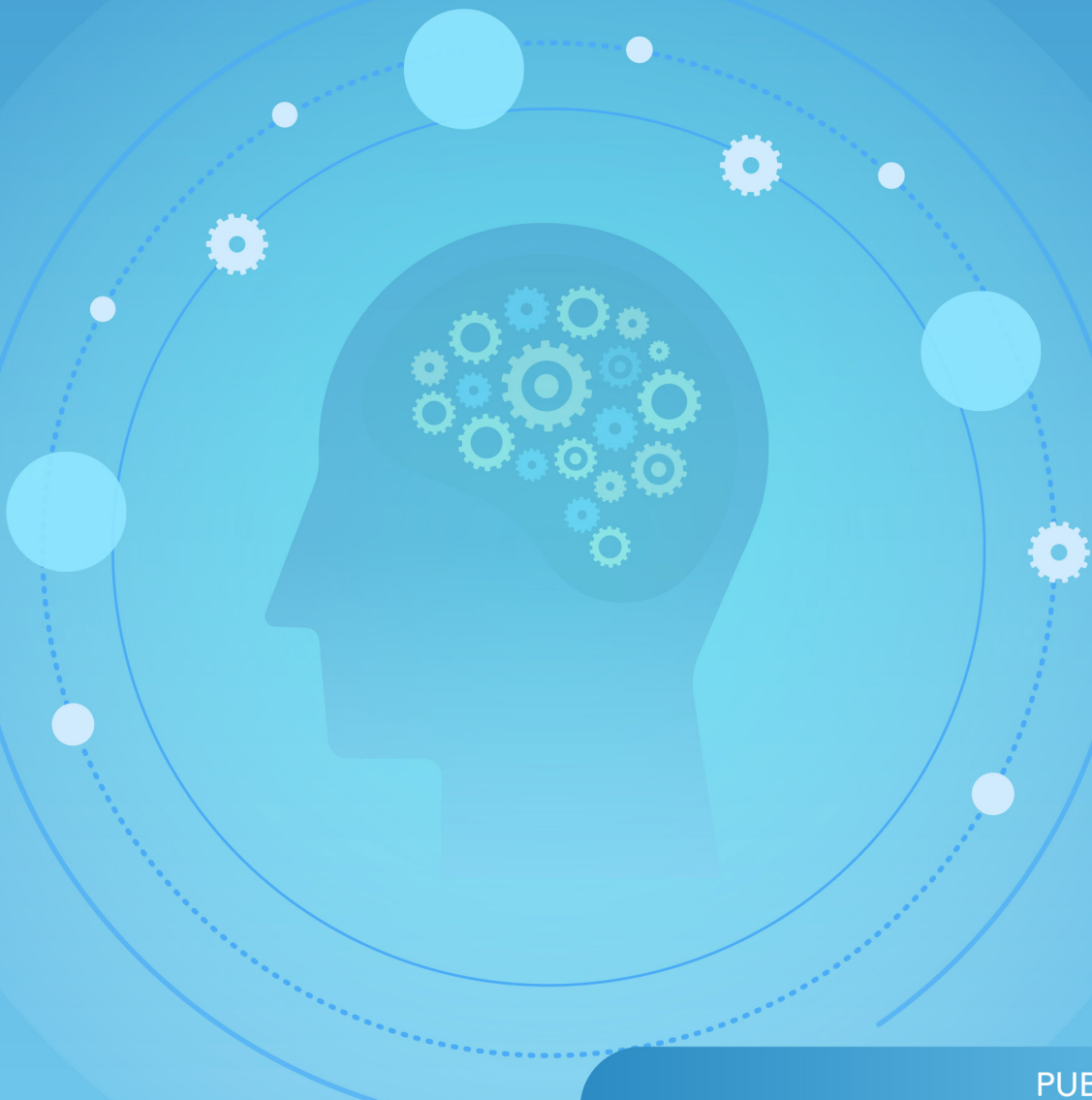




# American Journal of Arts and Human Science (AJAHS)

ISSN: 2832-451X (ONLINE)

**VOLUME 5 ISSUE 3 (2026)**



PUBLISHED BY  
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

## Gatekeeping Through Anxiety: Triggers and Consequences of Exam Stress Among English Foundation Students in Oman

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### Article Information

**Received:** April 07, 2026

**Accepted:** June 20, 2026

**Published:** July 18, 2026

### Keywords

*English Assessment, Exam Anxiety, Foundation Students, Gatekeeping, Oman*

### ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the problem of English exam anxiety among the foundation students in Oman, its levels, its triggers, its effects, and some strategies which might assist in minimizing exam anxiety. A quantitative cross sectional survey method was used in collecting the data from 108 students who filled out a structured questionnaire consisting of items with Likert scale and open-ended questions. The results indicated moderate levels of exam anxiety in general with the cognitive and emotional symptoms being more evident than the physiological symptoms. Factors that were found to be the greatest causes of anxiety were found to be lack of preparation, fear of low grades and difficulty of understanding English lessons. Students also indicated that anxiety caused memory loss, difficulty concentrating, lack of confidence, loss of motivation, and poor grades. Open-ended answers showed that children felt that preparation, time management, adequate sleep, support from teachers and supportive exam conditions would help to alleviate anxiety. The study also found that both levels of preparedness and the high stakes with which English is being taught as a gatekeeping subject in foundation programmes are determinants of anxiety in this context. The results indicate that a combination of academic, pedagogical and institutional support is required to reduce exam anxiety.

### INTRODUCTION

Examination anxiety is a common issue in post-secondary education and associated with a reduction in students' academic performance as well as well-being. A comprehensive meta-analysis conducted over a span of 30 years, covering 238 studies, revealed the presence of small to moderate negative associations between test anxiety, and a wide range of educational outcomes including standardized test scores, university entrance exam performance, and grade point averages (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018; Ramos, 2023; Degorio, 2023). recent correlational work with undergraduate nursing students similarly demonstrated a statistically significant negative correlation between test anxiety and academic performance, thereby indicating that anxiety has a powerful detrimental effect on achievement (Benjamin & Mohammed, 2023). Exam anxiety normally includes cognitive worry, emotional distress, and physiological hyperarousal in evaluative situations. It is, nowadays, considered a serious constraint to equal learning and advancement in tertiary contexts (Hameed, 2023).

For students learning English as a foreign language, assessments often bring additional language related identity threats which may exacerbate test anxiety. Studies that evaluated the impact of language focused programmes provide evidence that test anxiety increases worry and disrupts access to the L2 knowledge needed to complete a listening, speaking, reading or writing task (Altamimi & Altamimi, 2025). University English majors in Saudi Arabia are for example reported moderate test

anxiety and significant negative relationship between anxiety and self-assessed proficiency in all four skills suggesting increased anxiety undermines learners perceived and actual communicative competence (Altamimi & Altamimi, 2025). Parallel work with EFL university students has showed high-level language anxiety. The anxiety is characterized by fear of negative evaluation, apprehension about making mistakes and concern over peers and teacher judgments. All this are closely linked to anxiety in test situations (Bintang Zul Hulaifah & Sibuea, 2023).

In Oman, English is a vital assessment in foundation programmes that prepare students for advanced diplomas or degrees within a specific discipline and thus exam performance in English particularly consequential. Research on Omani learners' speaking test experiences indicates that cognitive aspects of test anxiety, such as intrusive thoughts, anticipatory worry, and preoccupation with failure, are salient even at the elementary and pre intermediate proficiency levels (Al Ghaithi & Behforouz, 2024). A recent study among Omani EFL learners found that cognitive anxiety of low proficiency was most often caused due to lack of confidence, fear of failure, sleep disruption before examinations, and immediate oral feedback.

The triggers of exam anxiety university students suffer from are multifactorial and may occur on intrapersonal, instructional and contextual levels. They include low self-esteem, perceived difficulty, and the high-stake nature of tests (von der Embse *et al.*, 2018). Nonetheless, existing

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scholarship in Omani context has mostly restricted itself to certain professional disciplines, like medicine (AlHarthi *et al.*, 2023), or a given skill and test type rather than the general configuration of exam anxiety triggers and consequences at foundation level English courses (Al Ghaithi & Behforouz, 2024). As a result, there is limited knowledge regarding the trigger and manifestation of exam anxiety in relation to cognitive, emotional, and academic effects among English foundation level students at Omani universities who sit for English assessments linguistically demanding and gatekeeping in nature.

#### To address this gap, the present study is guided by the following research questions

1. What levels of English exam anxiety do foundation-year students report, and across which cognitive, emotional, and physiological dimensions is it most pronounced?

2. Which intrapersonal, social, and contextual factors do English foundation students perceive as the primary triggers of their exam anxiety?

3. What are the perceived academic, behavioral, and psychological effects of exam anxiety on English foundation students, and what support strategies do they consider most effective in reducing it?

There are several important aspects of this study. To begin with, it is based on an under-researched population: English foundation level students in Oman where English exams have direct implications for progression into degrees and future careers. Next, by mapping the triggers and effects all at once, the findings can serve as valuable evidence for the development of language support strategies and other pedagogical and counselling interventions designed to alleviate anxiety and promote more adaptive coping, such as assessment accommodations and psychoeducational programmes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualising exam anxiety in higher education

Exam anxiety is a type of anxiety that manifests in feeling anxious, worried, and fearful due to examinations and studies, which results in affecting the performance of students (David & Aakash, 2025). The meaning of fear of failure, negative self-evaluations, and somatic symptoms, and behavioural responses, including avoidance behaviours or over studying, as involved in exam anxiety is being used on recent empirical work on higher education students. (Popovska Nalevska *et al.*, 2024) According to Amaravathi & Kanagathara (2025), the anxiety that students face before performing any academic task is in addition to the more general type of anxiety that the child experiences. Together both types of anxieties predict academic performance. Likewise, Popovska Nalevska *et al.* (2024) indicate that university students characterize exam anxiety as emotional tension and cognitive preoccupation that interferes with performance, even where students believe that they have sufficient content knowledge.

### Prevalence and correlates among university students

Recent studies indicate that there is a high incidence of exam anxiety in the university population. A large sample of undergraduates in India revealed that a considerable section of students preparing for a national entrance examination reported clinically relevant levels of anxiety. Their findings revealed that anxiety was negatively related to perceived performance and satisfaction post-exam (Thiriveedhi *et al.*, 2023). Popovska Nalevska *et al.* (2024) studied test anxiety among half of the university students surveyed in Europe continent. More specifically, it was also found that women have significantly higher test anxiety than men.

Exam anxiety is also associated with a variety of academic and psychological correlates besides prevalence. In a study by Thiriveedhi *et al.* (2023), it has been shown that higher test anxiety scores are associated with more frequent cognitive interferences (e.g., “blanking”) in exams and lower self-rated performance. Test anxiety among high school students preparing for a university admission examination was negatively associated with mental well-being. Moreover, this anxiety is also impacted by socio demographic factors such as parental education, access to a private study space, and motivation for online learning (Yatkin *et al.*, 2023). The findings of the research depict that the examinational anxiety in higher education trajectories is not merely an individual difference variable but also a product of the broader structural and contextual conditions.

### Exam anxiety in EFL and English medium learning

Students who are learning through English as a foreign language exhibit exam anxiety that interacts with language anxiety and other affective variables associated with second language use. According to Abd Elmajid (2025), EFL learners worry about having accurate linguistic and a sufficient vocabulary. They also fear negative evaluation during both oral and written tests. In a different research context, the data from Prameswari *et al.* (2025) revealed that the junior high EFL learners experienced severe speaking anxiety. There was a general anxiety in front of classmates, mispronouncing a word, and being laughed at. The authors mentioned that this anxiety worsened during formal testing situations.

In a foreign language context, self-regulated learning has also been linked to exam anxiety. Citing candidates from professional examinations, Amate Romera & de la Fuente (2021) reported that test anxiety was negatively related to self-regulation. Furthermore, students with low levels of self-regulation were more likely to adopt emotion focused coping strategies (for example, worry, rumination) rather than problem focused strategies (for example, planning, help seeking).

### Triggers of exam anxiety among EFL and foundation learners

Recent research has analyzed a set of intrapersonal, verbal and contextual triggers of anxiety in language learning

exam situations. Amate Romera and de la Fuente (2021) found at the intrapersonal level that high test anxiety is associated with low self-regulation and frequent use of coping strategies for stress that focus on emotional responses rather than problem solving. According to them, students who have no planning and monitoring would show more anxiety and less capability to manage stress occurring with high stakes assessments.

At the linguistic level, Prameswari *et al.* (2025) argue that the main causes of speaking related anxiety are the lack of vocabulary, the fear of mispronouncing words, and the fear of making mistakes. The study also found that speaking anxiety peaked at formal tests. The results support Abd Elmajid's (2025) finding that English as a medium of evaluation (mainly oral performances) is a salient trigger of test anxiety among EFL learners at the university level.

The contextual factors further shape the emergence of exam anxiety. The investigation of students' perceived anxiety is necessary for understanding their needs and circumstances (Popovska Nalevska *et al.*, 2024). Based on this study, the anxiety levels of students differ based on academic field, perceptions of examination difficulty, and the stakes of the assessment outcomes (like continuation of scholarship, advancement of programme, etc.). Evidence from comparative research on anxiety and performance indicates that institutional culture and assessment policies influence students' anxiety. More specifically, Stokes (2014) argues that high stakes summative testing cultures are associated with higher anxiety. For students at the foundation level of English in Oman, English, which acts as a gatekeeper to their higher studies, is expected to heighten under similar high stakes conditions, general and language specific triggers alike.

### Effects of exam anxiety on academic and psychological outcomes

There is increasing evidence that exam anxiety affects academic performance. A correlational study conducted in Pakistan indicates that anxiety is a significant negative predictor of undergraduates' academic performance in the science and social science fields (Khan *et al.*, 2023). Amaravathi & Kanagathara (2025) found that greater levels of general and study-related anxiety were linked to lower GPA, even after controlling demographics. According to Thiriveedhi *et al.* (2023), candidates with higher levels of anxiety, when taking entrance exams, not only report lesser perceived performance but also describe higher levels of cognitive interference. This refers to not being able to concentrate on questions, and forgetting what supremely practiced or studied.

Wider indices of well-being are also linked to exam anxiety. In the study that was done on Turkish students who were preparing for a university admission examination, it was found by Yatkin *et al.* (2023) that test anxiety had a significant negative association with mental well-being. University students who have high anxiety experience more emotional tension, irritability, and somatic

complaints compared to students with lower anxiety. As such, exam anxiety is one of the main cumulative sources of stress at university. Research demonstrates systematic evidence that anxiety is one of the major mental health burden among under-graduates (Rastogi, 2025).

The academic performance and language learning path of EFL and English medium learners are hampered through exam anxiety. Abd Elmajid (2025) reported that learners with high levels of test anxiety had difficulty recalling vocabulary and grammar structure even though they were well prepared. Likewise, Learners' Lack of Involvement or Response during Oral Test due to speaking anxiousness as found by Prameswari *et al.* (2025) limited the learners' opportunity to display their actual competence. For foundation level English students in Oman such patterns raise issues of the fairness and validity of exam score as a measure of underlying ability.

### Coping, self regulation, and protective factors

More recent work has started to pinpoint the ways of coping, as well as protective factors, that can help reduce exam anxiety in a language learning context. The professional examination candidates showed that higher goal setting, strategic planning, and monitoring (self-regulation) were linked with lower test anxiety and more adaptive coping strategies analytically through Amate Romera & de la Fuente (2021). As such, they discovered that when students learn how to plan, monitor and evaluate their work, this can potentially reduce exam anxiety, which in turn will enhance academic results.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research design

The current study will adopt a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational survey design which will enable the researcher to study the causes and impacts of exam anxiety of the English foundation-level students at a university in Oman. The design suits for answering the research question which identify the cognitive, emotional and contextual antecedents of exam anxiety. And examining the associations between the antecedents and self-perceived English competence and performance in high-stakes exam. Recent studies on test anxiety with university populations use survey-based correlational designs, which seek to model the relationships between anxiety, academic stress and achievement. A questionnaire approach is ideal to gauge students' subjective experience of anxiety and perceived triggers and self-reported outcomes at scale and within a single semester.

### Setting and participants

The research will take place within the English foundation programme of a university in Oman whereby students must pass the English language courses and their relevant examinations prior to advancing into discipline-specific undergraduate degrees. Students enrolled in foundation-level English language courses during the semester in which the data will be collected are eligible



for participation, provided that they are aged 18 years and older, and consent informedly. A priori power analysis for correlation and multiple regression will be performed using G\*Power 3.1. More specifically, a sample size will be determined for the previously described analysis, for detecting small to moderate effect sizes with 0.80 statistical power and an alpha level of .05. This approach follows the best practice recommendations for performing power analysis within social and educational research (Faul *et al.* 2009). To ensure representation of the different assessment bands in the foundation programme, stratified sampling through level (e.g. elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate) will be employed.

### Instruments

A self-administered questionnaire having four sections which include demographic and academic background, exam anxiety, perceived causes and effects of exam anxiety and self-perceived English competence would be used to collect data. We will employ the Cognitive Test Anxiety Scale (CTAS; Cassady & Johnson, 2002) to measure exam anxiety. The CTAS assesses cognitive indicators of test anxiety during preparation and performance phases. The CTAS has documented strong internal consistency and criterion validity in university samples. The CTAS has been translated and adapted to different languages and cultures, including Persian and German versions, which exhibit good psychometric properties (Baghaei & Cassady, 2014; von der Embse *et al.*, 2018). Items will be linguistically adapted to an Omani foundation context (e.g., referring to English midterm and final exams). As in previous CTAS adaptations, expert review will follow established translation–adaptation procedures.

To answer Research Question 1, we will develop further items to measure cognitive (e.g., worry, intrusive thoughts), emotional (e.g., fear, tension) and context-related triggers of exam anxiety (e.g., perceived high stakes, teacher expectations, time pressure), based on the prior conceptualizations of test, school and academic anxiety in higher education. The item content will be based on the domains represented in the School Anxiety Inventory – College Version (SAI CV), which differentiates school situations such as academic failure and social evaluation and anxiety symptoms (cognitive, behavioral, physiological) in college students (Beckmann & Jastrowski Mano, 2023). The items for Research question 3 will focus on perceived academic (e.g., concentration difficulties, avoiding revision), behavioral (e.g., procrastination, non-attendance), and psychological (e.g., sleep disturbance, somatic complaints) effects of exam anxiety. This will be based on recent literature on test anxiety, perfectionism, and coping efforts in universities. The perceived competence in English by the learners will be measured in listening, speaking, reading, and writing through Likert type scales which have been adapted from previous studies on language anxiety and self-assessment in EFL university reflexes. The research team will seek institutional permission for matching

questionnaire data with objective performance indicators (most recent English exam scores) from departmental records using anonymised codes.

### Procedures

After obtaining ethical approval, the researcher will contact the English course coordinators of the foundation to arrange the collection of data during normal class time at the middle of the semester and before final examination. After explaining clearly about the purpose of the study and that participation is voluntary, either a paper based or secure online questionnaire will be provided to students who provide written informed consent. Students will be instructed that there are no right or wrong answers, that responses are completely confidential, and that their responses will not affect their course grades. It will take you around 15–20 minutes to complete. The questionnaires that the respondents completed will be collected right away. Further, the responses with missing data will also be retained and analyzed if the missing data is acceptable (e.g. <10% at scale level). This is consistent with survey-based studies of test anxiety in higher education.

### Data analysis

The data will be entered into and analysed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS or R). The first stage will include checking missing values, outliers and normality assumptions. To describe levels of exam anxiety, perceived triggers and perceived effects, descriptive statistics (means standard deviations, frequencies) will be computed for all variables. The reliability study of the CTAS as well as the recently created subscales will utilize Cronbach's alpha as well as item–total correlations. This will be based on the psychometric studies of cognitive test anxiety as well as school anxiety measures. Exploratory factor analysis will be performed on the trigger and effect items to investigate the structures among them and to derive subscale scores that align with the cognitive, emotional and contextual focus of the research questions. This will follow similar procedures to those used in the development of recent academic anxiety scales.

To respond Research Question 1, descriptive and inferential analyses (e.g., mean comparisons across proficiency levels, gender) will be performed to spot the most salient triggers of exam anxiety for the sample. To answer Research Question 2, Pearson correlations and multiple regression analyses will be conducted to examine the relationships between participants' scores on the exam anxiety scale, their self-perceived English competence and their objective performance in an English exam, in line with established work in the area of test anxiety (Zeidner, 1998). The relationships between exam anxiety and reported academic, behavioral, and psychological effects at time of test will be investigated using correlation and regression models. Model specification will use insights from four cross-sectional studies of test anxiety and academic outcomes in university students.

### Ethical considerations

The study will follow applicable institutional as well as international ethical guidelines on human participants. Research ethics committee of university approved data collection at university. The aims of the study will be to explain to the students that participation is voluntary, and that they have the right to withdraw at any time and without penalty. This means that the respondents will not write their names on the questionnaire. Also, complete privacy will be maintained. All data will be stored safely and reported only in aggregate, to minimize any risk of deductive disclosure. Participants will be given information on available university counselling, and academic support services, should completing the questionnaire prompt any distress, as anxiety related topics are sensitive in nature.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Participant Profile

The questionnaire was completed by 108 foundation students. Most respondents were of Level 3 ( $n = 105$ , 97.2%) and only three students from Level 1 and 2 combined. Out of the total sample, 67 students representing 62% were females and 40 students representing 37% were males. Also, one response was missing. Regarding age, 55 students (50.9%) had an age range of 16-18 years old, while 50 (46.3%) had an age by 19-20 years old, and only three were outside the two groups. With respect to the history of learning English, 47 students had learning experience of more than 10 years, 43 of below 5 years, and 18 of 5–10 years.

### RQ1: Levels of English Exam Anxiety

The first research question looked into English exam anxiety levels and its dimensions where it was the highest. The average score across the 20 Likert-scale items was 3.13 which indicates that the level of anxiety was moderate. Moreover, 55.6 percent of the respondents have obtained an overall mean at or above the neutral midpoint which shows anxiety was a meaningful experience for over half of the respondents. This pattern indicates exam anxiety is not across the board, but widespread enough to warrant pedagogical and institutional intervention.

When the items were grouped conceptually, the cognitive dimension achieved the highest mean ( $M = 3.16$ ) closely followed by the emotional dimension ( $M = 3.15$ ). The physiological dimension, meanwhile, achieved a slightly lower score ( $M = 3.11$ ). The anxiety indicators with the highest levels of agreement were difficulty relaxing during the exam even though study has been done well ( $M = 3.25$ , 45.4%), a physically tired after the exam because the stress during the exam ( $M = 3.22$ , 46.3%) and feeling nervous before the English exam ( $M = 3.20$ , 49.1%). Indicators related to worrying were prominent too. Most students (41.7%) agreed that they worried they would fail the English exam, while 39.8% said that they were unable to concentrate during the exam due to anxiety.

These findings suggest that in this sample, exam anxiety

mainly manifests in terms of thought-related and emotional feelings rather than actual physical symptoms alone. The prominence of problems with relaxation, worry about failure, and memory disturbance aligns with the cognitive model of test anxiety offered by Cassady and Johnson (2002). The authors highlight intrusive thoughts and cognitive interference as central features of anxious test performance. Moreover, the results corroborate Thiriveedhi *et al.* (2023) that anxious students often experienced interference in their thoughts such as “blanking” during exam. Furthermore, results support Popovska Nalevska *et al.* (2024), who shared that test anxiety encompasses emotional tension and cognitive preoccupation among students in the university.

Males obtained higher scores than females in Terms 1 and 2. According to the findings, male students had a significantly higher overall anxiety mean ( $M = 3.58$ ) than female students ( $M = 2.83$ ). This finding contradicts the findings reported in the articles of Popovska Nalevska *et al.* (2024) and Altamimi and Altamimi (2025) which showed that female students have higher anxiety. Though one should interpret this a finding with caution, as the focus of the current study was not essentially a gender-comparison study, the pattern suggests that contextually male foundation students’ anxiety may merit further investigation.

### RQ2: Perceived Triggers of English Exam Anxiety

The second research question focused on the causes of examination anxiety in students. The sample and subscale mean of 3.23 show that the perceived causes of anxiety are slightly salient. Out of a total of six structured trigger items, the two items that elicited the strongest response were the item which lacks preparation will increase my exam anxiety ( $M = 3.29$ , 48.1%) and the item which fear of getting low grades will cause me anxiety ( $M = 3.28$ , 49.1%). They were reigned by I feel anxious since I do not clearly understand all English lessons ( $M = 3.19$ , 45.4%) and I become anxious while writing in English during exams ( $M = 3.11$ , 41.7%).

The open-ended responses reinforced the quantitative pattern. Students consistently identified fear of failure, lack of preparation, overthinking, tough questions, difficulty understanding lessons, and concern about getting low marks as causes of anxiety. Some responses also highlighted the influence of external factors like the observer, test conditions, and strict supervision. So, based on this study, exam anxiety doesn’t stem from a single factor but a combination of intrapersonal, linguistic and contextual pressure.

The results are similar to that of von der Embse *et al.* (2018) who predicted that perceived difficulty, low self-confidence, and high-stakes testing conditions are important predictors of test anxiety. The results also agree with Abd Elmajid (2025) who stated that EFL learners become anxious when they think they do not have enough language knowledge or fears about their mistakes during English assessment. The statement about

not being able to understand the English lesson clearly is particularly important in the present study, as it reflects that anxiety is connected not only to the event of the exam but also to students perceived linguistic readiness ahead of the exam. This supports the view that English exam anxiety in foundation programmes is partly due to language insecurity.

Triggers pertaining to the social and contextual environment were identified, albeit to a lesser extent than triggers associated with preparation and performance. The study revealed that 38.9% of students endorsed family pressure with a mean score of 3.02 followed by comparison with other students with 36.1% ( $M = 3.00$ ). The data suggest that inter-personal pressure creates anxiety but, less so than fear of failure or unpreparedness. Nevertheless, the qualitative comments suggest that the behaviour of observers and the testing environment may further stress some students. It is this shift in focus from individual psychology to more systemic across-the-board assessment climate that is important.

### RQ3: Effects of Exam Anxiety and Suggested Reduction Strategies

The third research question aimed to explore what the students perceived were the causes of exam anxiety and what they think might help them reduce it. On the subscale effects, the mean was 3.08 which indicates a moderate effect overall. Exam Anxiety Most strongly endorsed effect was I forget information during the test due to anxiety ( $M = 3.19$ , 46.3%), followed by exam anxiety affects my motivation to learn English ( $M = 3.14$ , 39.8%) as well as exam anxiety reduces my confidence in my ability ( $M = 3.12$ , 39.8%). The item exam anxiety, which negatively affects my academic performance, received a significant endorsement ( $M = 3.06$ , 36.1%).

The results indicate that anxiety has effects beyond just temporary emotional discomfort. On the contrary, anxiety is perceived by students as affecting memory retrieval, concentration, confidence, motivation, and performance. Similar outcome has been reported by Khan *et al.* (2023) whereby anxiety negatively predicts academic performance. Furthermore, Abd Elmajid (2025) also reported that anxious EFL learners fail to recall things learned for the exam due to exertion. The importance of forgetting in tests is particularly significant since it suggests that anxiety limits students from showing what they actually know.

One noteworthy finding is that the item, I avoid studying because exam stress makes me overwhelmed' received the lowest endorsement of the 20 items ( $M = 2.97$ , 33.3%). This shows that even if many students are anxious, it does not necessarily cause widespread withdrawal from study. A possible explanation is that the gatekeeping role of English foundation examination keeps students meaningfully engaged even though students tend to become anxious. Thus, their stakes are sufficiently high to exacerbate anxiety and repel full detachment.

The comments on ways of coping and supporting

services give rise to the key themes of 'preparation', 'self-regulation, instructional support' and 'spirituality'. Many students indicated adequate preparation or knowing the material well, time management, studying ahead of time, reviewing the material prior to exam day, and doing similar types of questions or past/sample tests. They also suggested getting adequate sleep and relaxation, being positive, breathing calmly. Some voiced a need for more assistance from instructors, clearer assessment guidance, and a less intimidating exam environment, while others commented about prayer, Surah Al-Fatiha and reliance on God. The answers showed that the pupils do not see exam anxiety as a personal weakness but a problem that can be reduced through adequate preparation, teaching support and a calmer exam setting.

### Discussion

The result indicated that the English exam anxiety of foundation students is generally at the moderate level but nonetheless substantial to affect their learning and performance. This outcome concurs well with prior higher education research which identified that test anxiety is often not particularly severe among entire groups of students but nevertheless acts as a key barrier for a sizable group of students (Popovska Nalevska *et al.*, 2024; von der Embse *et al.*, 2018). In this context, however, the consequences may be graver because it is the subject which denies access to the foundation programme. In such a situation, anxiety is not just a matter of emotional disturbance but also one that has a bearing on students' ability to move on to their planned area of specialisation. A key finding is the importance of the cognitive dimension of anxiety. The data indicates that students' anxiety is most reflected in worry, inability to relax, concentration problems and forgetting things in exams. This suggests that exam anxiety causes performance interference mainly by means of cognitive disruption and not through overt physiological symptoms. The finding strongly aligns with Cassady and Johnson (2002) and Thiriveedhi *et al.* (2023), which show that anxious students commonly experience intrusive thoughts and retrieval failure during testing situations. For the current study, some students may know the material but cannot access or arrange it to express it in the exam.

The trigger pattern carries equal significance. A lack of preparation and fear of low grades were perceived causes that are strongest, followed by difficulty in understanding the English lessons. The above means that students' anxiety is affected by their preparedness to act and the penalty of acting wrongly. In a foundation programme where English assessment affects progression, the fear of failing may weigh more heavily than it does in lower-stakes situations. Simultaneously, the involvement of lesson understanding and English writing reaffirms that this is not just general test anxiety but also language-related anxiety inherent in the EFL setting. This finding agrees with Abd Elmajid (2025) and Altamimi & Altamimi (2025) whose conclude that there is a close association

between the higher level of test anxiety and English language difficulty and lower perceived proficiency. Furthermore, the study shows how, besides the moment of the exam, anxiety causes effects. Students said that their confidence dropped, they were less motivated to learn English, they could not sleep, they were physically tired, and they were disappointed in themselves after their examinations. Such findings indicate that students' overall attitude towards learning English is affected by anxiety and not just the exam performance. This interpretation is compatible with previous studies of anxiety predicting poorer academic outcomes and well-being (Amaravathi & Kanagathara, 2025; Yarkin *et al.*, 2023). The current findings support the case that exam anxiety deserves to be taken as an academic and psychological problem in foundation education.

Simultaneously, the low endorsement of study avoidance is theoretically important due to this. This may suggest that students in this context may still keep engaged despite their anxiety as the English exams provide access to degree programmes. This somewhat contradicts research that suggests anxiety often leads to avoiding behaviour and procrastination (Amate-Romera & de la Fuente, 2021). It seems reasonable to suggest that the programmer's gatekeeping will have had the paradoxical effect of motivating students to study, but now this happens under duress. It follows that anxiety may not always cut back on effort, but it can reduce the quality of performance.

The current study makes a unique contribution regarding the open-ended coping responses. Besides academic preparedness and time management, students pointed to teacher reassurance, review sessions, sample tests, calm invigilation and spiritual practices such as prayer and Quran recitation. The responses depict that the students comprehend anxiety management in practical and cultural manners. The importance of spiritual coping is particularly high as this is seldom mentioned in test-anxiety scales which are made in the West. Indications within the Omani context, these responses highlight the importance of culturally responsive support frameworks which acknowledge religious coping as a valid part of the emotional regulation of students.

Overall, the study shows how English foundation students' exam anxiety is influenced by cognitive vulnerability, linguistic insecurity and high-stakes institutional pressure. It suggests that intervention therapists implement it at various levels. Training students in preparation strategies, time management techniques, and emotion regulation may help reduce worry, retrieval failure, and more. At classroom level uncertainty can be reduced by clarifying expectations, revising key lessons and familiarizing students with exam formats. At institutions, attention should also be given to the actual exam climate: the behaviour of physical invigilators, and the psychological effects of strongly gatekeeping assessment structures. Cumulatively, the results support that exam anxiety in foundation English courses is not an irrelevant issue, but

rather one that affects the fairness of the examination process, the confidence of students, and the educational progression of students between programmes.

## CONCLUSION

The above-mentioned findings reveal that the cognitive and emotional symptoms of English exam anxiety are stronger in foundation students than those physiological symptoms. Thus, it is a worrisome academic issue. There are three main causes, namely ill preparation, fear of getting low marks and difficulty in understanding the lesson in English. The effect includes forgetting the matter, losing confidence and losing interest in learning English. The results suggest that exam anxiety here is influenced not just by personal preparedness, but on the high-stakes, gatekeeping nature of English testing.

## Recommendations

Teachers should conduct structured reviews, sample tests, and advice before an examination to remove any uncertainties and strengthen the preparedness of students. To help students cope with constant exam stress, universities must create friendly exam environments, train invigilators not to add to that pressure and offer counselling and workshops. Moreover, the students should be encouraged to use adequate study strategies, time management, sufficient sleep and culturally familiar coping mechanisms such as relaxation and prayer when required.

## Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. First, the data used was self-reported through a questionnaire, and as such, the results were based on how the students perceived their performance and what they thought their grade level was rather than what they actually performed. Second, the sample was taken predominantly from pupils at Level 3, which may mean that results may not be applicable to all of the pupils in each of the foundation phases. Thirdly, the study was a cross-sectional one which meant that the study was unable to detect the casual relationship of exam anxiety, its triggers and effects.

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