

# International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



## Test Anxiety among Kurdish EFL Learners in Basic Schools in Kurdistan

[PP: 105-120]

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### ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to find out the level of test anxiety (TA) among Kurdish EFL learners in basic schools in Kurdistan. It also aimed to investigate the possible differences in TA among participants based on their gender, grade level, period of learning English language, and scores in English language courses. Test Anxiety Scale (TAS, Sarason, 1984), which consisted of 40 items of five-point Likert scale, was used to collect data from 396 Kurdish EFL learners. These participants were selected from 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade EFL learners in basic schools in Khanik province. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and t-test, ANOVA and correlation tests. The findings of the study revealed that Kurdish EFL learners had moderate levels of TA. Tension was the main component of Sarason TAS that manifested itself in testing situations for the participants. Significant differences were found in TA levels based on gender, grade level and years of learning English, while a negative correlation was found between English scores and TA scores. Female learners reported to be more anxious than male learners were and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students found to be the least anxious. Moreover, there were positive correlations found between years of learning English and TA scores as well as grade levels and TA scores. Based on the results, it is argued that TA is an academically learned concept that is highly influenced by previous experiences in testing and consequences of assessment. Therefore, EFL teachers and test designers need to take into account such issues when preparing tests and assessing students' performances.

**Keywords:** Test anxiety, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Kurdish learners, Kurdistan

### ARTICLE INFO

The paper received on: **11/07/2015**, Reviewed on: **30/08/2015**, Accepted after revisions on: **11/09/2015**

### Suggested citation:

Khammo, A. L. (2015). Test Anxiety among Kurdish EFL Learners in Basic Schools in Kurdistan. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 3(3), 105-120. Retrieved from <http://www.eltsjournal.org>



## 1. Introduction

As an area that attracted much attention since the 1950s, TA is considered a widespread educational problem, referring to a condition when learners do not feel confident about their abilities, which is especially reflected in their performance and test outcomes. There seems to be a range of definitions as to what the TA is and how it relates to the learning outcomes. For example, Zeidner, (1998) defines TA as a set of phenomenological, physiological and behavioural anxiety-related responses to possible negative consequences or failure on a test, which affect the learning and teaching process. Furthermore, Nemati (2012) describes anxiety up to a certain level is considered natural when the person is expected to perform in a specific way to be tested. However, Rezazadeh and Tavakoli (2009) also explain that when this amount exceeds the naturally expected levels, it is called test anxiety. There may be several reasons for experiencing test anxiety

Test anxiety is a difficult learners' state that has mental, emotional and physical elements to it. Stober (2004) claims that test anxiety decreases learners' educational achievement, life quality and internal enthusiasm and it makes difficult for them to concentrate. Rezazadeh and Tavakoli (2009) also claims that "Since test results in the most academic and occupational settings have important practical implications for a learner's goals and future career, test anxiety is frequently reported to be a meaningful factor impacting upon test scores" (pp. 68-69).

According to Rezazadeh and Tavakoli (2009), examination stress and test anxiety are pervasive problems in modern societies. Riasati (2011) explains that with the growing number of people in the world who are willing to learn English as a second/foreign

language, it is necessary to know and find out the factors which may hinder or negatively affect the language learning process, specific learning English. One of these factors which has not been paid due attention to in academic settings in Kurdistan is the language learners' levels of test anxiety. Chan and Wu (2004) mention that test anxiety negatively affects English as a foreign language (EFL) learners because it decreases the working memory for processing test information. Therefore, the sources, reasons and effects of test anxiety should be thoroughly investigated, especially for EFL learners.

### 1.1 The Aim of Study and the Research Questions

The current study will look at test anxiety behaviour of EFL students in basic schools in Kurdistan. It will try to synthesize the research findings on the sources, reasons and effects of test anxiety among Kurdish learners of English in basic schools in Kurdistan. The study also will investigate whether there are any differences in the perspectives of different group's Kurdish students concerning test anxiety. Accordingly, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. What is the level of test anxiety among EFL learners in basic schools in Kurdistan?
2. Do students' experiences differ in their experiences with test anxiety as a function of gender, grade level, time learning English or English language [proficiency]?

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Testing

Due to recent growth in human knowledge related to the role and techniques of educational evaluation, testing has gradually begun to occupy a prominent position in any educational system. Testing refers to the process that teachers and examiners employ

when trying to measure competence in the target language. According to Davies (2006), the purpose of taking a language test is to determine a person's ability and/or knowledge of the language and to discriminate that person's ability from that of other fields of knowledge. Such ability may be of different kinds, such as achievement, proficiency or aptitude. Ur (2012) also states that testing is by far the most common basis for assessment.

## *2.2 Anxiety and Classification of Anxiety*

In the previous explanations, the literature related to testing, and language testing in particular, has been covered. It indicates that anxiety is an issue that is closely associated with testing situations in language learning contexts. However, anxiety deserves a closer look on its own, as it is the focus of the current study. According to Aydin (2013), anxiety as an unpleasant emotional state in which one feels powerless, uneasy and experiences tension about an expected threat. Additionally, Nemati (2012) defines anxiety as "one of the most basic human emotions [...] in educational settings, anxiety is experienced often by the students when being evaluated such as when taking a test which is called test anxiety" (p. 97). Furthermore, (Olatoye, 2009; Huberty, 2009; Al-Sibai, 2005; Birjandi and Alemi, 2010; Loghmani and Ghonsooly, 2012), describe anxiety as an emotional factor that shows itself in trying circumstances in the form of worry and restlessness. Identify anxiety as one of the most widespread emotional conditions that students experience in any learning situation. Trifoni and Shahini (2011) state that as a result of the nature of anxiety, researchers have singled out different sub-components of this phenomenon (e.g., language anxiety, speech anxiety, social anxiety). As mentioned earlier, the current study will focus on one of these components, namely TA.

In previous studies about anxiety, researchers have identified three types of anxiety. Aydin (2009), Huberty (2009) and Subaşı (2010) classified anxiety types in general as a trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety. According to Riasati (2011), trait anxiety is the tendency of a person to be nervous or feel anxious irrespective of the circumstances he/she is exposed to do. Moreover, Subaşı (2010) regards the first type of anxiety as a general possibility trait anxiety that is applicable across different situations, whereas Huberty (2009) found that trait anxiety refers to anxiety that is constant and enveloping across states and is not activated by definite events. Trait anxiety is the foundation for a variety of anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety and social phobia. Huberty (2009) mentions that state anxiety takes place in specific states and usually has a clear cause. Andrade and Williams (2009) argue that "state anxiety, which is nervousness or tension of a particular moment in response to some outside stimulus", (p. 2). According to Subaşı (2010), the third type refers to anxiety as a temporary emotional condition that occurs in certain situations. Aydin (2009) stated that situation-specific anxiety is unique to certain situations and actions. Subaşı (2010), the third approach looks at the specific structures of anxiety that take place consistently over time within a given circumstance. In relation to TA, Zeidner (1998) explains that the term "test anxiety" has been used to refer to a number of connected yet very different constructs, including stressful evaluative situations, individual differences in anxiety levels in evaluative situations (i.e. trait anxiety), and fluctuating anxiety states accomplished in a test condition (i.e. state anxiety).

## *2.3 Language Anxiety and Test Anxiety*

### *2.3.1 Language Anxiety*



According to Trang (2012), language anxiety became a popular research topic in the field of second and foreign language learning over 30 years ago and it is still a controversial issue. Lucas, Miraflores, and Go (2011) state that emotional factors such as attitude, motivation and anxiety were considered to account for successful language learning results. Anxiety, measured as one of the most important emotional factors, has been studied since the 1970s. According to Ohata (2005), in light of the difficult, multidimensional nature of language anxiety, one of the possible approaches is to study the nature of language anxiety using descriptions of emotional experiences of exacting learners or a group of L2 learners who share the same cultural background and information.

According to Azarfam and Baki (2012), there are two approaches to the classification of language anxiety. First, language anxiety in the broader meaning is a basic human feeling and emotion that, as McIntyre (1995) claims, may be brought on by several combinations of situational issues. For instance, a shy learner may feel anxious and worried when asked to give a short speech in front of all the learners in the classroom. Second, Horwitz (2001) defines language anxiety as a combination of other anxieties that produce an inequitable form of anxiety inherent to the language learning process. However, the second view on language anxiety considers that there is something, which is exclusive in the language learning process that makes some people nervous and anxious.

Wu (2010) found that test anxiety seems to be a problem of language acquisition throughout the learning process. The factor of anxiety-provoking sources should be taken into consideration. It is the teachers' responsibility to produce a less frightening atmosphere, to encourage and support learner

confidence. Wu continues that more motivated students come to be more successful language learners. In addition, Aydin and Zengin (2008) mention that personal differences such as beliefs, feelings, expectations, attitudes, motivation levels, and emotional states have significant effects on the foreign language learning process.

### 2.3.2 Test Anxiety

According to Rezazadeh and Tavakoli (2009) "test anxiety refers to a special case of general anxiety consisting of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioural response" (p. 69). Nemati (2012) indicates that TA may have significant negative effects on a learner's ability to achieve at an optimal level. Aydin (2009) found that the relationship between test anxiety and foreign/second language learning indicates that TA is a significant variable, which affects the language learning process. Rezazadeh and Tavakoli (2009) state that TA has appeared as one of the most salient constructs in modern-day psychology and by far the most widely studied specific form of anxiety in the literature. According to Nemati (2012), there are different factors that contribute to the development of TA:

One factor is self-concept, which is the overall sum of self-referent information that an individual has processed, stored and organized in a systematic manner. Another factor that contributes to the development of test anxiety is self-awareness. It is defined as the feeling of being observed or evaluated by others. (p. 97)

Bedewy and Gabriel (2013), on the other hand, argue that TA is a special type of anxiety, which is characterized by somatic, cognitive and behavioural signs of anxiety in states of preparing and performing in examinations. (Trifoni and Shahini, 2011; Olatoye, 2009) mention that TA showed that some of the factors influencing learners' reactions to examinations are related to test

validity, time limit, test techniques, test format and length, testing environment, and clarity of test instructions.

In his study, Zeidner (1998) reveals that in any test situation, test-anxious learners may experience all, some, or none of the test anxiety reactions mentioned earlier. The specific anxiety response may differ depending on the personality traits and previous experience of the individual, the nature of the problem to be solved, and different situational features affecting the level of anxiety. According to Önem (2012), the association between anxiety and success has been studied in a great body of research, and models to clarify the connection between anxiety and success have been studied.

In his research, Ohata (2005) found that most of the students said that they were afraid when they were taking tests because test-taking situations would make them feel more anxious and nervous about the negative consequences of getting a bad mark. This factor would lead to other psychological tensions and stresses, such as the fear of losing self-confidence or feeling lower than others would. In addition, some learners said they sometimes felt stressed and pressured to think that they had to arrange their ideas and thoughts in a short period of time (e.g., essay tests) while caring about grammar mistakes at the same time, (Ohata, 2005). Aydin (2009) argues that language proficiency and ability, environment, time, gender, age, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, test techniques and formats significantly correlate with the level of TA among EFL language learners. What's more, he explains that TA significantly affects learners' levels of academic achievement, performance, proficiency, ability and language skills. Despite the negative connotations of the term TA and the numerous negative effects listed in the literature, Cassady and Johnson's (2002)

examination of the relation between the emotional element of TA and performance revealed that moderate levels of physiological stimulation generally were connected with higher exam performance.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Design***

The current study was designed as a survey study with a quantitative approach. However, the current study used the Test Anxiety Scale (TAS) designed by Sarason (1984) to investigate the levels and sources of anxiety amongst Kurdish English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner in basic school in Kurdistan.

#### ***3.2 Population and the Sampling***

Participants in the current study were chosen amongst Kurdish EFL learners studying at three different grade levels (seventh grade, eighth grade, and ninth grade) in the basic schools in Khanik province in Kurdistan. Khanik Province is a small city in the Dohuk Governorate in Kurdistan. About 25,000 people live in this city and a great majority of the residents have Kurdish nationality. All of the schools in this city are public schools. The total number of students in the basic schools in this province at the time of the study was 1185. The distribution of students among five existing basic schools in the province from which the sample of the current study was chosen randomly. A total of 396 students participated in the study by filling in the TAS. The table 1, also show the distribution of the sample based on gender, their mark for the English language courses in the last year and the number of years that they have been learning English. In order to facilitate students' understanding of the items in the TAS and increase the validity of the questionnaire, the TAS constructed by Sarason was translated into Kurdish language by the researcher and the final version was sent to the Ministry of Education in Kurdistan



Government in Kurdistan to receive permission for the documents to be distributed in basic schools. Once the permission was granted, the questionnaires were distributed to the learners during their English language lessons by the researcher himself. Information about the aims of the study and guidelines on how to fill in the questionnaires was provided to the students in advance by the researcher. Finally, the researcher gave the participants an hour to fill in the questionnaire. This time was divided into two parts; first 10 minutes were given to answer and fill up demographic information part and then 50 minutes were given to respond to the TA items.

### 3.3 Instruments

The instrument that was used to collect descriptive data consisted of two parts: The first part aimed at collecting information about the participants' background and demographic data for the purposes of comparison. The demographic information collected from the participants included gender, grade level, the amount of time for learning English language, and their English language score for the past academic year. The second part of the instrument included the TAS (Test Anxiety Scale) developed by Sarason (1984) (see appendix). This part aimed to find out the levels and sources of TA among Kurdish EFL learners in Kurdistan. The TAS consisted of 40 statements. Based on the factorial analysis carried out by Sarason (1984), the items in the scale are divided into four different components in order to find out the levels and sources of TA among Kurdish learners. These components consist of (a) tension, (b) worry, (c) test-irrelevant thinking, and (d) bodily symptoms. The participants were asked to state the frequency of experiencing the given conditions on a five point Likert-scale (never, sometimes, usually, often, and always). Total

scores computed for each of the participants to decide on the levels of TA among the participants.

For the reliability of the questionnaire, the Cronbach Alpha score of the questionnaire used in the current study, which was calculated to be 0.872, showed a high level of reliability.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Data collected through the survey was analysed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20. Descriptive statistics namely mean scores, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages were calculated for all items. T-test and ANOVA tests were used to find out the significant differences between the TA scores of groups of participants based on the variables identified in the research questions. These variables were gender, grade level, English mark and the amount of time for learning English. Post-hoc analysis was carried out where significant differences were found. Finally, correlation analysis was carried out to see if there were any significant correlations between TA and these variables.

*Table 1: Distribution of participants based on gender, grade, their marks and years of learning*

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	180	45.5 %
Female	216	54.5 %
Total	396	100%
Grade level		
7th Grade	142	35.9 %
8th Grade	116	29.3 %
9th Grade	138	34.8 %
Total	396	100.0 %
English Mark		
50-59	176	44.4 %
60-69	97	24.5 %
70-79	59	14.9 %
80-89	39	9.8 %
90-100	25	6.3 %
Total	396	100.0 %
Years of Learning		
4-5 years	46	11.6%
6-7 years	113	28.6%
8-9 years	183	46.2%
10 + years	54	13.6%
Total	396	100.0%

As can be seen from Table, the majority of EFL learners in the current study were females (54.5%), whereas 45.5% were males. Similarly, table shows that the majority of participants were seventh grader (35.9%), which reflects the original percentages in the population, whereas 116 of them were 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The remaining 138 were 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

However, the table shows that based on the students' marks in English courses they took in the previous year, the majority of participants in the current study were learners who have marks between 50 and 59, this added up 44.4% of the total amount of participants there were no students who scored lower than 50. In addition, 24.5% of the learners received a mark between 60 and 69 in their English lessons the previous year. While 14.9% of the learners scored between 70 and 79 in English, 16.1% received the highest marks, which were between 80 and 100. The table also suggests that more than 270 Kurdish EFL learners received scores less than 70.

### 3.5 Findings and discussion

#### 3.5.1 The Level of Test Anxiety among EFL Learners in Kurdistan

The results of the current analysis of data on TA among Kurdish EFL learners in basic schools of Kurdistan indicated that overall, the learners have a moderate level of TA ( $M = 91.63$ ,  $SD = 21.12$ ).

Table 2: Level of TA among Kurdish EFL learners in basic schools

Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Range	Level of TA
91.63	21.12	396	123	Moderate

Sarason (1984) divided TAS into four components: (a) Tension, (b) Worry, (c) Test-irrelevant thinking, and (d) Bodily symptoms. Different mean scores for each component was calculated and the results indicated that there were differences in relation to these sub-components of TA among Kurdish EFL learners in Kurdistan.

Table 3: Distribution of TA scores according to sub-components

Components	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tension	2.52	1.38
Worry	2.41	1.47
Bodily symptoms	2.26	1.31
Test-irrelevant thinking	2.00	1.27

It is clear from Table 3 that tension seems to be the biggest issue among the participants in relation to TA ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ). In terms of the remaining three components, the mean scores suggest that the participants were neutral about worrying about the test ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) and having bodily symptoms ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), while they reported that they did not have test-irrelevant thinking ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

The current analysis showed that from 396 Kurdish EFL learners that took part in the study, some participants had higher levels of TA and others had low and moderate levels of TA. These participants were divided into three groups according to their levels of TA.

Table 4: Distribution of participants and levels of TA



Levels of TA among Kurdish EFL learners	N	Percentage
Low level of TA	141	35.6 %
Moderate level of TA	253	63.9 %
High level of TA	2	0.50 %
Total	396	100 %

As shown in Table 4, about 63.9 % Kurdish EFL learners had a moderate level of TA, meaning that more than half of the learners in the study were moderately anxious when taking tests. Only two learners had high levels of TA and the rest of the participants (N =141) had low levels of TA.

When individual factors of anxiety were examined, it was found that some issues were experienced more often than others were by EFL learners. The results of the study revealed that the most important issue that Kurdish EFL learners face in relation to TA was experiencing physical symptoms of anxiety when they were taking tests. In this respect, the item that received the highest mean score was whether the participants lapsed into tachycardia before the test started or not (M = 3.16, SD. = 1.52). In addition, descriptive statistics of the study show that the participants' anxiety levels on the day of the test were higher compared to the days before (M = 3.10, SD. = 5.16). Fear of failing the test was another factor, which affected the participants. According to the results of the study, the participants were worried about the final evaluation/result of the test (M = 3.04, SD. = 2.77). Finally, the participants pointed out that they felt tense during the time of the test as well (M = 2.95, SD. = 1.38). Hence, it can be observed from the items with the highest mean scores that TA among the participants were mostly about the worry and tension they felt on the day of the test as well as the duration of the test. In addition, the fear of evaluation seems to be a factor that triggers TA.

Table 5: Items with the highest mean scores in the TAS

No	Items		Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
11	My heart beats faster when the test begins.	Never	62	15.7%	3.16	1.52
		Sometimes	121	30.6%		
		Usually	26	6.6%		
		Often	66	16.7%		
		Always	121	30.6%		
6	I find myself becoming anxious on the day of a test.	Never	80	20.2%	3.10	5.16
		Sometimes	108	27.3%		
		Usually	29	7.3%		
		Often	49	12.4%		
		Always	130	32.8%		
8	During a difficult test, I worry whether I will pass it.	Never	49	12.4%	3.04	2.77
		Sometimes	160	40.4%		
		Usually	30	7.6%		
		Often	87	22%		
		Always	69	17.4%		
15	While taking a test, I feel tense.	Never	44	11.1%	2.95	1.38
		Sometimes	172	43.4%		
		Usually	19	4.8%		
		Often	83	21%		
		Always	78	19.7%		

In contrast to the fear of evaluation at the end of the test, the participants pointed out that they did not feel that they were preoccupied with the thoughts of doing poorly during the exam period (M = 1.36, SD. = 1.02). The same thought also does not seem to interfere with their concentration (M = 1.65, SD. = 1.10). Therefore, it appears that the only factor that triggers TA and interferes with the performance of the students is the fear of final evaluation. Table 9 shows the mean scores for the lowest scored items.

Having a fast heartbeat at the beginning of the test appeared to be the only physical symptom of TA that was common among the participants because other physical symptoms such as stomach aches (M = 1.57, SD. = 1.27) or the frequent need to go to the toilet (M = 1.69, SD. = 1.09), were not common symptoms.

Table 6: Items with the lowest mean scores in the TAS



No	Items		Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
27	Thoughts of doing poorly interfere with my concentration during tests.	Never	334	84.3%	.36	.02
		Sometimes	23	5.8%		
		Usually	13	3.3%		
		Often	16	4%		
		Always	10	2.5%		
14	My stomach gets upset before tests.	Never	282	71.2%	.57	.27
		Sometimes	57	14.4%		
		Usually	12	3%		
		Often	34	8.6%		
		Always	11	2.8%		
34	During tests, I think about how poorly I am doing.	Never	49	12.4%	.65	.10
		Sometimes	160	40.4%		
		Usually	30	7.6%		
		Often	87	22%		
		Always	69	17.4%		
10	I feel the need to go to the toilet more often than usual during a test.	Never	249	62.9%	.69	.09
		Sometimes	78	19.7%		
		Usually	23	5.8%		
		Often	36	9.1%		
		Always	10	2.5%		

### 3.5.2 Levels of TA based on different variables

In order to understand the relationship between certain variables and TA, further analysis of correlation and significance tests were carried out. In the following sections, these variables will be investigated one by one.

#### Gender and TA

The results of the present study show that female learners were more anxious and worried during tests. In other words, female learners were found to have high levels of TA, whereas male learners had moderate levels of TA. There were 59 (14.9%) male learners in the study who had low levels of TA, whereas 121 (30.6%) male learners had moderate levels of TA. There were not any male learners with high levels of TA in the current study. While 82 (20.7%) female learners had low levels of TA, 132 (33.3%) females scored moderate levels of TA. The two learners who scored the highest on the TAS were both females (0.50 %).

Table 7: Levels of TA based on gender

Levels of TA	Gender	N	Percentage
Low level of TA	Male	59	14.9 %
	Female	82	20.7 %
Moderate level of TA	Male	121	30.6 %
	Female	132	33.3 %
High level of TA	Male	0	0.0 %
	Female	2	0.50 %
Total		396	100 %

As we can see from Table 7, the percentage of female learners with low and moderate levels of TA was also higher than that of male learners. This finding correlates with that of Zaheri, Shahoei, and Zaheri (2012), who found that TA was more common among female learners. Despite these findings, when the mean scores of male and female learners are observed, it is seen that the mean scores for females (M = 91.65, SD = 21.12) is very close to that of males (M = 91.62, SD = 22.65), which makes it difficult to anticipate any meaningful differences between the two groups in general.

Table 8: TA mean scores based on the gender

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Male	91.62	180	21.12
Female	91.65	216	22.65
Total	91.63	396	21.94

#### Grade level and TA

According to the findings of the current study, levels of TA varied between learners of different grade levels. Sixty (15.2 %) 7<sup>th</sup> grade EFL learners had low levels of TA, 34 (8.6 %) 8<sup>th</sup> grade learners had low levels of TA, and 47 (11.8 %) 9<sup>th</sup> grade EFL learners had low levels of TA. Among students who had moderate levels of TA, 82 (20.7 %) were 7<sup>th</sup> graders, 80 (20.2 %) were 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and 91 (23 %) were 9<sup>th</sup> graders. However, only



two (0.50 %) 8<sup>th</sup> grade EFL learners had a high level of TA.

*Table 9: Levels of TA based on grade levels*

Levels of TA	Grade level	N	Percentage
Low level of TA	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	60	15.2 %
	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	34	8.6 %
	9 <sup>th</sup> grade	47	11.8 %
Moderate level of TA	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	82	20.7 %
	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	80	20.2 %
	9 <sup>th</sup> grade	91	23 %
High level of TA	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	0	0.0 %
	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	2	0.50 %
	9 <sup>th</sup> grade	0	0.0 %
Total		396	100 %

In the present study, 8<sup>th</sup> grade EFL learners were found to have the highest levels of TA ( $M = 95.08$ ,  $SD = 21.73$ ), whereas 7<sup>th</sup> graders were the lowest anxious about tests ( $M = 87.38$ ,  $SD = 22.81$ ).

*Table 10: TA mean scores based on the grade level*

Grade level	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	95.08	116	21.73
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	93.12	138	20.62
7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	87.38	142	22.81
Total	91.63	396	21.94

### *English score and TA*

The results of the analysis showed that the lowest level of TA was found among learners whose marks were between 90-100 in their English classes with an average TAS score of 74.60.

As expected, the lowest scoring students in English (marks between 50 and 59) were the highest scoring ones in TAS ( $M = 96.06$ ,  $SD = 21.96$ ). The majority of EFL learners (253 people) had a moderate level of TA. Their marks varied between 50 and 59 (31 %), 60 and 69 (17.4 %), 70 and 79 (8.1 %), 80 and 89 (5.1 %), 90 and 100 (2.3 %).

*Table 11: TA mean scores based on participants' English marks*

English Mark	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
50-59	96.06	176	21.96
60-69	94.01	97	20.15
70-79	85.90	59	21.36
80-89	85.38	39	21.72
90-100	74.60	25	17.87
Total	91.63	396	21.94

*Table 12: Levels of TA based on English score*

Levels of TA	English mark	N	Percentage
Low level of TA	50-59	52	13.1 %
	60-69	27	6.8 %
	70-79	27	6.8 %
	80-89	19	4.8 %
	90-100	16	4 %
Moderate level of TA	50-59	123	31 %
	60-69	69	17.4 %
	70-79	32	8.1 %
	80-89	20	5.1 %
	90-100	9	2.3 %
High level of TA	50-59	1	0.25 %
	60-69	1	0.25 %
	70-79	0	0.0 %
	80-89	0	0.0 %
	90-100	0	0.0 %
Total		396	100 %

Only two EFL learners had a high level of TA, and those learners scored the lowest in their English marks. One of them had an English language score between 50 and 59 (0.25 %), another between 60 and 69 (0.25 %). About 192 (48.4 %) of learners had moderate levels of TA. These students' English marks ranged from 50 to 100 with only 9 of them scoring between 90-100 in

their English lessons. It was clear from the findings that the learners who had a low mark had higher levels of TA.

#### Years of learning English and TA

As mentioned in previous sections, there were distributions of EFL learners who had high, moderate and low levels of TA. See table 13 and following explanation about years of learning English language and TA at the schools.

*Table 13: Levels of TA based on years of learning English language*

Levels of TA	Years of learning	N	Percentage
Low level of TA	4-5	14	3.5 %
	6-7	54	13.6 %
	8-9	63	15.9 %
	10 +	10	2.5 %
Moderate level of TA	4-5	32	8.1 %
	6-7	59	14.9 %
	8-9	118	29.8 %
	10 +	44	11.1 %
High level of TA	4-5	0	0.0 %
	6-7	0	0.0 %
	8-9	2	0.50 %
	10 +	0	0.0 %
<b>Total</b>		396	100 %

Among learners who had low levels of TA, there were 14 (3.5 %) participants who had been studying the English language for 4-5 years, 54 (13.6 %) participants who had been learning English for 6-7 years, 63 (15.9 %) of learners who had been taking English courses for 8-9 years, and only 10 (2.5 %) learners with more than 10 years of experience. According to the results of the current study, 253 participants had moderate levels of TA. These participants were distributed as follows, according to years of learning English: 14 (8.1 %) learners – between 4 and 5 years, 59 (14.9 %) – between 6 and 7 years, 118 (29.8 %) – between 8 and 9 years, and 44 (11.1 %) – 10 or more. Finally, only two EFL

learners had high levels of TA, and both of them had been studying the English language for 8-9 years.

#### Relationship between TA and different variables

The results of the correlation analyses revealed that there were significant relationships between TA and the identified variables. First, as earlier analysis of the results has also suggested, a negative correlation was found between the English mark and total anxiety score ( $r [396] = -.00, p < .01$ ). The higher the English mark was, the lower the level of TA was. Aydin (2009) found that having good marks increases the learners' confidence in passing tests. In addition, Aydin, Yavuz, and Yesilyurt (2006) indicate that:

The higher the scores are, the less the level of test anxiety is. In other words, the students who have high scores feel more confident and relaxed than the ones who have lower scores. The participants with lower marks often think unrelated things during the exam will fail and cannot be sure if they will succeed. (p. 155)

Moreover, Aydin (2013) found that learners who had good marks on tests felt more self-confident during subsequent exams. The authors state here that when learners have bad marks, their performance is affected more negatively than that of the students with higher scores, causing even higher levels of anxiety and turning test-taking experience into a vicious cycle.

*Table 14: Pearson Correlation of TA and variables*

	Gender	Grade level	Time of learning English	English mark
Pearson Correlation	-.001	.111*	.123*	-.267**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.496	.027*	.014*	.000*
N	396	396	396	396

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) \*.  
Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) \*\*.

According to the findings of the present research, there was a positive correlation between years of learning English and test



anxiety score ( $r [396] = .14, p < .05$ ). Although this was not an initially expected result, as one would expect that people get used to taking exams as they study a subject matter for several years, it indicated that TA is constructed that is learnt over the years. This finding is significant as it is also different from Rezazadeh and Tavakoli's (2009) findings, who stated that there was no meaningful relationship between test anxiety and years of study in a subject matter. Similarly, another positive correlation was found between grade levels and test anxiety score ( $r [396] = .27, p < .05$ ). This meant that TA was more common among upper-grade students, which confirmed the previous argument about TA being learnt over the years. Finally, no correlation was found in the current study between the gender of Kurdish EFL learners and test anxiety score.

The main purpose of this study was to look at the TA behaviour of Kurdish EFL learners at basic schools. According to the findings of the questionnaire, the following main results were obtained from data analysis:

- It was revealed that Kurdish EFL learners in basic schools in Kurdistan had moderate levels of TA.
- The main component of TA that affected the participants' TA behaviours was tension. The mean scores suggest that the participants were neutral about worrying about the test and having bodily-symptoms during tests, while participants reported that they did not have test-irrelevant thinking.
- The results showed that there were significant differences between TA levels experienced by different genders. Females reported that they felt less comfortable and self-confident while taking tests compared to males, which meant that female learners had more TA

than male learners while they were taking tests.

- There was a negative correlation found between the English scores of participants and total anxiety score on the questionnaire, meaning that learners who had high marks in English courses scored lower in TAS.
- The results of the study indicated that students in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade were the least anxious group about taking tests and that there was a positive correlation between TA scores and grade levels. In other words, as the grade level increased, TA score also increased.
- There was a positive correlation between years of learning English and TA scores. Kurdish EFL learners who studied English language for more than 8 years had more TA than learners who studied English for less than 8 years.
- It seems that TA had been learnt because EFL learners with high-grade levels and more years of studying English scored to have more TA at the time of testing. Based on these findings, it was argued in the previous chapter that Kurdish EFL learners in basic schools of Kurdistan learnt TA as they progressed through the education system.
- Students who are used to succeeding have less anxiety than students who are always in danger of failing.

Furthermore, the results of the present study seem to be largely in agreement with the previous studies about TA (Zaheri, Shahoei, & Zaheri, 2012; Aydin, 2009; Nemati, 2012; Rana & Mahmood, 2010; Trifoni & Shahini, 2011; Yeşilel, 2012).. However, the participants scored each component of Sarason TAS differently. In terms of the remaining three components, the mean scores suggested that Kurdish EFL learners were neutral about worrying about

the test and having bodily symptoms, while they reported that they did not have test-irrelevant thinking during tests.

According to the results of the current study, Kurdish EFL learners scored highly in tension (stress) related items in TAS. Moreover, they reported that they felt anxious and unhappy on the day of the test and before. In relation to anxiety, EFL learners felt distressed and panicky when they took the tests. The researchers further state that if learners are taught how to manage their emotional anxiety, it can help in improving their academic achievements (Rana & Mahmood, 2010). This is particularly important in thinking about the relationship between previous performances in tests (previous English scores) and TA. As will be discussed later in this section, the tension experienced before the exams can directly affect the performance of the learners in that test and can also impact the outcome. This is also supported by the findings of the current study regarding worry. The results showed that thoughts about the difficulty of the test were important features that students reported as increasing their worry about tests. Learners also seemed to be highly worried about the outcome of the test, especially focusing on failure related issues. According to Aydin (2009), worry can be aroused, leading to the TA when EFL learners imagine that other learners are better than they are. This indicates that the type of the exam and the approaches used in the assessment and evaluation of students are very important factors leading to TA. If students take tests in very competitive situations and their performances are compared to others', then they tend to feel more worried about the test and its outcomes. This, however, was beyond the scope of this study, as it would require an in-depth examination of the assessment and evaluation methods used in basic schools in

Kurdistan and their possible relationship to TA.

#### Recommendations for Practice

According to the findings of the current study, some recommendations can be presented for further practice:

- EFL curriculum designers and language teachers should review their principles for assessment and evaluation of learning in the basic schools in 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grades in Kurdistan because one of the major findings of this study revealed that TA is learnt in school. More importantly, it is affected by the previous performances of students in tests and it also affects students' performances in future tests due to fear of negative consequences.
- EFL teachers should try to avoid focusing too much on assessment and evaluation through tests and should incorporate other communicative ways of measuring foreign language performance. As Aydin (2006) mentions, creating a low-stress language environment is believed to simplify the acquisition of second language by allowing learners to focus on communication rather than be distracted by TA.
- Teachers and parents should be aware that female students might need more assistance in dealing with symptoms of TA.
- Kurdish EFL learners in Kurdistan should be made conscious of what TA is and training in overcoming TA should be part of the academic curriculum in the basic school program and as part of the psychological counselling unit.

#### Suggestions for further research

Further recommendations can be made in relation to future research studies based on the findings of the current study. First, this investigation was limited in its methods as it employed a predetermined set of items to



investigate the level of TA among the participants. It does not provide information about the actual experience of anxiety by the participants in relation to any other possible components other than the ones identified in TAS. Moreover, this study was conducted with the basic school students only in one particular region in Kurdistan. In other words, the scale used in this study can be applied to different groups of students from different basic schools in different regions of in Kurdistan for comparison. Interviews with Kurdish EFL learners from different levels and different places might be more helpful to understand and find out the reasons, sources and effects of TA behind EFL learners' lapsing to have TA at the basic schools in Kurdistan. Moreover, a study focusing on the EFL teachers' attitudes toward TA may reveal important information regarding the role of the teachers in this process.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This section summarizes the findings of the current study and draws conclusions about TA and Kurdish EFL learners in basic schools in Kurdistan. Furthermore, some recommendations and suggestions were given in order to help learners, teachers and researchers find out sources and levels of TA and reduce these among Kurdish EFL learners in Kurdistan. Although the results suggest that EFL learners have moderate levels of anxiety, TA in basic schools should be measured in a consistent way to help deal with this problem and its possible negative effects on students' performances. This means that not only teachers and learners, but also parents, administrators and school counsellors should be involved in the process to provide adequate support. It is essential for this support system to be accessible to every Kurdish EFL learner in Kurdistan. Although TA is not the only problem that EFL learners face in Kurdistan in learning English, dealing

with its sources and consequences will help them to improve themselves in many aspects.

#### **About the Author**

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#### Appendix

Test Anxiety Scale TAS (Sarason, 1984)

Put a tick (✓) in the column that you choose

1. Gender: Male  Female

2. Grade level: 7<sup>th</sup>  8<sup>th</sup>  9<sup>th</sup>



3. What was your average mark for English last year?

.....

4. How many years you have been taking English?

4-5 years  6-7 years  8-9 years  10+ years

No.	Questionnaire's item	Never	Sometimes	Usually	Often	Always
1	I feel distressed and uneasy before tests.					
2	The thought, "what happens if I fail this test?" Goes through my mind during tests.					
3	During tests, I find myself thinking of things unrelated to the material being tested.					
4	I become aware of my body during tests (feeling itches, pain, sweat, and nausea).					
5	I freeze up when I think about an upcoming test.					
6	I feel jittery before tests.					
7	Irrelevant bits of information pop into my head during a test.					
8	During a difficult test, I worry whether I will pass it.					
9	While taking a test, I find myself thinking how much brighter the other people are.					
10	I feel the need to go to the toilet more often than usual during a test.					
11	My heart beats faster when the test begins.					
12	My mind wanders during tests.					
13	After a test, I say to myself, "It is over and I did as well as I could."					
14	My stomach gets upset before tests.					
15	While taking a test, I feel tense.					
16	I find myself becoming anxious on the day of a test.					
17	While taking a test, I often do not pay attention to the questions.					
18	I think about current events during a test.					
19	I get a headache during an important test.					
20	Before taking a test, I worry about failure.					
21	While taking a test, I often think about how difficult it is.					
22	I wish tests did not bother me so much.					
23	I get a headache before a test.					
24	I have fantasies a few times during a test.					
25	I sometimes feel dizzy after a test.					
26	I am anxious about tests.					
27	Thoughts of doing poorly interfere with my concentration during tests.					
28	While taking tests, I sometimes think about being somewhere else.					
29	During tests, I find I am distracted by thoughts of upcoming events.					
30	My hands often feel cold before and during a test.					
31	My mouth feels dry during a test.					
32	I daydream during tests.					
33	I feel panicky during tests.					
34	During tests, I think about how poorly I am doing.					
35	Before tests, I feel troubled about what is going to happen.					
36	The harder I work at taking a test, the more confused I get.					
37	I sometimes find myself trampling before or during tests.					
38	During tests, I think about past events.					
39	During the tests, I wonder how the other people are doing.					
40	I have an uneasy feeling before an important test.					