

Exams as a Source of Anxiety in TEYL.

By Michela Gronchi

Exams in TEYL are counterproductive to children's learning because they produce anxiety and stress. Although final exams may be considered objective assessment tools, they have drawbacks for children. Young learners experience frustration and anxiety when moving from a stress-free atmosphere with no exams to an anxiety-provoking exam context. Teachers could relieve the children of this negative environment by making assessment an integral part of the teaching and learning. There must be a continuum between lesson/learning time and assessment time in TEYL.

This paper draws on the existing literature and on a questionnaire survey conducted on the Internet (Appendix A). The paper will also draw from the author's experiences as a YL teacher in a private English language school in Italy from 2001 to 2004.

The existing literature on the subject is scarce and mostly concerning the EFL context rather than the TEYL context; however, the findings of the literature can be adapted to TEYL. The survey was used in order to gather teachers' opinions and personal experiences in regards to using exams in TEYL. A total of twenty-four responses were received from Mexico, South Africa, Korea, China, USA, UK, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, UAE, Canada and Turkey. The survey was not designed as a scientific tool but on the whole it is a good representation of the TEYL community. Graphs were created to visually represent the survey responses.

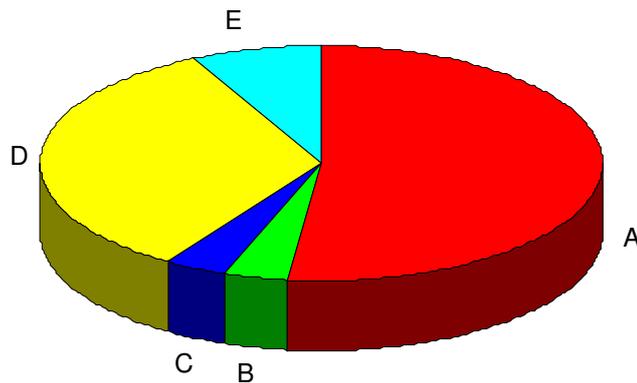
Recurring attendance problems at the language school in Italy motivated the author to investigate the anxiety caused by exams. Many young learners experienced difficulties during exam time due to the high level of exam anxiety. This discomfort was often underestimated and measures against this comfort were not properly taken. There was a consistent drop out of young learners from the school. The drop out rates were often regarded as a result of loss of interest by the children who were not motivated enough to attend the English courses. Other young learners who did attend the entire course would often fail to take the final exam. Some children would underachieve in their exams contradicting the teachers' expectations of their results. Some young learners had emotional outbursts, especially crying, before taking the exam, which often resulted in not taking the exam at all (Please see the introductory section in Appendix A).

The TEYL Community's View on Exams

Teachers' responses to the survey were quite unanimous in spite of the diversity of countries. Respondents regard exams as an obligation implemented by the school or by the government. They are allowed almost no say in the exam situation.

The great majority of the respondents believe that an exam's purpose is to check pupils' progress (see Survey Question 3).

Why do you test pupils?



Survey Question 3

A: *to check pupils' progress*

B: *to help pupils' learning*

C: *to provide parents with a report on their children's learning*

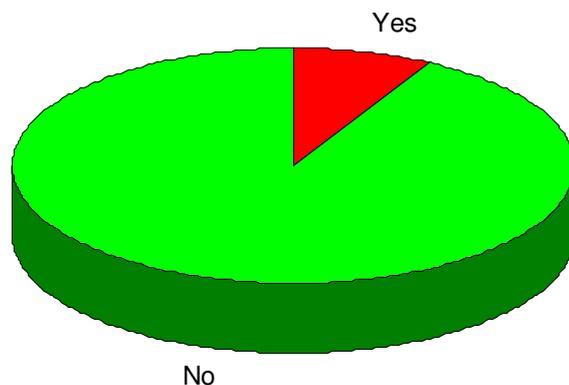
D: *because it is school policy*

E: *other*

However, quite a number of respondents state that testing of pupils is done because it is school policy and therefore testing is the mere result of a conventional system.

Teachers also seem to share the same thoughts concerning the relation between pupils' performance in tests and their actual learning (see Survey Question 5).

Do you believe that pupils' performance in tests reflects their actual learning?



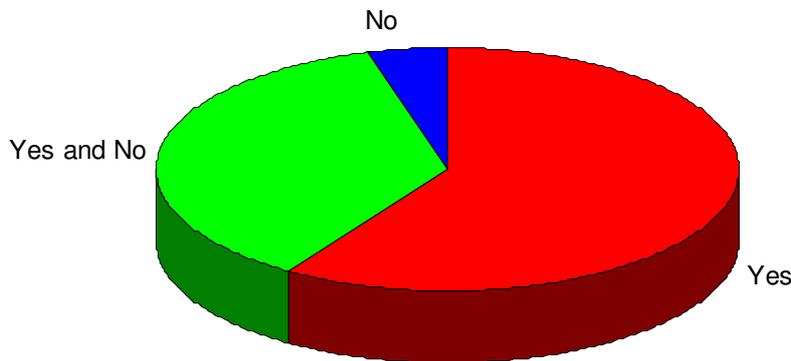
Survey Question 5

As the graphic shows, teachers do not believe that scores reflect pupils' learning. Extra comments by the survey respondents state:

1. the difficulty in balancing a communicative approach with a paper-and pencil test
2. the difference among learners (kinetic or visual) and the need for assessment variety
3. the stress provoked by test performance
4. the importance of learning test techniques and understand thoroughly test requirements
5. the importance of testing as diagnostic system and evaluation tool

Furthermore, teachers were asked if they would be able to provide a report on their students without a final exam and the majority of the responses was positive (see Survey Question 8).

At the end of the course do you think that you would be able to provide a reportwithout a final exam?



Survey Question 8

Is a final exam strictly necessary? Would it not be wiser to make use of alternative assessment methods?

Exam Anxiety is Counterproductive to Children's Learning.

“Anxiety is a basic human emotion consisting of fear and uncertainty¹” and it can be generated to avoid dangerous situations as well as non-dangerous ones. The mind, as Deutsch says, can not distinguish between dangerous or non-dangerous situations and the mind “freezes” during testing although there is no real risk to take. Similarly, this happens in TEYL during exam time.

Exam anxiety can positively or negatively influence students' performance. However, the great majority of students can not channel exam anxiety in a positive direction. Consequently, anxiety and fear have a negative outcome. Krashen says that “low and high achievers may be distinguished by levels of anxiety as well as a degree of self-confidence”.²

Exam anxiety can also cause “acting out”³ behaviours (emotional outburst like crying and throwing tantrums). Emotional stress behaviours are common in TEYL during exam time.

Standardized tests and score ranking are often regarded as objective evaluation methods. However, they entail “performance goals” and “comparative standards of excellence”⁴ which are counterproductive in TEYL. Paris, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, states that a standard exam format induces students to study with the aim of passing the exam with good scores instead of learning: “Testing has caused students to believe that good grades are more

¹ Nellie Dutsch (May 2004). *EsL learners feel anxious when doing reading comprehension tests*.

Retrieved from www.nelliemuller.com/ESL_EFL_Reading_Comprehension_Tests_and_Anxiety.htm

² Stephen D. Krashen. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* pp29-30. Retrieved from www.sdkrashen.com/SL_Acquisition_and_Learning/029.html

³ Daniel Edelstein (July 2000). *Test + Stress = Problems for students*. Retrieved from Brainconnection Library www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=fa/test-stress

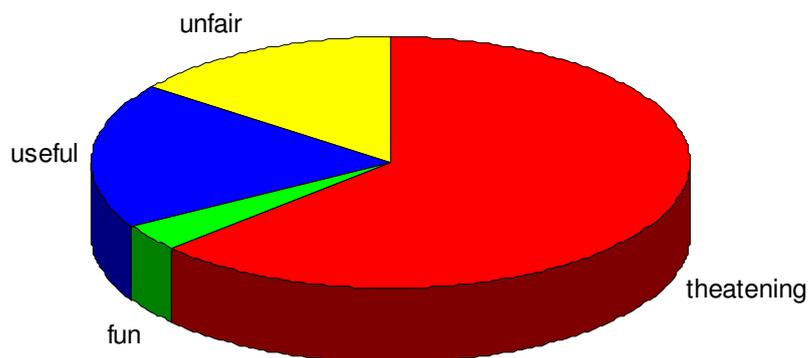
⁴ Daniel Edelstein (July 2000). *Test + Stress = Problems for students*. Retrieved from Brainconnection Library www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=fa/test-stress

important than understanding”⁵. What is the main aim of an EFL young learner? Acquiring a second language or obtaining good grades?

Moreover, as both Paris and Edelstein explain, some students regard test scores as parameters for social judgements and they “worry about their low test scores becoming common knowledge possibly lowering their esteem in the eyes of the others”.⁶

Survey responses show how the great majority of EFL young learners are believed to regard exams as “threatening and scary” and a consistent number of them regard exams as “unfair” (see Survey Question 6).

What do you think are children’s views on exam testing?



Survey Question 6

Survey respondents said that students become nervous and “freeze” with their English when taking an exam because they have to face a different scenario than the one they are used to in the classroom.

Assessment is an integral part of teaching “that should reflect and complement the methodologies used in class”, but unfortunately it “has not developed in the same way”.⁷

Pappamihiel says that environment change can prove to be traumatic. She conducted a study on English language anxiety in Mexican girls who were moving from the ESL classroom to the mainstream classroom. Pappamihiel demonstrates that “the shift from a mostly ESL environment to a mainstream class can be just as traumatic to students, increasing anxiety as they move from a relatively safe setting into one of new challenges and pressure”.⁸

Avoiding the drawbacks of environment switching is a feasible solution. Assessment should be a continuous process together with teaching and learning instead of a single-day testing. Shaaban promotes the use of alternative assessment because “traditional paper-and-pencil tests no longer cover the variety of activities and tasks that take place in the elementary classroom”.⁹

Exam anxiety can be also generated by the exam type itself, as some survey’s responses from China stated. According to some teachers, the difficulty Chinese children experience in taking exams is

⁵ Ibidem

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Sophie Ioannou-Georgious and Pavlos Pavlou (2003). *Assessing young learners. Directed reading and thinking activities for second language students.* OUP

⁸ Pappamihiel Eleni, *Moving From the ESL classroom into the Mainstream: an Investigation on English Language Anxiety in Mexican Girls.* Retrieved from <http://brj.asu.edu/v2512/pdf/ar3.pdf>

⁹ Kassim Shaaban. *Assessment of young learners.* Retrieved from <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol39/no4/p16.htm>

due to the fact that written exams are prepared by non-native speakers and they very often have grammatically incorrect questions which are also wrongly constructed. The exams' inaccuracy and the children's concern about their exam grades cause anxiety and stress.

There is a sceptic's view on exam anxiety. The sceptics "question the notion that stress hurts students and their performance in the classroom".¹⁰ They consider exam anxiety as closely linked to school life and therefore students are supposed to cope with it.

Motivation plays a crucial role in children's second language learning. When assessment is conducted in order to reach formative goals, it is perceived as a stimulus by the students because it is meant to advise, help and support them in language learning. Contrary to this, when assessment is conducted in order to reach standard scores, it might have the opposite effect and act like a deterrent for children's motivation causing a loss of interest for the students.

Conclusion.

Some survey respondents have commented that exams in TEYL have been institutionalized and they have become a sort of compulsory part of language learning. However, teachers state that exams in TEYL are not necessary to evaluate students.

Teachers agree that children show improvement in language learning when they are in a child-friendly and stress-free atmosphere. Exams undermine the positive effect that this child-friendly environment has created in the classroom. Assessment and eventually evaluation should reflect and respect TEYL teaching methodology.

On the whole, TEYL exams have some advantages in terms of accountability but they also have drawbacks for children. Young learners equate learning with scores while language acquisition should be a reward in itself. As source of anxiety, exams undermine students' motivation and interest in language learning.

[The charts concerning the most significant results have been included in the body of the paper, while the remaining ones can be seen in Appendix B.]

¹⁰ Daniel Edelstein (July 2000). *Test + Stress = Problems for students*. Retrieved from Brainconnection Library www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=fa/test-stress

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Nancy Wallace (2002). *Exam action. Make testing less scary and more positive for young learners*. Retrieved from <http://education.guardian.co.uk/tefl/story/0,,782005,00.html> (Click on Printable Version)

Sophie Ioannou-Georgious and Pavlos Pavlou (2003). *Assessing young learners. Directed reading and thinking activities for second language students*. OUP

Shelagh Rixon (2004). *Assessment of young learners of English. Keeping track without turning them off*. Retrieved from www.eltforum.com/forum/pdfs/aym04_papers.pdf

Appendix A

Using Testing in TEYL Survey

Friday afternoon. 16.30. Classroom One downstairs. I try to open the school front door. Impossible. It seems blocked from inside. I try again...my key probably doesn't....It springs open. A smiling face is welcoming me inside. I look around quite taken aback by the number of parents in the hall and I quickly disappear in the director's office.

It's children's exam day today. I wonder how they will perform and I also think....What was that? A scream? G. is crying under her desk and doesn't want to take her test. The examiner hands her a sweet which G. simply doesn't seem to notice.

G.'s mother enters Classroom One and tries desperately to convince her daughter that now "she is a big girl" and she can't behave like that anymore. The drama ends with the mother carrying the crying child out of the classroom and straight out of the school. I haven't seen G. since then. She hasn't signed up for English classes and probably she never will. I wonder how many Gs have already refused to take their exam.

I promised G. and myself that I would ensure my pupils a child-friendly and natural learning environment.

My name is Michela and I'm teaching English to pre-schoolers and young children at a language school in Italy. I'm writing a paper about children's exams and alternative testing systems for a [TEYL](#) course that I'm taking.

This survey, along with any comments or stories that you provide, will be the core of my paper. Thank you for helping me!

1. Do the children you are teaching have to take a final English exam at the end of the course/school year?

Yes

No

2. What testing system do you use with your students?

Cambridge Starters, Movers, Flyers

- Trinity oral exams
- The school's in-house tests
- I write my own tests or exams
- We don't use formal testing on children.

Other:

3. Why do you test pupils?

- To check pupils' progress
- To help pupils' learning
- To provide parents with a report on their children's learning
- Because it is school policy

Other:

4. Who are pupils tested by?

- You
- A teacher other than their own but someone they know
- A teacher who they do not know
- A person from outside of the school

Other:

5. Do you believe that pupils' performance in tests reflect their actual learning?

- Yes
- No

Comments:

6. What do you think are children's views on exam testing? You may select more than one choice.

- Exams are threatening and scary
- Exams are fun
- Exams are useful and important
- Exams are unfair

Other:

7. Are you expected to have exam preparation lessons which are somehow different from the usual ones? (If your answer is "Yes", please leave comments in the space provided)

- Yes
- No

Comments:

8. At the end of a course, do you think that you would be able to provide a report on each of your pupils regarding their learning styles and progress without a final exam?

- Yes, I know my pupils' strengths and weaknesses and I don't need a formal test
- Yes and no, I would be able to provide a report for a few of them but not for everyone
- No, I believe a formal test is necessary

Other:

9. Which changes would you make to your syllabus if children didn't have to take a final test?

- I would keep the syllabus as it is
- I would leave out the more difficult grammar topics
- I would use a more natural approach to language teaching
- I would introduce topics which could rouse my pupils' interest

Other:

Additional Comments/Feedback/Personal Stories/ETC.:

Your Name (Optional):

Number of Years Teaching ESL/EFL to children:

Country:

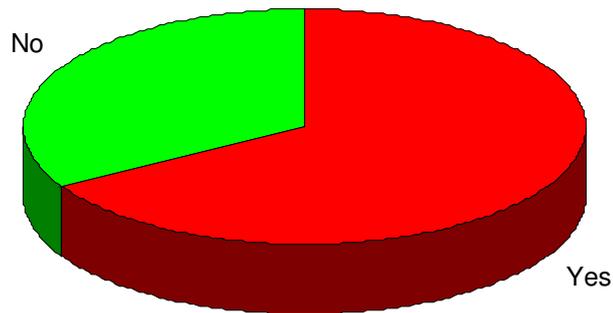
Email (Optional):

Please click once to submit survey...

Thank you for your help!

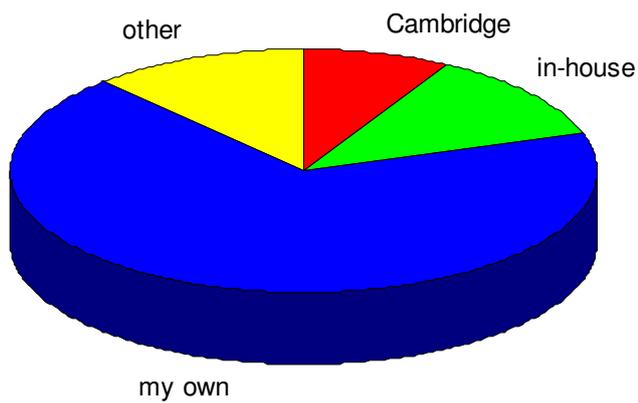
Appendix B

Do the children you are teaching have to take a final English exam at the end of the course/school year?



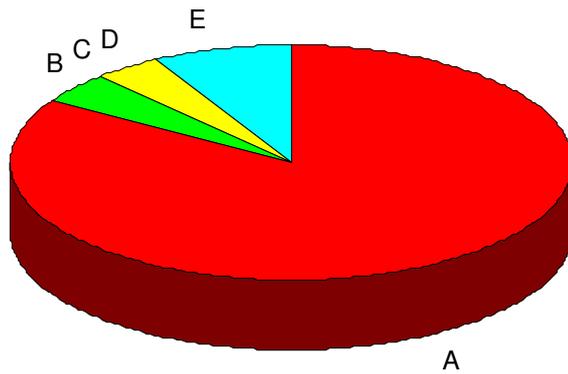
Survey Question 1

What testing system do you use with your pupils?



Survey Question 2

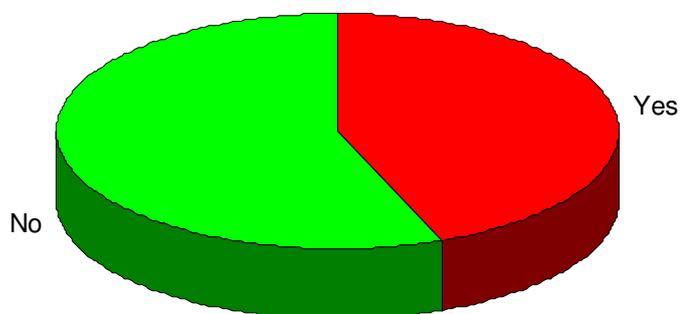
Who are pupils tested by?



Survey Question 4

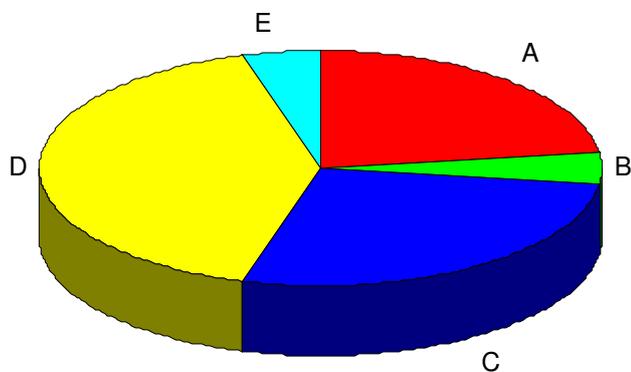
- A: you**
- B: a teacher other than their own but someone they know**
- C: a teacher who they don't know**
- D: a person from outside the school**
- E: other**

Are you expected to have preparation lessons which are somehow different from the usual ones?



Survey Question 7

Which changes would you make to your syllabus if children didn't have to take a final test?



Survey Question 9

A: *I would keep the syllabus as it is*

B: *I would leave out the more grammar topics*

C: *I would use a more natural approach to language teaching*

D: *I would introduce topics which could rouse my pupils' interest*

E: *other*