Educational and Humanities
ISSN Print: 3104-4352
ISSN Online: 3104-4360
CD ISSN: 3104-4379
https://doi.org/10.63313/EH.9096

How to Help Middle School Students Reduce English Test Anxiety

Shang Xiang
China West Normal University, Nanchong 637000, China
Email: 2957867484@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Xiang, S. (2026). How to Help Middle School Students Reduce English Test Anxiety. Educational and Humanities, 4(1), 76–83. ISSN Print: 3104-4352, ISSN Online: 3104-4360.
https://doi.org/10.63313/EH.9096
Published: 2026-07-13

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
CC BY 4.0

Abstract

With the rise of humanistic psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, researchers and language educators have increasingly recognized the significant role of affective variables in language acquisition. Among these variables, English test anxiety has emerged as a critical factor influencing students' performance. Since the late 1950s, when Samson initiated formal research on test anxiety, this field has evolved into a specialized area of study. While much of the research in China has focused on general test anxiety, there has been limited exploration of English test anxiety specifically. This paper examines the theoretical foundations of foreign language anxiety and its impact on middle school students, drawing on existing literature in psychology and language education. By analyzing the causes of test anxiety among junior high school students, which stem from personal, academic, and environmental factors, the study proposes several strategies for reducing anxiety, including guiding students to make reasonable attributions, setting phased goals, and creating a supportive learning environment. The findings underscore the importance of addressing test anxiety, offering insights for educators and policymakers to foster a more psychologically conducive learning atmosphere.

Keywords

Middle School Students; English Test Anxiety; English Teaching; Influencing Factors; Countermeasures

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Research

Testing is almost ubiquitous in modern society. An exam is an evaluation process that gauges students' performance and influences an individual's future success (Sarason, 1984). However, the fear of poor performance and failure often leads to test anxiety, a phenomenon that affects a significant portion of students. According to Putwain and Daly (2014), 16.4% of 2435 secondary school students across 11 schools reported being highly test anxious. Similarly, Thomas (2018) found that

approximately one-fourth of students experience negative thoughts and anxiety before exams, with 15% to 22% exhibiting severe test anxiety. This anxiety negatively impacts students' learning and academic performance (Sub & Prabha, 2003), leading to poorer grades (Chapell et al., 2005), higher retention rates (Beidel & Turner, 1988), and increased dropout rates (Tobias, 1979).

Nowadays, with the rise of economic globalization and the growing trend of studying abroad, the enthusiasm for learning English in China has remained high, particularly among middle school students. However, not all students excel in English, and middle school students, in particular, face significant pressure from various sources. If their psychological resilience is insufficient to overcome these emotional barriers, it can adversely affect their academic performance and mental development. While Chinese scholars have explored the definition and superficial causes of test anxiety, there has been limited research on the specific factors influencing English test anxiety and effective countermeasures.

1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

Anxiety is a prevalent psychological phenomenon, especially among students under academic pressure. The junior high school stage is a critical period for students' physical and mental development, and English, as a core subject, often induces exam-related stress, leading to anxiety. This anxiety not only hinders students' English learning but may also have long-term negative effects on their mental health. Therefore, investigating the causes and coping strategies for English test anxiety among junior high school students holds significant theoretical and practical importance.

This study aims to explore the specific manifestations and causes of English test anxiety among junior high school students, analyze its impact on their English learning, and propose strategies to reduce test anxiety. By doing so, it hopes to provide scientific guidance for teachers to alleviate students' anxiety and improve their learning efficiency.

2. Problem Identification

2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety is a future-oriented mood state associated with preparation for possible, upcoming negative events (Barlow, 2004). It is a prevalent emotional response among learners, particularly pronounced during the process of foreign language learning. Horwitz et al. (1986, p.128) conceived foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning, arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994, p.284), foreign language anxiety refers to the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second or foreign language contexts. Chinese scholars Du Meiyu and Li Tao (2017)

noted that foreign language learning anxiety refers to a state of nervousness and discomfort that individuals experience when learning or using a second language. This anxiety may result in impaired self-esteem and heightened guilt if learners cannot overcome their psychological obstacles.

2.2. Test Anxiety

The concept of test anxiety was first explored in depth by Luria in 1932. As a scientific construct, different definitions of test anxiety have evolved in response to changes in the zeitgeist and theoretical perspectives of key investigators involved in research in the field (Zeidner, 1998). The self-regulation paradigm views human behavior as a continuous process of matching current behaviors to desired goals (Carver & Scheier, 1991). Test anxiety occurs when students experience a major discrepancy between current behaviors and progress toward desired goals (Carver & Scheier, 1991). In evaluative situations associated with desired goals, test-anxious students experience self-doubts about their ability to perform, engage in self-deprecating thoughts, and misinterpret and do not attend to relevant cues, resulting in poor test performance (Zeidner, 1998). In contrast, the self-worth model suggests that test-anxious students are not able to maintain their self-worth or protect their academic competence because of repeated academic failures (Covington, 1992). According to this model, test anxiety is viewed as a symptom of "perceived intellectual incompetence and a defensive ploy to ward off low self-evaluation" (Zeidner, 1998, p.81). In the transactional process model, the dynamic interaction between students' personality traits and specific evaluative situations is highlighted. Test-anxious students have a propensity to experience high levels of trait anxiety across testing situations, and they perceive specific evaluative situations as threatening and experience different degrees of state anxiety. Worry and emotionality are symptoms of state anxiety, and these symptoms interfere with students' test performance (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995; Zeidner, 1998).

2.3. Causes of Middle School Students' English Test Anxiety

The factors influencing test anxiety are multidimensional and must be analyzed from various perspectives. Personal factors, such as self-efficacy and attribution styles, play a significant role in English test anxiety (Zheng & Gao, 2003). Students with low self-efficacy are more likely to experience heightened anxiety, as they believe they lack the necessary knowledge or skills to succeed. Additionally, a negative attribution style, such as attributing failure to a lack of ability, exacerbates anxiety (Zheng & Gao, 2003).

Academic factors, such as a weak foundation in English (Li & Zhang, 2007), inadequate test preparation (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995), and discomfort with test formats (Horwitz et al., 1986), also contribute to anxiety. For example, students who struggle with listening or writing may feel overwhelmed during exams, especially if

the test content exceeds their ability level.

Environmental factors, including the competitive school atmosphere (Liu & Chen, 2000) and teachers' methods and attitudes (Young, 1991), further influence anxiety levels. Teaching methods that overemphasize test scores or frequent mock exams can maintain high levels of pressure, triggering anxiety.

In conclusion, the causes of English test anxiety among junior high school students are multifaceted, involving personal, academic, psychological, environmental, and sociocultural factors. These factors interact in complex ways, leading to anxiety that affects students' academic performance and mental health. Future research should explore these interactions further to provide evidence-based strategies for alleviating anxiety.

2.4. Related Studies Home and Abroad

Test anxiety has garnered significant attention from scholars both domestically and internationally in the past half-century. Foreign scholars initiated research on foreign language learning anxiety earlier. Horwitz and Cope (1986) firstly proposed the definition of foreign language anxiety, which laid the theoretical foundation for subsequent studies. They pointed out three related types of performance anxiety, including communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986), among which test anxiety is a critical factor affecting students' academic performance. Maclntyre & Gardner (1994) further explored the impact of language anxiety on cognitive processes, suggesting that anxiety interferes with students' attention, memory, and information processing abilities, thereby affecting test performance. Spielberger & Vagg (1995) systematically organized the theoretical framework of test anxiety and proposed various assessment and intervention methods. In recent years, research has gradually expanded to the physiological and psychological responses associated with test anxiety. Zeidner's (1998) study demonstrated that test anxiety not only affects students' psychological states but also triggers a series of physiological reactions, such as increased heart rate, sweaty palms, and muscle tension. These physiological responses further exacerbate students' anxiety experiences, creating a vicious cycle.

Domestic scholars started researching English test anxiety relatively later but have made notable progress in recent years. Since the publication of Ling Wenquan's (1988) article "On the Study of Test Anxiety", the field of test anxiety has gradually garnered widespread attention from domestic scholars. This research underscored the significance of test anxiety, laying a foundation for the subsequent studies. Following this, Zheng Richang and Chen Yongsheng (1990) published the book *Diagnosis and Treatment of Examination Anxiety*, which stands as the first systematic work on test anxiety in China, providing crucial theoretical support and practical guidance for research in this area. As research has deepened, the focus of domestic scholars on test anxiety has progressively been expanded. Zheng Xifu and Gao

Hongzhang (2003) analyzed the causes of test anxiety from a cognitive perspective, identifying self-efficacy and attribution styles as key psychological factors influencing test anxiety. Zhang Min and Ji Xinghua (2007) conducted a quantitative analysis of academic papers published in China from 1986 to 2006 on the issue of test anxiety. The results revealed that domestic research primarily focused on the investigation of the current status of test anxiety, the study of internal influencing factors, as well as related research and intervention studies.

In summary, there has been a substantial amount of research on test anxiety both domestically and internationally. However, there is relatively little research in China on strategies to alleviate English test anxiety among junior high school students. Junior high school is a crucial stage for adolescents' physical and psychological development and it is also a key period for language learning. Therefore, it is essential to conduct research on strategies to reduce English test anxiety among junior high school students.

3. Problem Solution

3.1. Making Reasonable Attributions through Positive Feedback

As Kelley (1971) stated, "The attributor is not simply an attributor, a seeker after knowledge; his latent goal in attaining knowledge is that of effective management of himself and his environment"(p.22). According to the research by Zheng Xifu and Gao Hongzhang (2003), individuals with high test anxiety tend to attribute their success to external and unstable factors such as chance and luck, while associating their failure with stable factors like fate and ability. This negative attribution style diminishes self-efficacy and exacerbates anxiety.

Middle school students begin to develop a clearer self-concept and become more concerned about their self-image and others' evaluations. They may exhibit strong self-esteem, but they are also prone to feelings of inferiority due to external criticism or failure (Harter, 1999). To protect their self-esteem and reduce anxiety about exams, it is important for teachers to provide positive and constructive feedback after examinations. This feedback should highlight students' strengths and encourage them to view challenges as opportunities for growth. Specifically, after an exam, teachers can provide actionable and timely feedback to analyze the specific reasons for the results with students through conversations or group discussions. Such feedback helps students understand their performance and reinforce their positive learning behaviors. For example, teachers can guide students to attribute their success to controllable and stable factors, such as effort, effective learning strategies, and thorough preparation, rather than to uncontrollable factors like ability or luck. For instance, a teacher might say, "You did well on this exam because you reviewed consistently every day and used effective memorization techniques. These are the results of your hard work." For students who did not perform well, teachers should guide them to attribute failure to controllable factors, such as ineffective study

methods, poor time management, or insufficient effort. By providing timely and constructive feedback, teachers can help students build up their confidence and encourage them to make progress in English learning.

3.2. Setting Phased Goals to Cultivate Learning Habits

Tobias (1985, p.185) noted that the lower test scores obtained by test-anxious students are attributable to inadequate study habits, or to deficient test-taking skills. This suggests that anxiety itself may not be the sole cause of poor performance; rather, it is the lack of structured and efficient study practices, combined with insufficient strategies for approaching exams, that exacerbates the issue. Therefore, to address this, educators and students should focus on cultivating good learning habits, such as setting consistent study schedules, breaking down complex material into manageable parts, and employing active learning techniques like self-quizzing. Additionally, teaching students effective test-taking strategies, such as time management, question analysis, and stress-reduction techniques, can also help mitigate the impact of anxiety on performance.

Establishing short-term and long-term learning goals is a highly effective strategy to enhance students' motivation, self-efficacy, and academic performance. Teachers can help students set realistic phased goals to provide students with clear direction, help them track their progress, and create a sense of accomplishment as they achieve each milestone. This approach not only reduces feelings of overwhelm but also helps students develop a sense of ownership over their English learning by realizing their continuous improvements. For example, a short-term goal could be "memorizing 20 new words every day," while a long-term goal could be "improving the final exam score by 10 points". By breaking down large objectives into smaller, achievable tasks, students can gradually build a sense of accomplishment and boost their confidence. For instance, a student who successfully memorizes 20 words daily for a week can feel motivated to continue, knowing they are making tangible progress toward their long-term goal.

In the learning process, to support students in achieving their goals, teachers should offer personalized learning advice tailored to individual needs. For example, for students struggling with listening comprehension, teachers might suggest that they listen to 10 minutes of English news or podcasts daily and take notes on key points. Teachers could also recommend that learners use subtitles initially and gradually transition to listening without visual aids. For vocabulary building, a teacher might suggest, "You can try to expand your vocabulary by using flashcards or a vocabulary app. Set a goal to learn 10 new words each day and use them in sentences during class discussions." By setting clear goals and providing specific, actionable advice, teachers can help students achieve sustained progress and develop some valuable skills for lifelong learning.

3.3. Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

A supportive learning environment is crucial for students' academic and emotional well-being. For middle school students, who are often navigating the complexities of adolescence, a supportive classroom atmosphere can provide a sense of security and belonging, enabling them to focus on their studies without the fear of judgment or failure. By prioritizing emotional support, collaboration, and encouragement, teachers can empower students to overcome obstacles and build confidence in their abilities.

For students with high test anxiety, teachers should offer consistent emotional support to help alleviate stress and build resilience. This can be achieved through one-on-one tutoring. Personalized attention can help students address specific challenges and feel more confident in their abilities. For instance, a teacher might spend extra time with a struggling student to review difficult concepts or provide additional practice materials.

Teachers can also encourage collaboration among students to create a sense of community and mutual support. Assigning group projects or activities allows students to learn from one another, share ideas, and develop teamwork skills. Besides, based on the theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), teachers can pair students with different skill levels for peer tutoring or study sessions, which can help build a culture of support and cooperation.

4. Conclusion

Over the past few decades, China has established a highly competitive education system, achieving remarkable learning outcomes. China's performance in international standardized assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) organized by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), demonstrates the strength of its education system. However, these accomplishments may come at the cost of students' mental health, particularly the high prevalence of test anxiety.

This study highlights the complexity of test anxiety and proposes strategies to reduce it, including guiding students to make reasonable attributions, setting phased goals, and creating a supportive learning environment. Through multifaceted interventions, such as psychological support, academic guidance, and environmental optimization, students can be better equipped to cope with stress, thereby improving both their academic performance and mental health.

References

[1] Beidel, D. C., & Turner, S. M. (1988). Comorbidity of test anxiety and other anxiety disorders in children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, (16), 275-287.

[2] Barlow, D. H. (2004). *Anxiety and Its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic*. Guilford Press.

[3] Chapell, M. S., Blanding, Z. B., Silverstein, M. E., Takahashi, M., Newman, B., Gubi, A. et al. (2005). Test anxiety and academic performance in undergraduate and graduate

students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97, 268-274.

[4] Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1991). A control-process perspective on anxiety. In R. Schwarzer & R. A. Wicklund (Eds.), *Anxiety and Self-Focused Attention*(pp. 3-8). Harwood.

[5] Covington, M. V. (1992). *Making the Grade*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

[6] Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.

[7] Harter, S. (1999). *The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective*. Guilford Press.

[8] Kelley, H. H. (1971). *Attributions in Social Interactions*. Morristown, General Learning Press.

[9] MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, 44(2), 283-305.

[10] Sarason, I. G. (1984). Stress, anxiety, and cognitive interference: Reactions to tests. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(4), 929.

[11] Sub, A., & Prabha, C. (2003). Academic performance in relation to perfectionism, test procrastination and test anxiety of high school children. *Psychological Studies*, 48, 7-81.

[12] Spielberger, C. D., & Vagg, P. R. (1995). Test anxiety: A transactional process model. In C. D. Spielberger & P. R. Vagg (Eds.), *Test Anxiety: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment* (pp. 3-14). Washington, Taylor & Francis.

[13] Tobias, S. (1985). Test anxiety: Interference, defective skills, and cognitive capacity. *Educational Psychologist*, 20, 135-142.

[14] Thomas, C. L., Cassady, J. C., & Finch, W. H. (2018). Identifying severity standards on the cognitive test anxiety scale: Cut score determination using latent class and cluster analysis. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 36(5), 492-508.

[15] Tobias, S. (1979). Anxiety research in educational psychology. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71, 573-582.

[16] Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426-437.

[17] Zeidner, M. (1998). *Test Anxiety: The State of the Art*. Plenum.

[18] Du, M., Li, T., & Yan, X. (2017). Analysis of the effect of sandplay therapy on English learning anxiety in early school-age children. *Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences)*, 2, 127-132.

[19] Zheng, X., & Gao, H. (2003). A study on cognitive factors of test anxiety. Psychological Science, 1, 148-149.

[20] Ling, W. (1988). A study on “test anxiety”. Advances in Psychological Science, 2, 45-51.

[21] Zhang, M., & Ji, X. (2007). A quantitative analysis of research on test anxiety in China over the past 20 years. Journal of Huaibei Vocational and Technical College, 2, 94-96.

[22] Zheng, R., & Chen, Y.(Eds.). (1990). Diagnosis and Treatment of Test Anxiety. Heilongjiang Science and Technology Press.