressure on their students to achieve high scores.

There were several reasons behind students’ anxiety associated with the test. One of the most apparent reasons included their perceived social prestige associated with the test because of the lack of confidentiality of the test results. Contrary to most western countries, individual students’ performances in the SEE are publicised by most schools (in some cases individual students’ photographs along with their Grades in the SEE are even displayed on the school walls and in different public places) to attract students for admission. Because of this practice, it is clear that the achievement of high grades in the SEE is likely to earn social prestige while low grades may degrade the prestige. This also suggests that the achievement of

high scores/grades on a test receives high prestige in the Nepalese society without necessarily considering the knowledge and skills the student has in the related subject.

As reported by previous studies (e.g., Basol & Zabun, 2014; Peleg et al., 2016), parental expectations and the perceived importance of the test results also seemed to trigger anxiety in students. All the parents, irrespective of their educational background, contributed to the development of such psychology in their children's mind that their children consider the SEE to be everything in their life, "failure in the exam equating to failure and meaninglessness in life" (Bhattra, 2014, p.70). Indeed, it has now been a general phenomenon that poor performance on the test is a failure in an individual's life; most students consider the SEE to be a landmark in an individual's life as they believe that the examination provides the ladder for one to get higher education and also opens up the vista of developing his/her career (Giri, 2011).

Some students were also anxious because of their perception that they lack test-taking skills. This anxiety seems to be related to our one-off exam system. It is true that all the students cannot perform efficiently under time pressure. Furthermore, it could be the result of the mark-oriented and rigid practice in the SEE as the exam focuses on one-off examination system which does not seem effective enough to capture the real skills of students, and also does not offer opportunities for students of being assessed in a natural setting.

Students' anxiety could also be a result of their thriving interest in getting good scores on the test, rather than learning English. Ahmad and Rao (2012) argue, "Students suffer from examinations when their primary concern becomes to perform well in exams, not to learn well" (p.179). As discussed above, the students in this study were under an intense pressure to perform well on the test. Thus, the findings suggest that students, who are obliged to perform a task under pressure, may experience anxiety (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Furthermore, the SEE students' test anxiety was rooted in their self-confidence; many students had a low level of confidence of doing well on the test. Hence, they would feel insecure about their test performance.

It is highly important that both teachers and parents are aware of such issues. While it may sound trite to state this, it cannot be denied that the role of parents and teachers is paramount in moderating anxiety. Therefore, both of them should be "provided with intensive training on how to behave around sensitive students at school and at home. As well, the students should be counselled to reduce exam related anxiety and emotional distress" (Bhattra, 2014, p.82). Bhattra further argues that school level teachers in Nepal do not take any counselling training for stress and anxiety management. Similarly, parents receive no training on how to understand their children's psychology and problems to be able to support them in an appropriate way.

Students' anxiety was not static nor was it a one-off result created by their class tests or mock tests. As reported by Aydin (2013), the students in this study suffered anxiety both before and after the test. Indeed, students' diaries indicated that they had test related anxiety throughout the year but the level of anxiety steadily increased when the date of the test grew closer. Similar findings were reported by previous test impact studies (e.g., Gosa, 2004; Huhta et al. 2006; Joy, 2013; Lotz & Sparfeldt, 2017; Tsagiri, 2006).

Heightened anxiety in students nearer the test date might have resulted from the intensification of teaching and learning at school in view of the imminent exam. There was an intense level of preparation for the test nearer the test date in each school from where the data for this study was collected.

As reported by previous studies (e.g. Aydin, 2013; Birjandi & Alemi, 2010; Newspoll, 2013; Takagi, 2010; Tsagiri, 2006; Wyn et al., 2014), test anxiety revealed some physical responses. These findings highlight that there is an urgent need for stress management sessions and workshops for students (Bhattraï, 2014). Addressing students' anxiety and fears about tests can make students more proactive and careful use of tests may encourage students to use deep instead of shallow approaches to learning and also improve students' study habit.

Implications of the study

The study has several implications. One of the implications concerns teachers' and parents' awareness of students' anxiety. This means, students seemed to have elevated anxiety related to the test, but the study did not evidence any attempt made by teachers to mitigate students' anxiety. It is worth noting that "while moderate levels of test-related anxiety can actually improve motivation and test performance, an unmanageable amount can have an adverse effect" (Abrams, 2004, p.24). In other words, heightened level of anxiety is likely to hinder the process of learning. Therefore, it is highly important that effective therapeutic interventions for reducing the adverse effects of the test on students are considered and students are educated on the coping strategies to ameliorate the adverse effects of test anxiety. For this, teachers also might need some trainings on how to support their students. Teachers should understand that they need to do more than preparing students with the test contents to make students perform to their potential. Furthermore, it is equally important to educate parents as parents are one of the main sources of student anxiety. It is highly important that parents are made aware of their roles so that they allow their children to feel more relaxed at home. For example, parents ensure that there is a proper balance between work and play or rest.

Another implication of the study concerns the test related pressure and anxiety in students. The findings indicated that students experienced test related anxiety throughout the year and they had enormous pressure to perform well on the test. Parents influenced their children in such a way that students considered the SEE to be so important in their life that their whole life would be ruined, if they were unable to perform well on the test. Therefore, parents need to be aware of their roles and should not put unnecessary pressure on their children to perform well on the test. Instead, they have to play an important role in moderating stress and pressure on their children.

The study suggests avenues for further research in the field of language testing to expand the findings of the study and also to explore test impact issues in a greater depth. In the first instance, what is lacking in this particular context is that this study could not collect and benefit from classroom observation data that would add more insights and make the evidence of the test impact clear. This study could also be extended to a greater number of participants so that the findings could be generalised. Furthermore, it would produce a more comprehensive picture of the test impact operating therein, if the study was extended to other stakeholders of the test including teachers, teacher trainers, policy makers and test designers.

Limitations of the study

The study has revealed interesting findings regarding the impacts of the SEE English test on students. Nevertheless, the study has three major limitations that need to be acknowledged. The first limitation of the study concerns its sample size as it was limited to 247 students (for the survey) and six parent-student pairs (for the case studies). Hence, it is difficult to generalise the findings of this research to the entire population of the SEE students in Nepal. However, it should be noted that the participants shared important common attributes of the entire population.

The second limitation is pertinent to the data collection to the study. The data in this study was collected only from the students studying in public schools but nearly 20% students in Nepal study in private schools; most of which use English as a medium of instruction. That is why, this study does not represent the voices of the students studying in private schools in Nepal; generalization of the findings is limited by this constraint as well. However, there is no reason to suggest that the findings of this study are not generalizable to other students, particularly public-school students, across the country.

The third limitation of this study is from a methodological point of view. This study was limited to the data collected from students, but it would have benefited from additional classroom data collected through observation and teacher interviews. However, this shortcoming was, to some extent, compensated for through students' oral diaries. This study is one of the few test impact studies that has explored the test impacts over an extended period, and used both qualitative and quantitative data to study test impact.

Conclusion

This paper is dedicated to present and discuss the findings regarding the SEE test impacts on students' psychological domains. Having brought both the qualitative and quantitative data together, this study has unpacked the test impact issues very well. The findings indicated that the test had negative psychological impacts on most students; they had an intense level of anxiety and pressure associated with the test. However, neither parents nor teachers seemed to be aware of the issue. Therefore, it is crucial that secondary schools consider the issue without any delay. Furthermore, it is highly important that the test designers understand how the SEE English test is used in the Nepalese societies and how its stakeholders are affected by the test use.

The Author

Saraswati Dawadi is currently a research associate at The Open University (OU), UK. She holds a doctorate in Language Assessment from the OU. She has taught at Tribhuvan University Nepal for over eight years. Her current research is around language assessment, equity and inclusion in education, girls' empowerment and professional development through online learning.

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