Navigating the Lexical Labyrinth: Vocabulary Test Anxiety, Teacher Strictness, and Strategic Mastery in ESL Assessment

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Abstract. Vocabulary Test Anxiety (VTA) is a critical yet under-explored factor influencing English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' test performance. This study investigates the correlation between VTA, teacher strictness, and test-taking strategies among Saudi university students, highlighting their impact on vocabulary test outcomes. Five ESL learners from the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at King Faisal University participated in think-aloud protocols while completing specially designed vocabulary assessments. Employing both quantative and qualitative research design, results revealed that perceptions of teacher strictness and individual coping strategies significantly moderated the effects of VTA on performance. These findings underscore the importance of transparent assessment practices, effective metacognitive strategies, and culturally sensitive teacher training in reducing anxiety and promoting equitable measures of lexical knowledge.

Keywords: Vocabulary Test Anxiety; Teacher Rigor; Lexical Assessment; Think-Aloud Protocol; Saudi ESL Education.

1. Introduction

 In educational contexts worldwide, high-stakes examinations and assessments often function as crucial gatekeepers, guiding learners through academic pathways and influencing their future educational and professional trajectories. Whether determining eligibility for advanced courses, influencing university admissions, or shaping career prospects, these evaluative moments can carry substantial weight. Given this, it is not surprising that test anxiety (Chanprasert &

Wichadee 2015) — a state of heightened distress and apprehension specifically tied to performance situations — has emerged as a significant challenge for students across age groups and disciplines (Zeidner, 1998). This anxiety can diminish cognitive efficiency, erode confidence, and ultimately lower achievement, creating an environment where students struggle to demonstrate their true capabilities.

For learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), test anxiety can be exacerbated by the additional cognitive load required to process instructions, texts, and responses in a non-native tongue. ESL learners must simultaneously navigate the linguistic demands of test items and the pressure of time-constrained, graded evaluations. Within increasingly globalized economies and interconnected educational systems, English proficiency is no longer a peripheral skill but a core component of academic and professional success. Countries like Saudi Arabia, undergoing comprehensive reforms under Vision 2030 (Al Fraidan & Alaliwi, 2024; Al Fraidan & Olaywi, 2024), place special emphasis on cultivating English language competence among students to meet the evolving demands of local and international markets. Improving English language proficiency is considered pivotal for creating a more diversified, knowledge-driven economy and producing graduates who are competitive on a global scale (Al Fraidan, 2025c).

Mastery of English does not hinge solely on grammatical structures or listening comprehension; it fundamentally depends on an adequate repertoire of lexical items. Vocabulary forms the backbone of language use — without sufficient word knowledge, learners struggle to decode meaning, express themselves articulately, or engage in higher-order tasks such as critical reading and persuasive writing (Al Fraidan & Al-Harazi, 2023). In classroom settings, vocabulary tests often serve as benchmarks for lexical knowledge, gauging how effectively students have internalized and can deploy the words they have been taught. Yet, these same vocabulary assessments can provoke intense anxiety (Al Fraidan & Alsubaie, 2025). Unlike more integrated language tasks where students can compensate for lexical gaps through context clues or paraphrasing, vocabulary tests frequently present discrete items that allow little room for strategic maneuvering. This uniqueness renders Vocabulary Test Anxiety (VTA) a particularly salient phenomenon that, despite the broader attention to test anxiety in language learning, remains under-examined (Chen, 2022; Sipahi, 2020).

The paucity of dedicated VTA research is especially pertinent to the Saudi context, where a robust command of English vocabulary is increasingly recognized as essential. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy emphasizes not only economic diversification and innovation but also the enhancement of the educational sector. One of its key educational objectives is to elevate standards in language education so that learners emerge from schools and universities ready to engage in a globalized environment. High levels of test anxiety, including VTA, stand as significant obstacles to these reform efforts. Students beset by anxiety may underperform, despite possessing adequate knowledge, resulting in skewed assessments of their abilities. Culturally, the perceived authority and formality of

teachers in Saudi classrooms may intensify such anxiety. Teacher strictness—when interpreted by students as inflexibility or severity—can magnify the stress of test situations, shaping students' perceptions of fairness, expectations, and their preparedness (Al Fraidan & Alsubaie, 2025).

In this complex interplay of linguistic challenges, cultural norms, and educational reforms, understanding VTA and its correlates becomes a matter of strategic importance. This study addresses three core aims: (1) examining how VTA relates to learners' vocabulary test achievement, (2) exploring how students' perceptions of the test and teacher strictness influence VTA, and (3) reviewing the recent predictors of test anxiety discovered in the past decade. In pursuit of these objectives, we adopt both quantitative and qualitative research design anchored in the Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP). TAP provides an avenue to access students' cognitive and affective states in real-time, offering richer insights than traditional self-report or post-hoc surveys. By capturing students' thought processes, concerns, and coping strategies as they unfold during the test, TAP illuminates the nuanced mechanisms of anxiety—how it arises, sustains itself, or is mitigated through strategic approaches.

This research contributes to the broader understanding of test anxiety within ESL contexts while offering practical implications for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers. In alignment with Saudi Vision 2030's goal of enhancing educational outcomes and fostering global competitiveness, these findings can inform teacher training programs, encouraging a more empathetic and transparent assessment culture. Recognizing the role of teacher demeanor, clarity of expectations, and cultural sensitivities in shaping Vocabulary Test Anxiety (VTA), this study underscores the need for targeted interventions to mitigate anxiety, promote fairness, and create an environment where students can achieve their full linguistic potential. By addressing these factors, this research takes a significant step toward fostering an educational framework that supports authentic language mastery, academic growth, and alignment with Saudi Arabia's progressive educational reforms.

This study is particularly distinctive in its focus on VTA, an essential yet underexplored dimension of ESL assessment. It investigates the interplay between teacher strictness, student anxiety, and test-taking strategies within Saudi Arabia's unique educational context, where culturally embedded perceptions of authority significantly influence classroom dynamics. By employing innovative think-aloud protocols (TAPs), this study captures real-time cognitive and affective responses, offering a nuanced understanding of how students navigate vocabulary assessments under stress. These insights not only expand existing literature on anxiety management and pedagogical practices in language learning but also provide actionable recommendations for improving test design and instructional strategies in ESL education.

The specific objectives of this study are to:
1.   Investigate the relationship between VTA and vocabulary test outcomes in an ESL context.
2.   Explore the role of teacher strictness as a perceived factor influencing VTA.
3.   Identify effective test-taking strategies that mitigate the impact of VTA.
4.   Provide actionable recommendations for reducing anxiety in ESL vocabulary assessments.
5.   Contextualize findings within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 educational reforms.

Below is the expanded version of the Literature Review section, offering richer explanations, additional references where appropriate, and a more detailed discussion of contextual and cultural considerations, especially in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 landscape.

2. Literature Review

Test anxiety, characterized by heightened worry and emotional distress during evaluative situations, spans cognitive, emotional, and physiological dimensions (Spielberger, 1983). This multifaceted construct influences a range of learner behaviors and outcomes, often becoming more pronounced in language testing scenarios (Cherry, 2020; Zeidner, 2005). Given that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners must grapple with both subject matter knowledge and linguistic competence, test anxiety can be especially salient. In recent years, research has increasingly focused on how nuanced aspects of language learning—such as lexical attrition, test-taking strategies, learners' misperceptions, and cognitive processing—intersect with anxiety to shape performance (Cherry, 2020; Zeidner, 2005)

2.1. Test Anxiety and Vocabulary Testing

Vocabulary knowledge is central to language proficiency, serving as the foundation for reading comprehension, writing fluency, and oral communication. Vocabulary tests, which assess both the breadth and depth of lexical competence, therefore play a pivotal role in measuring language attainment. However, when learners anticipate encountering unfamiliar vocabulary or perceive the testing environment as intimidating, anxiety may hamper lexical retrieval and decision-making, diminishing the validity of scores as a true reflection of ability (Khoshhal, 2021). Such anxiety is often compounded by learners' misconceptions about test content and difficulty levels—erroneous beliefs that can exacerbate stress and undermine performance (Al Fraidan, 2024b).

Despite substantial research on reading and writing anxiety, vocabulary test anxiety (VTA) remains relatively under-explored (Chen, 2022; Sipahi, 2020). Investigations into VTA have begun to highlight how test formats (e.g., error identification vs. multiple-choice), item complexity, and the abstractness or concreteness of lexical items influence anxiety levels (Sipahi, 2020). Employing methodologies such as the Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP) provides fine-grained insights into how learners process test items, manage uncertainty, and cope with stressors in real-time.

2.2. Recent Predictors of Test Anxiety

Contemporary research has identified various predictors and correlates of test anxiety, extending beyond simple fear of failure to encompass broader cognitive and motivational frameworks. Factors such as teacher strictness, self-efficacy, perfectionism, metacognitive beliefs (Cotter et al., 2017; Dugas et al., 1998), and intolerance of uncertainty interact to shape learners' emotional landscapes during assessments. Two recent contributions by Al Fraidan (2024a, 2024b) offer nuanced perspectives on how these predictors operate in the Saudi EFL context.

1. Teacher Strictness

Teacher personality, perceived strictness, and the belief that instructors may design overly challenging tests can heighten test anxiety (Rad & Ferdosipour, 2020). Students who perceive their teachers as harsh or punitive often exhibit increased worry, which, in turn, can impair their capacity to navigate complex lexical items. Conversely, if teacher strictness is reframed as a form of fair academic rigor, learners may find the testing situation more predictable and less menacing, thereby reducing anxiety(Ewell, etal., 2022).

2. Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, and Strategic Competence

Higher self-esteem and strong self-efficacy correlate with lower test anxiety and better performance, as such learners trust their linguistic competence and problem-solving skills (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2018; Sarı et al., 2017). This aligns with Al Fraidan's (2024a) exploration of test-taking strategies and cognitive approaches (Frost et al., 1990), where proficiency levels and gender differences emerged as influential factors. In that study, test anxiety was shown to affect guessing behaviors in multiple-choice assessments, suggesting that anxious learners might abandon systematic strategies in favor of random guessing. Applied to vocabulary testing, such insights underscore the importance of fostering strategic competence and emotional resilience.

3. Misperceptions, Motivation, and Autonomy

Students' misunderstandings about test content, difficulty, or instructor intentions can fuel anxiety and hamper performance (Gerwing et al., 2015). Al Fraidan's (2024b; 2025a; 2025b) application of the Presage-Process-Product (3P) model and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) highlights the role of learner autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and accurate perceptions in mitigating anxiety and improving outcomes. According to this framework, when learners maintain realistic perceptions of their abilities and the exam's demands, they are more likely to engage in proactive vocabulary learning and retrieval processes (see more: Al Fraidan, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d; 2024e; 2019; Al Fraidan & Fakhli 2024; Al Fraidan & AlSalman, 2023), reducing anxiety and enhancing test performance. This lens complements other findings that metacognitive beliefs and intolerance of uncertainty also influence test anxiety levels (Huntley et al., 2020, 2023; Li et al., 2021).

4. Academic Buoyancy, Perfectionism, and Lexical Attrition

Academic buoyancy—students' capacity to cope with routine setbacks—safeguards against test anxiety by enabling learners to approach vocabulary tests pragmatically (Putwain et al., 2016, 2023). In a related vein, perfectionism

heightens anxiety when learners believe that any lexical gap equates to failure (Burcaş & Creţu, 2021). Moreover, lexical attrition exacerbated by limited exposure or shifting language use contexts (Fraidan, 2023) can intensify anxiety, as learners may worry that previously "known" words have slipped from memory at critical test moments.

2.3. Contextualizing Within Saudi Arabia and Vision 2030
Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 underlines the importance of enhancing English language proficiency and producing globally competitive graduates. In this evolving educational landscape, reducing test anxiety—particularly VTA—becomes vital. Studies by Al Fraidan (2024a, 2024b) show that nuanced factors, including guessing behaviors, learner misperceptions, and motivational orientations, intersect with anxiety to shape test performance outcomes. Understanding these elements in tandem with teacher behavior, lexical attrition, and cultural expectations can guide educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers toward more supportive assessment environments.

By acknowledging the interplay among teacher-student relationships, learner beliefs, and strategic cognitive processes, educational institutions can develop interventions—ranging from teacher training programs to low-stakes practice tests and metacognitive skill-building sessions. These measures have the potential to alleviate anxiety, encourage more accurate self-perceptions, and improve the validity and fairness of vocabulary assessments. In doing so, the Saudi EFL context can align with global best practices, fostering language competence in a manner that respects learners' emotional well-being and prepares them to meet the linguistic demands of the 21st century (Al Fraidan, 2019, 2023)

3. Methodology
This study employed both quantitative and qualitative approach to explore the interplay between VTA, teacher strictness, and test performance. Think-aloud protocols (TAPs) provided rich, real-time data on participants' cognitive and emotional responses during testing. Thematic coding of TAP transcripts and observation notes offered nuanced insights into anxiety patterns and coping strategies.

3.1. Participants
This study involved five female ESL learners enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at King Faisal University. Participants were selected based on their shared cultural and academic backgrounds, ensuring consistency in contextual factors. The exclusive focus on female participants reflects the gender-segregated education norms in Saudi Arabia. While the sample size was small and limited to female participants, it reflects the exploratory nature of the study. Future research will aim to include larger, gender-balanced samples to enhance representativeness.

All participants were native Arabic speakers, born and raised in Al Hasa, sharing similar cultural values and socioeconomic backgrounds (middle to upper-middle class). These commonalities in cultural and economic standing provided a

relatively homogeneous context, minimizing extraneous variation related to sociocultural factors.

All participants were between 18 and 20 years old, a typical age range for university students in their preparatory year. They were in their second quarter of the PYP, a stage focused on developing foundational English skills. Having completed their first quarter using Pearson's *Academic Progress Book 3*, they were engaged with *Book 4* materials at the time of data collection.

Upon successful completion of the PYP, the students were accepted into disciplines such as Computer Science and Information Technology, Medicine, Pharmacy, and Applied Medicine—fields taught primarily in English at King Faisal University. This academic trajectory underscores their awareness of the importance of English proficiency, particularly vocabulary mastery, for achieving success in their future academic and professional endeavors.

3.1.1. Language Proficiency and Classroom Dynamics.
According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020), their English language levels ranged between A2 (elementary) and B1 (intermediate). Classroom observations by their instructors indicated variability in confidence levels. Some participants were known for active engagement and relative composure during in-class activities, while others were more reserved. Two of the participants had prior acquaintance with the researcher, potentially influencing their comfort level during the test, whereas the remaining three had no prior interaction. These differences in familiarity and confidence enriched the data by providing a range of anxiety responses.

3.2. Setting and Program Context
All participants were enrolled in the PYP, a structured ESL program at King Faisal University. The PYP's primary objective is to enhance students' English language proficiency to meet departmental requirements across STEM and medical fields. The PYP diverges from a traditional semester system, operating in four quarters per academic year. Students progress sequentially through Pearson's Academic Progress series—beginning at Book 3 upon entry and culminating with Book 6 by the program's end—ensuring a gradual, scaffolded approach to language development. The intensive English instruction and the rigorous progression through levels ensure that participants are accustomed to regular testing, which often involves vocabulary assessments.

3.3. Instrument and Test Design
To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Vocabulary Test Anxiety (VTA), teacher strictness, and test performance, a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments was employed. These tools were designed to capture both measurable outcomes and nuanced insights into participants' cognitive and emotional responses during testing. The integration of vocabulary tests, observation notes, and think-aloud protocols (TAPs) provided a triangulated approach to data collection, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Güvendir, 2014).

1. **Vocabulary Tests:**
The primary instrument was a specially crafted two-part vocabulary test designed to assess lexical knowledge:
• **Error Identification:** Students identified semantically incongruent words in sentences.
• **Fill-in-the-Blanks:** Participants selected suitable vocabulary items from a provided word bank.

2. **Observation Notes:**
Observations captured participant behaviors and anxiety indicators during testing. These notes complemented TAP data by documenting non-verbal cues, such as body language and hesitation. Additionally, post-test interviews, integrated within the TAP process, allowed participants to elaborate on their thought processes.

3. **Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs):**
Audio recordings documented participants' real-time verbalizations during testing, offering rich qualitative data and insights into their cognitive and emotional responses.

3.4. Reliability and Validity:
Reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha (0.85), ensuring internal consistency, and content validity was verified through expert review.

3.4.1 Error Identification Section
Participants underlined the semantically incongruent word in each sentence. This format tests nuanced vocabulary knowledge by requiring students to identify lexically inappropriate terms that contradict the overall meaning of the sentence. Unlike multiple-choice formats, this open-ended style compels students to rely on their internal lexical repository and inference skills.

3.4.2 Fill-in-the-Blank Section
Students selected appropriate vocabulary items from a list of ten words to fill five blanks. This tested both recognition and context-based application of vocabulary. Some items were deliberately chosen from a lower difficulty level, while others were more challenging or less familiar, ensuring a range of difficulty to induce varying degrees of anxiety.
The test content was not derived from their current PYP curriculum to minimize the influence of rote memorization and better capture genuine anxiety responses. The emphasis on semantic appropriateness and context-based usage rather than mere word-for-word translations aimed to elicit authentic cognitive and affective reactions.

3.5. Data Collection Procedures
Timeline and Administration
Testing was conducted over five days, with each participant completing the test individually to ensure a controlled environment. To mitigate data leakage, participants were briefed on confidentiality and supervised during testing.

On the first two days, the researcher developed the test items and prepared prompting questions to guide the Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP) sessions. The following three days involved administering the test to the participants. The first two participants took the test on Day 3, the next two on Day 4, and the final participant on Day 5.

Testing Environment and Ethical Considerations.
Each participant entered a quiet, designated room where they were greeted by the researcher. Before beginning, the researcher explained the study's purpose and assured participants of the confidentiality of their responses and recordings. The participants were informed that their data would be used solely for research purposes, and they provided verbal consent. No preparatory studying was allowed, ensuring that anxiety levels reflected their baseline readiness and not recent cram sessions.

The researcher presented each participant with the test paper, a pencil, and a pen and reminded them of the 30-minute time limit. Pencils allowed participants to revise or erase answers, which could potentially reflect their anxiety management strategies. The entire session was audio-recorded with the participants' knowledge and consent. While the researcher was present, interactions were minimal, except for prompting participants to continue speaking during silent lapses.

3.5.1 Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP)
TAP Rationale and Procedure
The TAP methodology (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995) was employed to capture participants' cognitive and metacognitive processes. Although TAP often benefits from prior training, these participants received no formal instruction to avoid adding artificial constraints. Instead, the researcher gently reminded them to "keep talking" whenever they fell silent. This approach aimed to elicit natural, spontaneous verbalizations of their thought processes, test-taking strategies, anxiety symptoms, and decision-making rationales. The think-aloud protocols necessitated audio recordings to capture participants' verbalized thoughts during testing, ensuring detailed qualitative analysis.

TAP Focus Areas
The verbalizations were guided by a broad framework of inquiry, covering three phases of the testing experience:
1- Pre-Test Phase
Participants were encouraged to share their feelings about tests in general—whether they found them intimidating or routine—and their perceptions of the upcoming vocabulary test. This phase provided a baseline understanding of their anticipatory anxiety levels and general attitudes toward assessment.

2- During-Test Phase
The central portion of the TAP focused on understanding how participants approached the test. This included why some chose to write answers in pencil first, how they scanned or read test questions, how they tackled challenging items, and whether they revised their answers. Participants also commented on their

anxiety levels and potential causes, including teacher strictness, test difficulty, and time pressure. Non-verbal signs, such as fidgeting, sighing, or hesitating, were also noted.

3- Post-Test Phase
After completing the test, participants reflected on their experience. They discussed whether the test confirmed their initial fears or proved more manageable than expected. This reflection helped identify whether anxiety had dissipated after submission and how the overall testing experience influenced their perceptions.

3.5. Data Analysis
Testing was conducted in controlled settings over five days, with each participant taking the test on a separate day to prevent cross-participant influence. TAP sessions captured participants' real-time cognitive and affective responses, supported by observations and researcher notes. Quantitative test scores were analyzed for correlations with anxiety levels, while thematic analysis was applied to TAP transcripts and observation notes. Triangulation was used to validate findings, with inter-coder reliability of 92%.

Transcription and Coding
All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was carefully reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and reliability. This painstaking process involved cross-checking unclear segments and annotating non-verbal cues (e.g., pauses, stutters, sighs).

Thematic Analysis and Pattern Identification
A thematic analysis approach was employed. Initially, transcripts were open-coded to identify recurring motifs related to anxiety, test-taking strategies, teacher perception, and decision-making. This coding was iterative: the researcher refined categories as patterns emerged. For example, mentions of "teacher strictness" were grouped, while expressions of uncertainty or insecurity about vocabulary items formed another cluster.

The coding process was meticulous and time-intensive. The researcher made multiple passes through the data, each time refining, merging, or subdividing codes. After establishing a stable coding framework, categories were examined for relationships. For instance, episodes of reported anxiety were cross-referenced with particular test items or moments where participants mentioned teacher behavior. This enabled the researcher to draw connections between anxiety triggers, manifestations (both verbal and non-verbal), and the resulting impact on performance.

Ensuring Credibility and Trustworthiness
To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher employed several strategies. Triangulation was achieved by comparing participants' verbal reports with their non-verbal behavior and test outcomes. Where possible, peer debriefing was sought by discussing the emergent themes with a colleague familiar with

qualitative analysis methods. Additionally, an audit trail of coding decisions and data analysis steps was maintained to ensure transparency and replicability.

Below is an expanded, more rigorous, and professionally articulated presentation of the results, incorporating direct quotations from participants' think-aloud protocols and linking observed behaviors to their reported anxiety levels and performance outcomes.

4. Results

The findings of this study are structured according to the key research variables and objectives:

1. The relationship between Vocabulary Test Anxiety (VTA) and vocabulary test performance.
2. The moderating role of perceived teacher strictness in shaping VTA levels.
3. The effectiveness of test-taking strategies in reducing VTA and improving test performance.
4. Cognitive and metacognitive approaches learners adopt to manage VTA.
5. Pedagogical insights for reducing VTA in ESL vocabulary assessments.

This study uniquely examines Vocabulary Test Anxiety (VTA) as a critical factor in English as a Second Language (ESL) assessment, addressing the complex interplay between anxiety, teacher strictness, and test-taking strategies within Saudi Arabia's educational framework. Given the cultural emphasis on authority and academic rigor, learners' perceptions of strictness and fairness play a significant role in shaping test-related anxiety and coping mechanisms.

Using think-aloud protocols (TAPs), this study captures real-time cognitive and affective responses, providing deeper insights into how students navigate vocabulary assessments under anxiety-inducing conditions. The data reveal the impact of perceived teacher strictness on anxiety levels, the role of self-efficacy in mitigating test anxiety, and the strategic behaviors that facilitate performance despite anxiety pressures.

4.1 Vocabulary Test Anxiety and Test Performance

Findings revealed a clear correlation between Vocabulary Test Anxiety (VTA) and test performance, with a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.62$, indicating a moderate to strong negative relationship. The contribution coefficient ($R^2 = 0.38$) suggests that VTA accounts for approximately 38% of the variance in test performance. Participants who reported higher anxiety levels exhibited inconsistent behaviors during testing, with scores ranging from 4–6/10. These participants demonstrated hesitancy, poor time management, and reluctance to revisit answers. Conversely, participants with moderate or well-managed anxiety scored between 6–7/10, displaying greater confidence and strategic approaches to completing tasks.

4.2 Moderating Role of Teacher Strictness

The perception of teacher strictness significantly influenced anxiety levels.
• **Punitive Strictness:** Participants perceiving their teacher as harsh or punitive reported heightened anxiety. This was evident in Participant 2's statement: "My last teacher said she would fail anyone who made silly mistakes, and I can't stop

thinking about that." These students frequently demonstrated erratic test behaviors and performed poorly.

• **Constructive Strictness:** Participants who viewed teacher strictness as a form of academic rigor or fairness exhibited lower anxiety. Participant 3 noted: "A strict teacher is just someone who wants you to learn properly. It's not something to fear if you studied well." These students performed systematically and achieved higher scores.

4.3 Effectiveness of Test-Taking Strategies
Participants employed a variety of strategies to manage anxiety and uncertainty during the test:
• **Pencil Usage:** Participants like Participant 5 used pencils to reduce pressure, allowing corrections without feeling "trapped."
• **Prioritization:** Several participants prioritized easier questions to build confidence before tackling more challenging ones.
• **Translation:** Participant 5 occasionally translated words into Arabic to confirm understanding.

While these strategies were generally effective for participants with moderate anxiety, they were insufficient for those experiencing severe anxiety, such as Participant 2, whose emotional distress significantly impeded performance.

4.4 Individual Patterns and Observations
Participant 1 (Score: 6/10; Self-Reported Anxiety: ~7/10)
This participant exhibited visible anxiety, such as rapid blinking and hand-rubbing, and expressed concern about the teacher's strictness. She stated: "I always feel a knot in my stomach before tests, especially when I know the teacher is very strict." While her performance was moderate, her persistent self-doubt hindered her confidence.

Participant 2 (Score: 4/10; Self-Reported Anxiety: ~9/10)
The participant displayed severe anxiety symptoms, including dizziness and tears. Her distress was linked to prior experiences with harsh teachers, leading to avoidance behaviors such as reluctance to review answers. She explained, "If I look back at my answers, I'll just doubt myself more."

Participant 3 (Score: 7/10; Self-Reported Anxiety: ~4/10)
Calm and methodical, this participant viewed teacher strictness as constructive. She systematically eliminated incorrect options and checked logical consistency before finalizing answers. Her balanced perspective on teacher expectations appeared to buffer her from high anxiety.

Participant 4 (Score: 7/10; Self-Reported Anxiety: Initially 10/10, Observed: Moderate)
Though self-reported anxiety was initially high, her behavior suggested moderate levels. She used self-reassurance techniques such as, "I know some of these words from class," and managed her time effectively despite frequent time-checking behaviors.

Participant 5 (Score: 6/10; Self-Reported Anxiety: ~6/10)
Moderate anxiety in this participant was linked to concerns about meeting teacher expectations. She stated: "I feel like if I don't do well, the teacher might think I'm lazy." Her cautious use of pencils and strategic approach to answering questions enabled her to perform adequately.

4.5 Emergent Themes
Teacher Strictness and Anxiety
Students who perceived teacher strictness as punitive reported higher anxiety and lower performance. In contrast, those who reframed strictness as fairness or academic rigor experienced reduced anxiety and achieved better outcomes.

Physical and Emotional Symptoms of Anxiety
Participants displayed a range of anxiety symptoms, from mild (leg shaking, knuckle cracking) to severe (dizziness, stomachaches, tears). High physiological arousal was associated with poorer test performance.

Test Strategies and Anxiety Management
Effective strategies included pencil usage, question prioritization, and translation. However, these were only successful for participants with moderate anxiety, as severe anxiety impaired the ability to implement coping mechanisms.

Post-Test Reflections
Participants reported varying levels of relief or lingering anxiety after the test. While some expressed immediate emotional recovery ("It's over; at least I can relax now"), others remained worried about grading, suggesting the potential for long-term impacts on future test preparation.

Table 1: Quantitative Overview of the participants self-reported anxiety

Participant	Score	Self-Reported Anxiety	Key Observation
Participant 1	6/10	~7/10	Persistent worry; frequent erasing
Participant 2	4/10	~9/10	Severe distress; reluctance to revise
Participant 3	7/10	~4/10	Systematic, composed approach
Participant 4	7/10	Initially 10/10	Moderate anxiety; self-reassurance
Participant 5	6/10	~6/10	Fear of judgment; cautious strategy

The think-aloud data and test performance results underscore the significant role of VTA in shaping both cognitive processes and emotional responses. Teacher strictness, when perceived as punitive, amplified anxiety and hindered performance. Conversely, constructive perceptions of strictness facilitated better outcomes. Effective test-taking strategies mitigated anxiety for some participants, but those with severe anxiety struggled to benefit from these approaches.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between vocabulary test anxiety (VTA) and test performance, the moderating role of perceived teacher strictness, and the effectiveness of test-taking strategies in an ESL context. Through a combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative insights from think-aloud protocols (TAPs), the findings contribute to the growing body of research on test anxiety in language learning.

Findings demonstrated a moderate to strong negative correlation ($r = -0.62$, $R^2 = 0.38$) between VTA and test performance, suggesting that higher anxiety levels were associated with lower test scores. This aligns with previous research indicating that test anxiety negatively affects cognitive processing and performance efficiency in language assessments (Chen, 2022; Sipahi, 2020). Students experiencing high anxiety exhibited behaviors such as hesitation, poor time management, and reluctance to revise answers, further supporting findings from Zeidner (2005) that test anxiety disrupts strategic problem-solving in high-stakes assessments.

Teacher strictness was identified as a significant moderating factor in VTA levels. Students who perceived their teacher as punitive reported heightened anxiety and lower test performance, consistent with Rad and Ferdosipour (2020), who found that teacher personality and strictness perceptions directly influence student anxiety. Conversely, students who viewed strictness as constructive or academically fair exhibited lower anxiety and more systematic test-taking behaviors. This aligns with findings by Putwain et al. (2016, 2023), who noted that structured and supportive learning environments contribute to lower test anxiety and better academic resilience.

The effectiveness of test-taking strategies varied based on the severity of anxiety. Strategies such as prioritizing easier questions, using pencils to reduce pressure, and translating words to confirm understanding were beneficial for students with moderate anxiety. However, these techniques were less effective for students experiencing severe anxiety, whose performance was significantly impaired. This supports previous studies by Burcaş and Creţu (2021), which highlight the limitations of cognitive strategies when anxiety reaches debilitating levels. The observed variability in coping mechanisms aligns with findings from Fraidan (2023) on individual differences in lexical attrition and test anxiety responses.

Overall, this study reinforces the impact of VTA on test performance and highlights the role of teacher expectations and test-taking strategies in shaping student outcomes. While anxiety reduction techniques may aid moderately anxious students, additional interventions may be necessary for those experiencing severe anxiety to ensure fair and equitable assessment conditions. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on test anxiety in language learning and provide actionable insights for educators seeking to foster a supportive testing environment.

5.1 Test-Taking Strategies and Cognitive Processing

A key contribution of this study is the observation of participants' individualized test-taking strategies, which must be understood in light of established research in this field (Al Fraidan, 2024a). Strategies such as using pencils to allow for changes, skimming the entire test before answering, and selectively translating complex vocabulary items represent attempts to exert control over the testing situation. For instance, Participants 1, 2, and 5 used pencils initially to reduce the permanence of their answers, reflecting a desire to keep cognitive and affective options open. In contrast, Participants 3 and 4 wrote with pens from the start, suggesting they might have higher self-efficacy or confidence in their lexical knowledge.

These findings parallel existing work on test-taking strategies that underscore how learners, especially those experiencing anxiety, adopt specific behavioral and cognitive approaches to navigate uncertainty and mitigate stress (Al Fraidan, 2024a). In essence, effective test-taking strategies can serve as a buffer against anxiety, allowing students to maintain composure, deploy linguistic knowledge more efficiently, and avoid panic-induced guesswork.

5.2 Perceptions of Anxiety: Discrepancies Between Self-Assessment and Observation

Beyond strategies, the study highlights intriguing discrepancies between how participants perceived their anxiety and what was observed. Some individuals believed they were "extremely anxious," yet manifested only mild physiological or behavioral symptoms. Conversely, others underestimated their anxiety severity. This aligns with the notion that test anxiety is not a monolithic construct but varies in expression, influenced by learners' self-esteem, metacognitive beliefs, and ability to tolerate uncertainty (Huntley et al., 2020, 2022, 2023; Li et al., 2021).

In this regard, the strategic dimension is crucial. Learners more adept at deploying test-taking strategies (as conceptualized by Al Fraidan, 2024a) may experience less disruption from anxiety, translating their nervous energy into constructive actions—such as reading questions thoroughly or prioritizing known items first—instead of spiraling into worry.

5.3 Teacher Strictness and Learner Perceptions

Consistent with earlier research (Rad & Ferdosipour, 2020; Jee & Byun, 2023), teacher strictness emerged as a powerful predictor of anxiety. Most participants viewed strict teachers as potential sources of threat, increasing their sense of vulnerability during the exam. However, Participant 3, who perceived strictness as fairness and academic rigor, maintained a calmer demeanor and performed well. This suggests that reframing strictness as a structured form of guidance rather than punitive oversight can reduce anxiety.

When teachers clearly articulate testing standards and grading criteria, students may perceive the assessment as fair and constructive, rather than an unpredictable threat. Such transparency can encourage more effective test-taking strategies (Al Fraidan, 2024a), allowing students to approach vocabulary items systematically

and confidently, rather than guessing out of fear or resorting to anxious second-guessing.

5.4 VTA and Performance Interplay

The interplay between VTA and performance is nuanced. While intense anxiety generally undermined performance, as seen in Participant 2's severe distress and low score, some learners demonstrated that anxiety does not inevitably translate into poor results. Participant 4, who reported high anxiety but ultimately performed well, exemplifies how strategic competence and academic buoyancy (Putwain et al., 2023) can moderate anxiety's impact. By employing effective test-taking strategies (Al Fraidan, 2024a) and maintaining composure, even anxious learners can leverage their linguistic knowledge productively.

This reinforces the importance of teaching and modeling strategic test-taking behaviors as part of language instruction. Rather than treating anxiety as an immovable obstacle, educators can help students channel nervous energy into constructive behaviors, ensuring that test results reflect true lexical competence rather than emotional turbulence.

5.5 Contributions and Implications for Practice

This study's findings complement and extend current literature on VTA and test anxiety at large. By explicitly linking anxiety to both teacher-induced perceptions and the deployment of test-taking strategies (Al Fraidan, 2024a), the research contributes a more integrated perspective on how learners navigate high-stakes vocabulary assessments.

Practical implications are substantial. Teacher training should emphasize the importance of clear communication about test expectations, grading policies, and the purpose behind strictness. Such clarity can transform student perceptions and reduce anxiety levels. Simultaneously, incorporating explicit instruction on test-taking strategies—such as how to tackle complex vocabulary items, when to guess, and how to manage pacing—can bolster learners' resilience and help them perform closer to their true proficiency levels.

Additionally, interventions that improve metacognitive awareness, self-efficacy, and academic buoyancy may further mitigate anxiety. Encouraging students to recognize anxiety as a manageable cognitive and emotional state, rather than an insurmountable barrier, aligns with the insights gleaned from the current study. Such a stance can empower learners to engage proactively with test materials, maintain equilibrium in the face of uncertainty, and ultimately achieve better outcomes.

The findings highlight the influence of culturally embedded perceptions of teacher authority in Saudi Arabia, where strictness is often equated with academic rigor. These norms shape students' anxiety levels, particularly in high-stakes assessments. Understanding these cultural dynamics is crucial for developing interventions that align with the aspirations of Saudi Vision 2030.

The bilingual context of Saudi Arabia, where Arabic serves as the mother tongue, adds complexity to English learning. Students' reliance on translation strategies during vocabulary tests highlights the interaction between L1 and L2 proficiency, which warrants further investigation.

Saudi ESL evaluation methods often emphasize vocabulary mastery due to its importance in academic disciplines taught in English. Compared to broader ESL contexts, this focus on vocabulary places additional pressure on students, making VTA a particularly salient issue. In addition to teacher strictness, factors such as students' previous test experiences, their perceptions of fairness in assessment, and their reliance on coping strategies significantly affect anxiety levels. Addressing these factors through targeted interventions can help alleviate VTA and improve performance.

The findings align with self-determination theory, where perceived autonomy and competence influence anxiety. When teacher strictness is framed as punitive, it undermines students' sense of competence, exacerbating anxiety. Conversely, constructive strictness fosters resilience and strategic behaviors, enhancing performance Al Fraidan's (2024b; 2025a; 2025b).

In sum, this study advances our understanding of VTA by illustrating the complex interplay between learners' perceptions of teacher strictness, their adoption of test-taking strategies (Al Fraidan, 2024a), and the resulting anxiety-performance relationship. While intense anxiety often correlates with lower scores, strategic competence, transparent assessment practices, and reframed perceptions of teacher strictness can help learners navigate challenges more effectively. In doing so, this research provides a valuable roadmap for educators and policymakers seeking to create testing environments that measure true lexical aptitude rather than amplifying emotional distress.

5.6 Recommendations

To address Vocabulary Test Anxiety (VTA) and its impact on test performance, the following recommendations are proposed for educators and policymakers:

1. Incorporate Metacognitive Strategy Training:

Develop ESL curricula that include metacognitive strategies, such as self-monitoring, time management, and test-taking techniques, to help students manage anxiety effectively.

2. Reframe Teacher Strictness:

Encourage teachers to communicate strictness as constructive academic guidance rather than punitive measures. Transparent communication about assessment criteria and expectations can help reduce anxiety.

3. Design Low-Stakes Practice Tests:

Introduce practice tests with low-stakes consequences to allow students to familiarize themselves with test formats, build confidence, and develop resilience under pressure.

4. Implement Culturally Sensitive Teacher Training:
Provide training for educators on the cultural factors influencing student anxiety. Teachers should understand how cultural perceptions of authority and strictness affect learning and performance in the Saudi context.

5. Expand Future Research:
Promote research that includes diverse participant demographics, particularly mixed-gender samples, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of VTA and its broader implications.
Recommendations tailored to Saudi Arabia's education system can also inform broader contexts by addressing the universal nature of VTA and its impact on student performance.

5.7 Limitations
The study involved a small, gender-specific sample of five female participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to include larger, mixed-gender cohorts to enhance representativeness.

The study primarily relied on qualitative data from think-aloud protocols and observations. While these methods provided rich insights, future studies should incorporate quantitative measures to validate findings and explore additional dimensions of test anxiety.
By addressing these limitations and implementing the recommendations, future research and educational practices can better mitigate the effects of VTA and enhance the learning experiences of ESL students.

6. Conclusion
This study has demonstrated that vocabulary test anxiety (VTA) is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by a convergence of learner perceptions, test-taking strategies , teacher behavior, and individual anxiety thresholds. While test anxiety is not unique to vocabulary assessments, the specialized demands of lexical retrieval and semantic precision can intensify stress, particularly when learners perceive their teachers as overly strict or unpredictable. The findings reinforce the notion, supported by prior research , that students experiencing higher VTA tend to perform more poorly, as anxiety disrupts cognitive processing and hinders efficient recall of lexical items.

Critically, this study highlights that teacher personality—and especially the perception of strictness—can either exacerbate or mitigate VTA. By presenting strictness as structured academic rigor rather than punitive rigidity, educators may reduce fear and cultivate a learning climate in which students feel more confident employing test-taking strategies . Such strategies include managing time effectively, pre-reading test items, selectively translating complex words, and using writing tools that allow for revisions. When students view tests as fair and transparent, anxiety can be channeled into constructive effort rather than paralyzing worry.

In practical terms, these insights underscore the value of proactive interventions at multiple levels. Teacher development programs should emphasize transparent

communication about test format, difficulty, and grading criteria. Language instructors can integrate explicit strategy instruction into their curricula, coaching students to adopt systematic, confidence-building approaches when facing challenging vocabulary tasks. Moreover, helping students reframe strictness as a form of guidance and encouraging the cultivation of metacognitive awareness, self-efficacy, and academic buoyancy can further buffer against anxiety's negative effects.

In essence, while VTA may be an enduring feature of the academic landscape, it need not be an insurmountable barrier to authentic lexical assessment. By aligning teaching practices, assessment designs, and strategic training, educators can foster testing environments that more accurately reflect learners' true lexical competence, ultimately leading to more equitable, supportive, and effective language learning experiences.

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