

Supporting Arabic Language Learners Experiencing Test Anxiety

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Test anxiety can be a concern for some Arabic language learners and may influence their performance, even when they are highly motivated. This Faculty Forum article describes an established instructional practice designed to support students' target-language learning and preparation for major assessments. After the Unit One assessment, eight students completed selected scales from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). The responses revealed that several highly motivated students also reported high test anxiety. To address this concern, the teaching team provided structured support for two months before ICPT 101. The support included zero-hour reviews, scheduled low-stakes quizzes targeting specific and measurable skills, test-taking strategies, focused language practice, and individualized feedback. Although classroom observations indicated that students benefited from clear routines and consistent support, the results cannot establish that these practices reduced anxiety or improved test performance. Test anxiety was not measured a second time, and the two assessments measured different outcomes under different conditions. Despite these limitations, the practice offers a reasonable and practical response to an important student need. The article encourages DLIFLC instructors to use structured preparation, targeted practice, and individualized support to help learners approach assessments with greater confidence.

Keywords: *Test Anxiety, Arabic Language Learning, Formative Assessment, MSLQ, Reflective Practice*

INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGE

In an intensive language program, assessment performance affects instructional decisions, learner confidence, and progress toward proficiency goals. In this class, several students participated actively, prepared consistently, and demonstrated course knowledge during daily instruction, yet performed less strongly than expected on the Unit One assessment. Post-

assessment conversations and classroom observations suggested that timed conditions, unfamiliar item formats, and the perceived consequences of formal testing made it difficult for some students to concentrate, manage time, and retrieve language they had used successfully during instruction.

This discrepancy prompted a practical question: How could the teaching team prepare students for assessment demands without turning instruction into repeated high-stakes testing? The concern was especially relevant because the same eight students would take ICPT 101 approximately two months later. The goal of the response was not to prove that particular activities or approaches reduced anxiety. Rather, it was to make assessment preparation more predictable, provide repeated opportunities to practice under manageable conditions, and help students develop strategies for approaching demanding language tasks.

RESEARCH-SUPPORTED DISCUSSION

Test anxiety involves thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions that can interfere with performance (Zeidner, 1998). Anxiety may reduce the attention and working memory students need for demanding tasks (Eysenck et al., 2007). This concern is important in language assessments because learners must understand new input, recall vocabulary, monitor accuracy, and often respond within a limited time. Research has also linked foreign language anxiety with weaker performance and greater self-consciousness during evaluation (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986).

Strong motivation does not always prevent test anxiety. The MSLQ measures motivation, self-regulation, and test anxiety as separate but related areas (Pintrich et al., 1993). A student may work hard, value the course, and prepare carefully but still have difficulty during an assessment. Therefore, instructors should not automatically view low test performance as evidence of low effort or weak motivation.

This issue is especially relevant at DLIFLC, where students learn complex languages in an intensive program. They must develop several skills quickly and demonstrate both achievement and proficiency. Clear preparation, scheduled practice, and practical test-taking strategies may help students approach assessments with greater readiness. These supports are intended to complement regular language instruction, not replace it.

Classroom Evidence That Informed the Response

Immediately after the Unit One assessment, the eight students completed selected MSLQ scales using a 7-point response format. Four students reported test-anxiety scores between 6.0 and 6.6, whereas four reported scores between 2.0 and 2.8. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation scores were generally moderate to high, although individual variation was present. These descriptive results reinforced the teaching team's observation that motivation and test anxiety could coexist. They were used as a needs-assessment snapshot, not as a pretest in an experimental design.

Unit One grades and later ICPT 101 results provided additional classroom context, but they were not treated as equivalent pre- and post-assessments. Unit One measured achievement in taught content across listening, reading, speaking, and translation/transcription, while ICPT 101 assessed proficiency under different conditions and did not include the same set of constructs. Although students reporting higher anxiety often showed weaker or less consistent performance patterns, the small group, one-time MSLQ administration, and assessment differences prevent causal conclusions. The appropriate interpretation is that the combined information identified a learner-support concern and guided instructional planning.

THE TEACHING RESPONSE

During the approximately two-month period between Unit One and ICPT 101, the teaching team used five connected practices that form part of the instructional routine in every course: zero-hour review, low-stakes quizzes, explicit strategy instruction, structured review, and targeted practice with individualized feedback. Regular lessons continued to follow the course curriculum. These recurring supports were designed to make assessment processes visible, provide more brief retrieval opportunities, and use learner-specific performance patterns to plan follow-up practice. Research suggests that retrieval practice may support durable learning when learners actively recall information rather than only restudy it (Karpicke & Blunt, 2011; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). Formative assessment may also inform later instruction when evidence of learning is used to adjust teaching activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Replicable Eight-Week Implementation Model

The schedule below provides a consistent eight-week structure for implementing this established course practice (see Table 1). Instructors should adapt the dosage to course schedules, proficiency levels, student needs, available zero-hour time, and local policy. Adaptation is an expected part of responsive instruction, but the purpose of each component should remain clear and its implementation should be documented.

Table 1
Eight-Week Implementation Model

Component	Frequency	Duration	Procedure	Evidence for Adjustment
Zero-hour review	Three Times weekly	45 min	Review one listening or reading task; pre-teach/recycle vocabulary; model one strategy; complete timed practice; debrief errors.	Attendance, error patterns, student questions
Low-stakes quiz	Three Times weekly	10-15 min	Use 5-8 ungraded or completion-graded items on recently taught vocabulary, listening, reading, spelling, or transcription.	Item-level responses determine reteaching groups
Targeted practice	Three times weekly	15-20 min	Assign short tasks by need: decoding, key-word listening, contextual vocabulary, spelling patterns, pacing, or oral response planning.	Individual feedback log and next task
Structured review	Weekly	30 min	Mixed-skill spiral review in individual, pair, and whole-class phases; end with a two-minute reflection.	Reflection notes and common misconceptions

Zero-Hour Review

A repeatable session follows five steps. First, the instructor states a narrow objective, such as identifying transition words in a short listening passage. Second, students complete a brief diagnostic item independently. Third, the instructor models the target process aloud, including how to preview directions, identify key information, eliminate implausible options, and move forward when uncertain. Fourth, students apply the process to a parallel item individually or in pairs. Fifth, the class reviews why each answer is supported and records one strategy for the next assessment. Materials may include a one-page review guide, short audio or reading excerpts, vocabulary-in-context cards, practice questions, a timer, and an error-analysis form.

Low-Stakes Quizzes and Feedback

Brief quizzes should be scheduled and communicated to students in advance; they should not be administered as surprise quizzes. Before each quiz, the instructor clearly states the content and skills that will be assessed so students know what to review. The quizzes focus primarily on previously learned material, such as vocabulary, structures, listening or reading content from the previous day's lesson, or key material from a previous chapter. This transparent and predictable approach is intended to keep the quizzes focused on retrieval, review, and feedback rather than add uncertainty. A practical format is five to eight items completed in eight to ten minutes. Quizzes may be ungraded or recorded for completion so that their purpose remains practice and feedback. Research suggests that retrieval attempts may support later retention, particularly when practice requires learners to reconstruct knowledge (Karpicke & Blunt, 2011; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). The instructor reviews item-level patterns the same day. A misconception shared by most students becomes a short whole-class reteach; a pattern affecting two or three learners becomes a small-group task; an isolated error receives individual feedback. Students correct answers and explain the evidence or process that supports each correction. This cycle is consistent with formative assessment because evidence of learning is used to guide later instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Feedback may be most helpful when it clarifies the learning goal, current performance, and a possible next step rather than merely identifying an error (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Targeted Practice: Strategies Taught Explicitly

Strategy instruction may be more useful when the teacher models, guides, and then gradually releases responsibility. Strategy support can connect affective needs to concrete language-learning behaviors while taking account of individual differences in anxiety, motivation, and self-regulation (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Oxford, 2017). The recurring course practice emphasizes behaviors that students may apply across tasks:

- *Pacing*: Divide available time by sections, mark a halfway checkpoint, and move past one difficult item rather than allowing it to consume the assessment.
- *Goal setting*: Use scheduled quizzes with specific and measurable target skills. Set reasonable deadlines for projects and presentations and consistently share reminders about upcoming assessments.
- *Direction and item analysis*: Underline the action required, identify what information is being requested, and distinguish main idea from detail questions.
- *Listening*: Preview options when permitted, listen for discourse markers and key words, and record brief notes rather than attempting full transcription.
- *Reading*: Survey the passage, use headings and connectors to predict organization, locate textual evidence, and infer unfamiliar vocabulary from context.

- *Productive tasks*: Pause to plan, use a simple response frame, prioritize a clear message, and reserve time for a final accuracy check.
- *Anxiety management*: Students to seek available resources at DLIFLC.

Structured Review

The same schedule need not produce identical assignments. Differentiated instruction requires teachers to monitor readiness and performance, then adapt content, process, grouping, or support in response to demonstrated needs (Deunk et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2014). The teaching team can create a simple learner profile from quiz errors, classroom performance, and student reflection. A learner struggling with listening may receive shorter audio segments and note-taking practice; a learner with reading-pacing difficulty may complete timed paragraph searches; a learner with spelling or transcription errors may practice sound-symbol patterns and immediate correction. Language learners also differ in anxiety, motivation, strategy use, and willingness to communicate, so tailoring should respond to the individual pattern rather than a single test score (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Pairing should be purposeful: students can explain strategies to one another, but individual practice remains necessary so the instructor can see whether each learner can apply the strategy independently.

REFLECTING ON THE RECURRING PRACTICE

What Appeared to Work

One promising feature of this recurring practice was its shift from general encouragement to concrete routines. Instead of telling students simply to study more or relax, instructors could point to a repeatable process for previewing a task, allocating time, identifying evidence, and recovering after a difficult item. Frequent short practice appeared to make student thinking more visible. Error review gave the teaching team opportunities to respond to specific needs rather than provide the same additional worksheet to every learner. Continued participation and engagement suggested that students accepted the added support in this course. However, these observations were not collected with a validated post-course measure and do not establish effectiveness.

What Did Not Work as Expected

The evidence collected in this course was not strong enough to determine whether anxiety changed. The MSLQ was administered only once, after Unit One, so claims that motivation remained stable or that test anxiety decreased are not warranted. The later ICPT 101 results could not serve as a posttest because ICPT 101 and Unit One differed in constructs, content, purpose, and testing conditions. In addition, a multi-component practice makes it impossible to identify whether zero-hour review, quizzes, strategy instruction, feedback, or ordinary language growth was most helpful.

Implementation also required balancing added support with an already intensive schedule. Zero-hour participation may vary because of student responsibilities and fatigue, and students do not all need the same amount or type of practice. A future cycle should protect instructional time, document attendance and dosage consistently, and avoid overwhelming students with excessive assessment-like work. Low-stakes practice should remain brief, purposeful, and followed by usable feedback; otherwise, it risks becoming another source of pressure.

What I Would Keep and Change

I would retain the predictable review routine, brief retrieval practice, same-day error analysis, and individualized follow-up. I would change the evidence plan from the outset. Students would complete an appropriate anxiety measure before and after the support period, and the teaching team would use a brief weekly reflection to capture confidence, strategy use, and perceived difficulty. I would also maintain a simple implementation log recording the date, duration, focus, materials, attendance, and student response for each activity. Finally, I would introduce strategies earlier in the course so that students practice them before anxiety becomes associated with a major assessment.

Applying this practice across courses has strengthened my understanding that visible effort and motivation do not rule out serious difficulty under evaluative conditions. It has also reinforced that learner support is most actionable when it connects affective concerns to teachable behaviors. Instructors cannot remove every source of pressure, but they can make expectations clearer, provide graduated practice, and help students develop routines for directing attention to the task. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that test anxiety is associated with educational outcomes and supports attending to both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of assessment preparation (von der Embse et al., 2018).

IMPLICATIONS FOR DLIFLC INSTRUCTORS

This recurring practice, together with research on retrieval, formative assessment, feedback, differentiation, and learner variability, suggests several practical changes that instructors can make while exercising professional judgment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006):

- *Screen early and interpret cautiously.* Use an appropriate needs-assessment tool near the beginning of the course and repeat it later if change over time will be discussed. A questionnaire should inform support, not label students.
- *Normalize strategy instruction.* Model how proficient test takers allocate attention, manage time, and recover from uncertainty instead of assuming that students already possess these skills.
- *Use short, low-stakes retrieval opportunities.* Keep them aligned with taught content, provide prompt feedback, and use response patterns to plan reteaching. Retrieval should

be effortful but manageable and should be followed by correction when errors occur (Karpicke & Blunt, 2011; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006).

- *Differentiate the support.* Adapt task length, modality, scaffolding, grouping, and feedback to learner profiles rather than assigning identical remediation. Research suggests that differentiation is more responsive when it uses ongoing assessment and purposeful instructional adjustment rather than fixed labels (Deunk et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2014).
- *Protect the language-learning mission.* Assessment preparation should be designed to support listening, reading, speaking, vocabulary, and self-regulation; it should not narrow the curriculum to test rehearsal.
- *Document implementation.* Record frequency, duration, participation, materials, and adjustments so later reflection is based on more than memory.

These recommendations can be adapted across DLIFLC languages and proficiency levels. Beginning learners may need more modeling, shorter texts, and stronger language scaffolds. Advanced learners may benefit from realistic time constraints, complex authentic texts, and metacognitive analysis of performance. Because language learners vary in affective, cognitive, and strategic characteristics, adaptation should be based on multiple sources of evidence rather than a single score (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Class size, schedule, available zero-hour time, student fatigue, and local assessment requirements should determine the dosage. Although the practice is used in every course, the descriptive evidence discussed here comes from one class of eight students; therefore, the approach should be applied through instructors' professional judgment rather than treated as a universally validated program.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE INQUIRY

This reflection has several limitations. The classroom evidence came from only eight students, although the teaching practice is used in every course. The MSLQ was given only once, after Unit One, so it cannot show whether students' anxiety changed. In addition, Unit One and ICPT 101 measured different outcomes under different conditions and cannot be used as matching pre- and post-assessments. Classroom observations were not collected through a formal observation process. Finally, several instructional supports were used together, so the evidence cannot show which practice was most helpful. For these reasons, the classroom evidence cannot prove that the practices reduced anxiety or improved performance.

Future research could measure test anxiety before and after the instructional period and include several student cohorts. Researchers should use comparable assessments given under similar conditions. They should also collect attendance records, quiz results, student reflections or interviews, classroom observation notes, and clear implementation logs. Examining other DLIFLC languages and proficiency levels could indicate whether similar patterns appear in different settings. Future studies could also examine zero-hour review, low-stakes quizzes, strategy instruction, and targeted practice separately.

CONCLUSION

This Faculty Forum reflection began with a familiar instructional concern: motivated students did not always demonstrate their classroom capabilities during formal assessment. A one-time MSLQ administration and related classroom observations suggested that test anxiety warranted an instructional response. The teaching team therefore added predictable review, low-stakes practice, explicit strategies, targeted language work, and individualized feedback. Students appeared to respond positively to the additional structure, but the available evidence does not show that anxiety decreased or that the approach caused later performance.

The practical value of this recurring course practice may lie in its shift in instructional attention. Test anxiety can be considered alongside language knowledge, motivation, and preparation when instructors interpret performance and plan support. At DLIFLC, instructors may respond by making assessment processes visible, practicing them under manageable conditions, tailoring feedback, and documenting what occurs. Existing research provides a rationale for retrieval practice, formative use of evidence, actionable feedback, and differentiated support. However, stronger local pre/post measurement, comparable assessments, multiple cohorts, and systematic student feedback are necessary before conclusions about effectiveness at DLIFLC can be drawn (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Deunk et al., 2018; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006).

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