

Research Article

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Exam Anxiety and Vocabulary Challenges: Insights from Postgraduate Female Students in Open and Closed Book Exams

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Abstract

Background: This study examines the effect of test anxiety on the academic performance of postgraduate female students, focusing on their perceptions and experiences in open-book exams (OBE) and closed-book exams (CBE).

Method: A qualitative case study design was employed using the Thinking Aloud Protocol (TAP) to collect data from five Saudi postgraduate students majoring in English at King Faisal University. Participants verbalized their thoughts and reflections during and after the exams, offering insights into their cognitive and emotional processes.

Findings: The results indicate that while OBEs generally reduce anxiety by offering access to resources, they introduce unique challenges, including synthesizing information and managing time. CBEs, on the other hand, often exacerbate anxiety due to their emphasis on memorization and dense curricula. Vocabulary-related anxiety emerged as a significant factor across both exam formats, although students found unfamiliar terms easier to manage in OBEs.

Implications: The study highlights the critical role of educators in shaping students' exam perceptions and the profound impact of initial expectations on their performance. Practical implications include the need for anxiety-sensitive assessment designs and the creation of supportive learning environments that mitigate stress and foster success.

Recommendations: The research underscores the importance of addressing vocabulary challenges in both exam types and calls for further investigation into test anxiety across diverse academic and demographic contexts.

1. Introduction

Test anxiety is a multifaceted psychological condition that impacts students' emotional, cognitive, and physiological wellbeing. It presents symptoms such as nervousness, negative self-talk, and impaired concentration (Balwan & Kour, 2022). While moderate anxiety can motivate students to prepare for exams, excessive levels often disrupt cognitive processing and impair academic performance (D'Arcy, 2022). This condition is particularly significant among postgraduate students, who face high academic expectations alongside work and personal responsibilities.

In higher education, assessment practices have evolved to include open-book exams (OBE) as an alternative to traditional closed-book exams (CBE). OBEs aim to reduce anxiety by shifting the focus from rote memorization to the application of knowledge (Hong et al., 2023). However, OBEs are not devoid of challenges, as students often encounter difficulties with time management, synthesizing information, and interpreting complex questions. Similarly, CBEs, with their emphasis on memorization, remain a source of high anxiety, particularly in dense curricula (Das, 2017).

Vocabulary challenges further exacerbate test anxiety, particularly for postgraduate students in language-related fields. Research suggests that unfamiliar vocabulary can disrupt cognitive processes (see more Al Fraidan, 2025a; 2025b; 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2023, 2019) impair comprehension, and heighten stress levels during exams (Chen, 2022). While studies have linked anxiety to vocabulary acquisition (Tayyebi, 2021), little is known about how vocabulary-related anxiety manifests in different exam formats, particularly OBEs.

The existing literature has primarily focused on the general impacts of test anxiety, its predictors, and coping mechanisms (von der Embse et al., 2018). Limited research has examined the comparative experiences of students in OBE and CBE contexts, especially concerning vocabulary challenges. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the following research questions:

1. How do postgraduate female students perceive open-book and closed-book exams before and after experiencing them?
2. How do students' pre-exam perceptions affect their performance during exams?
3. Why do students feel anxious about vocabulary, and how does encountering unfamiliar words differ in OBE and CBE formats from an anxiety perspective?

By exploring these questions, this study aims to enhance our understanding of the nuanced relationship between test anxiety, exam formats, and vocabulary difficulties, providing actionable recommendations for educators and researchers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What is Test Anxiety?

Test anxiety is defined as "a psychological condition in which people experience extreme distress and anxiety in testing situations" (Zeidner, 1998, as cited in Balwan & Kour, 2022). It is situational, meaning that it happens only in certain situations (like exams), and it can be anywhere from a mild case of nerves to full-on panic. Test anxiety presents multidimensional symptoms comprised of affective, physiological, and cognitive manifestations (e.g., sweating, trembling, nausea; feelings of incompetence, fear, helplessness; negative self-talk, inability to concentrate, memory problems) (Kendra, 2022; Balwan & Kour, 2022).

Mild anxiety can serve as a motivator, increasing focus and preparation. Nonetheless, high levels of anxiety usually create cognitive interference, impeding students' performance to retrieve and process information correctly in examinations (Bertrams & Englert, 2014). And then, once the deadly

cycle starts, it is tough to get out of a downward spiral of bad performance and increased anxiety on future tests.

2.2. How Vocabulary Is Related to Anxiety

Anxiety has a complex relationship with vocabulary acquisition. Studies show that high levels of test anxiety result in poor vocabulary learning and retrieval (Chen, 2015) and that anxious students use fewer vocabulary learning strategies (see more Al Fraidan & Fakhli, 2024; Al Fraidan & Al-Harazi, 2023; Al Fraidan & AlSalman, 2023) and do poorly on vocabulary tests (Tayyebi, 2021). The challenge is intensified when students are confronted with newcomers or abstract words, as the two are associated with high levels of exam stress (Chen, 2022).

In language testing, anxiety related to vocabulary is especially harmful because understanding and expression depend on vocabulary knowledge. Al Fraidan and AlMarri (2024) found that sporadically used words are hard to acquire not just because of their complexity but also because testing contexts are anxiety-arousing. Additionally, Al Fraidan and Alnajjar (2024) explored the impact of test anxiety on the vocabulary performance of high school students, suggesting a need for targeted interventions that address anxiety and enhance performance.

2.3. OBE (Open-Book Exam) Vs. CBE (Closed-Book Exam)

Open-book exams (OBE) aim to reduce the cognitive load of memorization to promote critical and creative applications of knowledge by granting access to textbooks and notes (Das, 2017). Whereas Closed-Book Exam (CBE) type assessment arguably fosters mere rote learning, OBE promotes higher order learning and problem-solving abilities (Hong et al., 2023). The results indicate that OBEs can encourage self-directed learning and lessen test anxiety in students since they have more opportunities to consult materials and prioritize understanding over recall (Gujral & Gupta, 2015; Abdulmajeed Mamhousseini, 2020).

However, OBEs are not without their own set of anxiety triggers. Ambiguous questions, large volumes of material to sift through, and educators not stating their expectations can all contribute to stress. Students are also told to show academic rigor and give articulated and structured responses, which can add to the anxiety. However, the challenges students face in OBEs, in particular, linked to unknown vocabulary, are not yet well researched, as most studies have been dedicated to CBE formats (Hong et al., 2023).

2.4. Predictors of Test Anxiety

A variety of psychological, demographic, and contextual factors shape test anxiety:

- **Gender:** Female students tend to experience higher levels of test anxiety compared with male students, perhaps due to social and cultural expectations (Aydin, 2017; Mascaret et al., 2021; Almutairi et al., 2024).
- **Social Support:** According to Almutairi et al., lack of adequate social support strongly contributes to elevated levels of test anxiety among students. (2024).
- **Academic stress:** High levels of academic stress are negatively correlated with cognitive processing and exam preparation, thus leading to test anxiety (von der Embse et al., 2018; Stankovska et al., 2018; Trigueros et al., 2020).
- **Performance Pressure:** Anxiety is frequently negatively associated with academic performance (von der Embse & Witmer, 2014); students with high anxiety are unable to concentrate and adequately recover information fully.

2.5. Practices of Educators and Test Anxiety

The behavior of educators is integral to creating students' experience of test anxiety. Research by Al Fraidan and Alnajjar (2024) stresses the need to know students' fears and perceptions while designing assessments. Among them, harsh grading practices and, vague instructions, an over-emphasis on proving how "hard" the content is can all increase anxiety. On the other hand, fostering a welcoming and candid testing environment helps remove the pressure and enhances performance.

2.6. Exploring Vocabulary Problems in OBE and CBE

One of the most common sources of anxiety in OBE or CBE format is the difficulty with vocabulary. Although OBEs enable referencing resources, interpreting vague or complex words in the exam questions may pose significant challenges for students. This problem is further heightened in context-based experiments (CBE), where students can rely on their memory and understanding as no references are available and hence need to answer questions based on their memory. For instance, the findings of Al Fraidan and AlMarri (2024) indicate that repeated exposure coupled with AI-assisted intervention could improve vocabulary skills and build confidence in students by reducing anxiety in approaching the subject.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants were five female postgraduate students enrolled in the master's program in the English Department at King Faisal University (KFU). All of the participants were Saudi nationals, about 23 to early 30s in age. These were intentionally chosen because of their willingness to answer questions and previous exposure to Open Book Exams (OBE) and Closed Book Exams (CBE). This multifaceted group of participants offered a deep exploration of the nuanced layers of test anxiety and its influence on performance across various test formats.

Participants were intentionally selected through purposive sampling based on their willingness to participate and prior exposure to OBE and CBE formats. This diversity allowed the study to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perceptions, enriching the findings. Anxiety levels varied among participants, ranging from mild to severe, with physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat and cognitive effects like overthinking and self-doubt reported.

The participants represented a range of educational and personal backgrounds, reflecting the similar diversity within the master's program. Most participants held undergraduate degrees in the study of the English language, and one held a degree in translation. Their total experience studying in English spanned four to six years, including undergraduate and current graduate studies.

All subjects had reached at least high proficiency in English, given that they were all accepted into the competitive master's program. Their overall language skills were close, but there were slight differences, especially in writing and vocabulary breadth. These differences were apparent throughout the research, with participants showing varying degrees of engagement and comfort towards academic English vocabulary and essay writing, as these were significantly emphasized in their curriculum.

The participants specialized in different areas of English language studies, from applied linguistics to literature and translation. These specializations forced them to wrestle with dense texts in depth and work on complex critical analyses and long academic essays. Their academic background made them perfect for investigating how test anxiety interacts with language challenges, such as meeting new vocabulary on tests. The participants were familiar with both OBE and CBE formats, although

they had been exposed to them to varying degrees. For example, three participants had repeated OBEs throughout their postgraduate degrees, including in subjects with application-based answers. Two participants had little experience with OBE and stated that they were initially concerned about this format. Every participant had had plenty of exposure to CBE, as that was the format adopted throughout their academic experiences in Saudi Arabia.

Participants had different levels of test anxiety, and this base anxiety influenced how they perceived exams. Two participants reported high levels of test anxiety, described as physical symptoms like rapid heartbeat, sweating, and even nausea on tests. Three participants mentioned moderate test anxiety, characterized by periods of heightened stress and overthinking, especially in instances where vocabulary or questions were not precise. Pursuing a master's degree in English shows these participants as motivated learners. Some of their aims were simple: improving their academic writing, critical thinking, and mastering advanced vocabulary. However, both learning objectives also created anxiety for them, as the pressure was high to meet expectations for good grades and perform at high levels.

This diversity in participants allowed the study to take into account a wide variety of experiences and perceptions, as the participants had different levels of English competence, specialization, and test anxiety. This added depth to the findings and helped deliver a well-roundedness to the interplay between test anxiety, exam formats, and linguistic challenges.

3.2. Tools and Materials

Tools and Materials: A digital recorder, transcription tool (Otter app), notebooks, pens, and structured question sheets were used in this study. The TAP sessions were conducted on Google Meet, using the platform's built-in video and audio recorders to collect data. They filled in structured question sheets to gather insight into specific domains of test anxiety, such as their initial response to these programs, how their responses changed the course of the exam, and anxiety-related behavior in the context of both OBE and CBE.

3.3. Implementation of Thinking Aloud Protocol (TAP)

The TAP served as a real-time and retrospective data collection tool. It elucidated participants' thoughts on when and after experiencing OBE and CBE. TAP consisted of the following stages:

3.4. Participant Training

Before the main TAP sessions started, participants attended a training session introducing them to the TAP methodology. They were trained to "think aloud" within a mock exam scenario and encouraged to verbalize all thoughts, be it items related to the exam's content, their emotional state, or how they planned to answer questions. They were trained to practice by answering sample exam questions out loud as they thought. Received feedback that would solidify them in the process.

3.5. Guided TAP Sessions

TAP sessions were held in either a real-time or a retrospective format. During mock exams created to mimic OBE and CBE settings, participants articulated their thought processes in real-time sessions. Participants in retrospective sessions described their experiences soon after they completed the exams, thus augmenting their narrative with a cognitive and emotional layer. These retrospective sessions enabled participants to expand on the most challenging or noteworthy moments during the exams.

3.6. Materials for TAP

Participants used structured question sheets aligned with the study research questions for their TAP sessions. These sheets helped guide their reflections on test anxiety, shifts in responses and struggles with vocabulary. Verbalizations were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed using the Otter app. The researcher extended the automated transcriptions' time by reviewing and refining the documents, mainly when the participants used Arabic.

3.7. Procedures

For the TAP sessions, Google Meet was used to conduct the sessions online collaboratively to create a uniform and comfortable space for all participants. Each session lasted about one hour, in which the researcher first briefly introduced what he would do during the session. Throughout the sessions and their attempts at verbalizing the answers, participants were asked to respond to various questions about their experience working with OBE and CBE.

Participants, for example, were asked how they perceived the discomfort before and after the exams, their reasons for changing answers, and how they managed situations that caused anxiety, such as facing unfamiliar vocabulary. The researcher remained supportive and neutral, though, stepping in only if participants were quiet for an extended period of time as a reminder to keep verbalizing thoughts.

3.8. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were converged with the audio and video recordings of the TAP sessions, which were transcribed and analyzed. This included an analysis of themes and categories of test anxiety, decision-making, and performance differences between OBE and CBE contexts. Key themes were generated and triangulated to responses on the structured question sheets to ensure reliability and depth of insights.

4. Results

The findings are organized by research questions, providing a deep dive into participants' insights and experiences and broader implications for knowledge regarding CVA and the relationship between OBE/CBE and vocabulary difficulties. Discuss emerging themes from the data.

4. 1. How do students perceive OBE before and after attending CBE?

4.1.1. Perceptions Before Exams

Participants experienced familiarity with the exam format strongly affected their pre-exam perceptions. OBE was a new and uncomfortable idea for many, who felt confused and lost. Participants said they wrestled with questions such as:

"What stuff do I need to memorize if I have the book?"

"Are the questions going to be simple or complicated?"

These concerns were particularly salient for participants who had only experienced traditional CBE formats throughout their educational careers. For instance, one participant wrote:

"OBE seemed like it was going to be super hard because I thought the professor would expect us to do more than we were capable of."

For Computer Based Examination (CBE), candidates reported high levels of anxiety even prior to entering for the examination. They mentioned a lack of clarity on what to study during their

preparation and information overload with the pressure of memorizing vast amounts of stuff. One participant mentioned the unpredictability of CBE questions:

"In CBE, you are always rethinking what might surface in class because the curriculum is so rich."

4.1.2. Perceptions After Exams

Perceptions after the exam painted a different picture. The thesis found that students strongly preferred OBE, expressing its focus not on rote memorization but on critical thinking and problem-solving as an advantage. They expressed relief and empowerment, knowing they could turn to their resources. However, the format was not without its challenges. Almost half of the tournament randomized participants mentioned, in some way, the significant time-management issue they experienced, which involved finding relevant information (including internal sources) as well as making the information fit into a cohesive answer.

In the case of CBE, exam takers cited residual stress and self-doubt after taking the exam. Many doubted their performance, fearing they had misremembered crucial details or had not met the professor's expectations. As one participant put it:

"After the exam, I could not understand that I could have done better off my mind."

Interestingly, some participants felt a sense of security in CBE's structured preparation requirements, albeit accompanied by stress. They found comfort in knowing what was expected, and even though there was a terrifying amount of pressure to reach those expectations, it was very consistent.

4.2. How do students' perceptions affect their performance on exams?

The study found a transparent relationship between pre-exam perceptions and exam placements. Participants who entered with negative perceptions—of the format, their preparedness, and the professor's expectations—often reported higher levels of anxiety that negatively impacted their performance.

4.2.1. The Effect of Negative Opinions

Respondents often spoke about how perceptions of their anxiety affected their test choice behavior. For example, many students reported changing correct answers to incorrect ones after overthinking or second-guessing themselves. One participant explained:

"Sometimes I talk myself into thinking my answer is wrong when it is correct. Then I mess with it and remember I was right the first time."

Others pointed out that their views of the professor's grading standards increased pressure and caused them to overthink their answers. For example:

"I do always try to add more details so the professor can see I studied hard, but it is sometimes counterproductive because I lose focus on the actual question."

4.2.2. Influence of Positive Perception

In contrast, participants who looked at the exam positively or believed OBE offered an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding rather than rote learning performed better. They

were more likely to stay calm, think critically, and generate well-organized answers. This was especially apparent in participants who felt supported by their professors; one said:

"When the professor gives us a pep talk before the exam, it helps a lot. I am more confident and less stressed."

4.2.3. Role of Professors

The role of professors proved to be a significant element in shaping participants' perceptions. More clarity around exam expectations and a supportive demeanor helped reduce anxiety and improve performance. In contrast, ambiguity or strictness increased stress, especially in CBE. As one participant stated:

"The sense that the professor makes or breaks your confidence going into the exam."

4.3. Why do students feel anxious about vocabulary, and does encountering unfamiliar words differ between OBE and CBE?

4.3.1. Vocabulary-Related Anxiety

Vocabulary became a significant source of anxiety in essay-based exams. Participants described how seeing unfamiliar words interrupted their thought flow and increased their stress levels. One participant remarked:

"If I miss one word, everything else goes down the drain. "Then I can't concentrate on the rest of the question."

The effects of this anxiety differentiated between OBE and CBE. In OBE, participants could alleviate their anxiety with their textbooks or other resources. They also relied on the skill of inferring meaning from context, as one of the participants elaborated:

In OBE, a lot of the times I can guess the meaning from reading other parts of the book."

CBE, on the other hand, provided no support of that kind. Participants reported feeling helpless when encountering words they did not know, which resulted in misinterpretation or skipping questions. For example:

"In CBE, just one undefined word can destroy the entire question for me. It's anxiety," she told CNN.

4.3.2. OBE vs CBE — Key Differences

OBE was very beneficial in this manner because it was able to address any clear language, but this would present a new problem. Respondents highlighted the time needed to find and understand information, sometimes making them feel rushed. Nonetheless, the general agreement was that OBE lessened vocabulary-relevant anxiety relative to CBE.

4.3.3. Key Learnings Beyond the Research Questions

These data produced a variety of more general observations in addition to answering our primary research questions. These findings illuminate the underlying mechanisms accounting for test anxiety; the strategies elicited in response to it, and the contextual factors that shape students' experiences with both exam formats.

4.3.4. Symptoms of Anxiety Across Respondents

Participants described experiencing a spectrum of anxiety symptoms from mild to severe. Rapid heartbeat, hyperventilation, negative thoughts, etc. were common symptoms that affected their

focus and ultimately their performance." Among the more serious reactions, especially among younger students, were fainting, nausea, and Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). One participant noted:

"I suffer from IBS, and when I have exams, it just makes everything so much worse. It is not only the test itself but everything leading up to it."

Such symptoms illustrate the physical, emotional, and cognitive interplays that test anxiety evokes, highlighting its multifactorial condition.

4.3.5. Strategies to Help You Manage Your Anxiety

Overall, the participants noted a variety of methods to cope with their anxiety, both before, during, and after the exams:

- **Before Exams:** Strategies included physical activities like walking and practicing deep breathing and mental exercises like rehearsing information or making mind maps.
- **During Exams:** Participants mentioned fill-in-the-blank improvisation when they could not remember specifics, doing the easier questions first or deliberately concentrating on their breathing to settle themselves.
- **After Exams:** They mentioned effective post-exam rituals, like treating themselves to something nice or doing calming activities.

Participants emphasized that these strategies, and others I recorded, were effective to varying degrees, and their effectiveness was frequently dependent on the supportiveness of their exam environment.

4.3.6. The Role of Exam Environments

The setting that exams took place in resurfaced as an important element affecting anxiety levels. The stress level of online OBEs also added to the mental load of doing online tests during the COVID-19 pandemic due to technical glitches in tests, limited duration of tests, and the lack of immediate support from faculty members. One participant shared:

"I was in a perpetual state of anxiety that my laptop would explode or the internet would fail. It made it hard to focus."

In comparison, in-person OBEs were described as more structured and reassuring, with instructors providing stability. In the case of CBE, the physical aspects of the exam hall, such as seating arrangements in the exam hall, cues for time management, etc., were strongly related to the levels of anxiety participants reported.

5. Discussion

This study contributes important knowledge regarding the type of students' test anxiety and how OBE and CBE differ from each other in the way they relate to students' performance. These results both align with existing literature and extend it by providing new insights, especially in terms of the complex relationship between vocabulary-related anxiety, the type of exam, and students' beliefs.

5.1. Perceptions of OBE and CBE

This study focused on the interplay between OBE and CBE. While students reported using memorization in OBEs, they described it as having less pressure than CBEs because resources were accessible. Such observations are consistent with results from similar studies conducted by

Abdulmajeed Mamhuseini (2020), which confirmed the impact of OBEs on reducing test anxiety through the promotion of critical thinking and problem-solving instead of memorization.

Participants in this study also noted unique stressors in OBEs in that questions were complex and required extensive interpretation and organization of the material. These concerns are similar to those made by Hong et al. (2023), who pointed out that OBEs can be just as challenging as traditional approaches because you need to handle greater cognitive demands, although they might be a lot less anxiety-producing in general. Fear that questions might be intentionally tricky also added to anxiety, especially for students who struggled with articulation in academia. This finding contributes to the literature by underscoring that — despite their many benefits — OBEs are not entirely free from anxiety-provoking elements.

In contrast, participants described CBEs as being predictable yet intimidating, noting that the overall volume and density of the curriculum contributed to stress. This aligns with previous studies (Das, 2017) highlighting the conventional dependency of Saudi Arabia on CBEs and the deep association with memorization and high-stakes pressures. The results also indicate that younger students report higher anxiety in CBEs, which may reflect the restricted coping mechanisms and resilience at an earlier developmental stage, as indicated by Dewaele et al. (2014).

5.2. Data - Perceived Performance vs Actual Performance

Before and during exams, students' perceptions led to varied performances. Negative pre-exam impressions frequently increased anxiety levels, causing cognitive distractions and bad choices while taking the exam. This is supported by the findings from von der Embse and Witmer (2014) that identified a negative relationship between test anxiety and academic performance.

Through overthinking, self-doubt, and a perceived need to be consistent with how they believed the instructor wanted them to respond, participants often changed their answers during CBEs. These actions illustrate the anxiety cognitive load, as detailed by Bertrams and Englert (2014), at which low self-control under test conditions increases poor performance. Add to these contributions the finding that the initial impressions formed about test items correlate positively with performance—which meshes well with the theoretical conceptualization that anxiety disrupts not only memory retrieval but also response choice, especially under high-stakes testing conditions.

5.3. Vocabulary Anxiety and Exams Formats

Vocabulary played an important role in determining anxiety in both OBE and CBE. Unfamiliar words in the CBEs repeatedly broke the students' concentration and understanding of the context and question, consistent with Chen's (2022) results showing the powerful effects of vocabulary anxiety on test-takers' performance. The explanation of vocabulary in CBEs was in a single sentence, which was a significant problem because it had little context from which to make an inference.

OBEs, in contrast, enabled participants to reduce their anxiety about vocabulary by using contextual hints or looking for the meanings in resources. This supports the investigation by Tayyebi (2021), which found that students are less anxious when they can use strategies to find out what they are missing. As Al Fraidan and AlMarri (2024) noted, navigating resources in OBEs empowers students and autonomy influences the stress related to the test.

5.4. Exam setting and teacher support

The exam environment stood out clearly as a key influence on students' experience. In comparison, online OBEs were riddled with technical issues and time limitations and were viewed as

less organized and more stressful than in-person OBEs. This supports the work of Gujral and Gupta (2015), who emphasized that structured environments reduce anxieties.

The role of educators was particularly impactful in shaping students' initial perceptions — and overall exam experience. Participants said supportive and approachable educators made anxiety easier to manage, while strict or critical teachers made it worse. These results are consistent with Almutairi et al. (2023) underscore the importance of social support in alleviating test anxiety. Some educators tended to stress how strict their tests were or how stingy they were when it came to grade point averages, which added to the stress they would face; the importance of more compassionate strategies ahead of giving and preparing for tests was also mentioned.

5.5. Test Anxiety and Its Broader Implications

The study showed that test anxiety can manifest emotionally, physically, and cognitively. Younger students specifically reported severe symptoms such as fainting and IBS, corroborating Sharma and Choudhury's (2020) findings that younger students seem to be more vulnerable to academic stress. The negative implications of anxiety bleed into cognitive interference, such as forgetfulness and hesitation, which seem to be ubiquitous detriments to positive outcomes of learning.

Participants' coping mechanisms — breathing exercises, improvisation, post-exam rewards — highlighted adaptive strategies to cope with anxiety. However, their differing effectiveness underscores the need for institutional interventions, such as test anxiety workshops and improved exam preparation support.

5.6. Connecting the Findings to the Research Gap

This study contributes to the existent literature by evincing distinctive levels of anxiety related to OBEs, which have been studied relatively handle for a unique exam format. Although previous studies, including Hong et al. (2023), report the cognitive benefits of OBEs, this report explores emotional factors such as notes people took in response to high-stakes courses, including stress and academic pressure driven by unknown words. The sensitivity to how vocabulary anxiety manifests in various testing contexts fills a gap noted by Al Fraidan and Alnajjar (2024), who urged future research into linguistic contributors to test anxiety.

In addition, the study's findings contribute to the body of literature on educator support and exam experiences, thereby filling an important gap in knowledge considering the impact of instructor behavior on test-related anxiety. Through synthesizing all of these observations, the research contributes to a discussion on building more just and supportive environments for assessment.

6. Conclusion

In particular, this research gives a detailed analysis of test anxiety levels among postgraduate female students in the unique situation of open-book (OBE) and closed-book exams (CBE). The results suggest that encountering OBEs may help to lower anxiety for individuals who have access to resources, even as OBEs are imperfect sources of respite. Students often feel anxiety about synthesizing information, applying knowledge in new situations, and managing their time. By contrast, CBEs tend to create anxiety because they rely heavily on memorizing information in a limited time period when faced with dense and divergent curricula.

A key factor in shaping students' experiences of tests emerged to be the role played by the educators. Positive and empathic behaviors by educators decreased anxiety, whereas rigid or punitive behaviors increased stress. Another primary source of anxiety reported was vocabulary challenges, as unfamiliar terms hampered comprehension during CBEs. With OBEs, students reported

feeling less constrained in their use of such things given the availability of resources, but they struggled to integrate vocabulary in a way that was effective even in that environment.

6.1. Practical Implications

That has important implications for educators. A key takeaway is balancing critical thinking and memorization skills in designing exams, along with communicating clear and transparent expectations to students. When designing OBEs, educators must remember that they are not teaching students where to find resources. Instead, students should be taught how to navigate resources and synthesize information as opposed to simply just finding it. The tenor of examination questions should be tailored closely towards what is taught in class to avoid putting unnecessary pressure on students, particularly when considering what is being taught in line with CBEs, where it is essential to fully understand what a question is asking without ambiguity, notably in terms of vocabulary.

Teachers should also establish a supportive class culture that recognizes the psychological toll of testing. Workshops held in advance of the exam can enable students to develop effective techniques for taking tests (time management), minimizing stress, and bolstering coping strategies for vocabulary challenges. Most notably, teachers should not frame exams as punitive experiences or stress their difficulty, which can increase anxiety. Instead, they should talk positively about the purpose and expectations of assessments.

Vocabulary challenges must also be a routine element in teaching and assessment design. Students may feel more ready and sure-footed by being given structured opportunities to enhance their vocabulary, practicing presenting examples rich with content and use and isolating the learning on how to stereotype advanced terminology and its use.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the current study provides important insights, it was limited to postgraduate female students from a single academic setting. The limited sample size limits the findings to other populations, such as male students, undergraduate students, or those from different academic disciplines or cultures. This will help account for the various nuances across different populations to better understand the test anxiety phenomenon.

Lastly, the study only investigated the immediate consequences of test anxiety on OBEs and CBEs, without consideration of how these experiences could affect exam performance or long-term academic and psychological outcomes. Additional research could explore the longer-term effects of repeated exposure to these types of exam formats, specific to the anxiety with which students approach the assessment, as well as the strategies used to approach learning and academic performance over time.

Future research may focus on technology-enhanced OBEs, especially in online or blended learning settings (Al Fraidan & Olaywi, 2024; Al Fraidan & Alaliwi, 2024). Technical issues such as having places with no internet or unreliable software became stressors at some point in this study. This could be a good opportunity for research on how technology could help to improve the experience around testing and result delivery.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of educators being responsive to students' psychological wellbeing and adjusting their teaching and assessment practices to foster a more equitable and less demanding academic context.

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Appendix

This session implied thinking aloud protocol (TAP)

1. Have you tried open book exam ?

All students said yes, some of them said that they tried open book exam once and some of them said that they tried it multiple times.

2. In close book exam , why do students change their answer during the exam before deciding the final one? are there effects from their initial perception?

Student A: From my experience, I usually change my answer because I feel like it will align with what's my professor wants. My initial answer it's usually based on what I have studied, but sometimes I change my answer to make it more suitable to the professor standard.

Her answer to the second part of the question:

Yeah, sometimes my initial perception affects my answer because of extra pressure. It makes me like not focusing on the answer itself but focusing on what and how I want it to be perceived. Sometimes I want the professor to know that I have studied a lot so I add more information, something that professor didn't ask for, just to show the professor that I am a hard working student, that I have studied hard so stuff like that sometimes ruins it. and I ended up having spelling mistakes or coherent mistakes, because my brain during the exam just thinking about putting the information in the paper without thinking about making it presentable or readable for the professor, this is my issue.

Student B: for me, I maybe change my answer if there was a similarity between two answers or between two information, so i get confused. What's the most suitable answer for the question? i think that is the most reason why I changed my answer. I'm not actually feeling the stress or anxiety during the exam, but that's the most thing I confused. What is the most suitable answer? Is it this one or this one, because the similarities between them.

Her answer to the second part of the question:

Yes, my performance in the exam depends on my thinking before taking the exam, if I'm not comfortable, if I am thinking a lot, I will be mistaken. I will not get a good mark and that really affects my grades, even though I have the correct answer. But always I have that thought I'm not doing well. This is not the correct answer for this question, or this is not what the professor wants to answer. And I will mix up everything

Student C: in my opinion, the reason why students change their answer and cross their original answer and mostly the correct answer and they change it to the wrong answer. Me as someone who did this a lot, it's because feeling anxious really impacted the way that you think, like in a long term and in a short term. You might think about the total grade and how, how this great, how much it has value it could cut out of the total a lot, or whether it's more or less and not feeling certain it's related to cognitive interference, self-doubt, the low confidence. That's why most of students, including me, sometimes we cross the original answer and goes to another, the other answer, which sadly sometimes, would be the wrong one, and crossing the previous correct answer.

Student D: I change my answers if I finished early and there was a time left, I overthink and I change my answer as a result, I don't think that my initial perception affects my answer.

Student E: usually I change my answer if I thought that professor manipulating the question, or if the question is easy and found directly or basically a tricky one, whenever I saw question like this I overthink " it is already exist so, why professor want us to write it? "

Her answer to the second part of the question:

Yeah, sometimes I have negative thought and this affects my answers.

3. What are your perceptions before and after taking open book exam and close book exam?

Student A: My perception before taking the open book exam was anxiety, fear, because I have no idea how it's going to be and what should I study? Am I going to memorize? Or no need for memorization? I was confused. But my perception after taking an open book exam, I prefer it over the close exam, because it tests your actual knowledge of the subject and your understanding, not merely this normalization of definitions and meaning, sorry, not meaningful sentences or like without any value. So open book exam, I feel like it's just the actual knowledge and the value of the subject. close book exam makes me nervous before, during and after, especially if the professor is strict and meticulous. When I leave an exam room, and I know that I worked hard and I studied hard, but I'm not satisfied with not with my answer, but with how is the professor going to react? Sometimes we know that we wrote the answer, we answered all of the questions, we filled the paper. Maybe we asked for extra paper sometimes. But this is not a sign that you are going to get the full mark on your hard work or the homework, and this is the pressure I get after the exam. However, my pressure before the exam mostly about how is the question going to be like?

Student B: for me in open book exam, because it was my first time to take it. So I will. I was really nervous. I can't imagine. How can I answer that question, what kind of a question I will face? Will I be able to find the right question or

not? This is before taking the exam. But after I took the exam, I really like it. I feel like I can elaborate more further to explain my answer, and because this type of format doesn't require a specific type of answer (like definition, fill in blank) this gives me freedom to search and write my own answer. However, an open book is not easy exam because you can not find the answer directly in the book, but I love that open book made me realize the side of me that can search and write a suitable answer. Before taking the close book exam, I'm really comfortable, because I know I have to study from this chapter to this chapter. For example, I know the question type I will face in the exam, so I have a clear idea what I have to study and what will I face in the exam. During the exam, I feel very nervous, usually I blank for 10 minutes at the beginning then the answers start to flow and comeback to my mind .after the exam I feel frustrated that I worked hard studying, but my answer did not become as perfect as I wanted it to be .

Student C: (she tried open book multiple times) before taking an open book exam, I was nervous and clueless of what would be an experiment. I was feeling anxious in terms of, Am I going to do good better when I have the material beside me, or like worse, and after it from my first experiment, because it was online one, I didn't have that much of a positive encounter due to the time limit, the internet problem, page problems, but after all, by trying it more and doing it in person , open book exam, it was more amazing and more easier than before.

In terms of closed book exam, before taking the exam, my if I prepare good with the right strategy, using the right techniques to release and reduce my anxiety, like walking, listening to a piano, like notes, or violin, drinking like soft drink and or like hot chocolate, hot coffee could make my mind feeling less nervous and more ambitious to learn, and my mind will be open for any type of a question .

after the closed book exam. I feel nervous about how I deliver my answer, but I feel confident depend on how much I study and prepare for the exam, and normally, I will release my stress by just exhaling and inhaling and just trying to remember the scenario that I was studying before the exam, and remembering every information that come into my mind, and that will flick an idea, and I will remember it immediately, which is work most of the time with me. And that's it.

Student D: As the first time trying open book exam, I was so scared that I drunk safflower so, I can clam myself. I was scared because I thought that in open book you can bring your book, but the questions will be so difficult that I can not answer .

Student E: I was really nervous the first time I tried open book . now I find open book is easier than close book because I can express my ideas and paint them with my colors (means that she can form her own perfect answer and she controls her answer very well) , but in the close book there are me and my memory , if my memory fails me , it is good bye to my grades .

4. In open book exam, why do students feel nervous even if they are allowed to use the book and the available resources?

Student A: I think this students feel nervous, even if they know it is going to be an open book, because finding the answer sometimes is not easy, they are confused of what the professor wants exactly especially when the curriculum is extensive.

Student B: for me as I said before , I feel nervous on open book because you don't have a clear and direct answer to write , so you search to find a suitable answer that fits the question .this may need an intensive reading of one chapter or even more than chapter to know what does question mean and form your answer perfectly , or as professor wants .

Student C: I feel nervous because I have the required information, but I can form it very well from my perspective. from my previous mistakes, the professor noted that I mention something that have several examples, but I didn't mention them in the right place. if the book is written by the most academic style, how can I be more academic than the book!.my struggle that I want to be more academic than the book or study material and have better logical flow, this is what made me more anxious in open book exam.

Student D: maybe time tightness, half of time you will spend searching of information and the time left will be on arranging your ideas and form you answer .it will be problematic if there are lots of questions and short time.

Student E: it stresses me that professor do not want an answer directly from the book

5. In your opinion, can you tell me the reasons why students feel stress in open/ closed book exam?

Student A: I think that I said what is stress me on my previous answers

Student B: I was stressed in open book because it was my first time trying open book exam. At first I had questions about what can I do in this format of exams, what should I write or bring, after the professor gave us the idea about open book I feel little relieved. during open exam I felt stressed because I had everything, a book and information but I need to understand the idea behind the question, the part that I felt I wasn't good in it was prove my ideas or argument, how can I choose a suitable study or example that supports my argument, and this what made me anxious. in close book exam the reason why I am anxious was evolving around the professor and the materials , are professor's questions direct or not? is his grading of exam fair or biased and unfair ? the idea of his/ her questions are obvious or not ? second thing that I felt anxious because of how curriculum is huge and divergent, during the exam usually I feel blank because of the length of curriculum and how it divergent , a lot of information and few question, especially if there are lots of

overlapping and similar question and information , so I feel lost and my memory fails me even if I prepare well memorizing things .

Student C: I feel stressed in open book exam because I have the material, but I cannot form a perfect answer. I feel stress in close book because the curriculum is intensive, huge and divergent, but questions are few, when this happens, I can't expect questions that may come in the exam so my stress level in close book would be higher than open book exam. I tried open book multiple times in COVID-19, so even if the exams was not bad this period was inconvenient for me. I preferred open book in person over online open book because in person open book was really smooth and arranged , I have my pen , papers and iPad , instructor was beside me so I can ask if there is any inquiries, I did not like online open book because of several things like , time tightness (in order to prevent cheating at that time) , page bugs and lags , I was worried about surrounding things like battery may die or the laptop , I was really anxious because I saw that time has passed but I could not answer questions from anxiety , questions were mixture between multiple choices questions and open ended question. My performance was bad although I prepared well even, I did a summary to the slides and book that was given to us.

Student D: I said what is stress me in my previous answers

Student E: in open book, I feel stress because professor does not want a direct answer from the book and I bad in paraphrasing. in close book, when the curriculum is huge , I can't expect question may come in exam. And this makes me nervous

6. Why do students feel anxious about vocabulary? is encountering a word you don't know in open book exam varies in close book exam from an anxiety perspective?

Student A: I think encountering a word that I don't know is going to throw my pace off. So, it's going to be like my ideas going flowing in the exam, like when I'm writing my answers, but when I get cut off by a word that I don't know, it makes me feel really anxious, and it makes me sometimes even forget, how am I going to answer? But it's, of course, going to be better in an open book exam, because I simply can find it in in different contexts and know the meaning. But in a closed book exam, I will not know the meaning.

Student B: yes, for the first part of the question, For me in speaking, for example, I will feel anxious if I must use more advanced vocabulary, and I don't know the right word or the correct vocabulary, and I will feel anxious if I pronounce it correct or not in writing. Maybe I will. I will feel anxious if I write it correct or not okay for the second part 'encountering word I don't know in open book is less anxious than close book, because in open book to know this vague word I can read the chapter, or I can read the paragraph and find the meaning of the word from the context. Or if I have access to internet, maybe I can search for the meaning. For close book, anxiety will be higher than open book because not knowing a word may be cause problem not understanding the whole question. Hence, you will not perform well.

Student C: In open book exam will be easier. Because I can see the word in the context, inside the book, Inside the page, and I can understand what this means from the context. But what? What if I had it as one single sentence in the form of a question? It will be vague. Generally encountering word I don't now will definitely makes me feel lost and my anxiety level will increase.

Student D: in my opinion, encountering word I don't know in open book exam is less anxious than close book because I can figure it out from book context or I can basically search for its meaning in the dictionary if it allowed .

Student E: Sometimes we asked to use an advanced vocabularies since we are a master's degree students, this put much pressure on me that I become anxious. During my study and exams, I encountered many advanced and strange words, and I feel annoyed, I did not see any difference between OBE and CBE.

7. Describe yourself when you are anxious and what soothing mechanism you do to relieve your anxiety?

Student A: When I feel anxious, i feel panic and sometimes I can't breathe, sometimes i become really fast that I ignore the spelling. Sometimes I write a word and even, like, don't write the last letters in the word, because I move on to the next one thinking that I that I got wrote it and this will make me lose grades. Sometimes I feel nervous that I'm going to forget the answer, so I immediately improvised. How? I did not wait to remember the answer so I recreated an improvised answer where I show the professor that I understand the question explaining it to him/ her. This is all resulted from anxiety. To relieve my anxiety before the exam I try walking, speaking out loud, explaining as if I'm explaining to others. During the exam, breathing deeply, deep breaths, and sometimes trying to move on to the other questions. Then, I will come back to that question that I am having struggle.

Student B: When I feel anxious before the exam, I usually walk and read aloud. Reading aloud makes me gain my awareness and consciousness somehow, and retrieve my information, it is like restarting my state from an anxious person to the normal one. Unfortunately, these are not allowed in examination hall so, sometimes i spend a long period try to remember information so I bring an extra paper and try to retrieve my information that I forget it by writing or drawing since I used to correlate thing by drawing a sign for each .

Student C: I have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) , so you know what I feel when I anxious , sometimes I shake, faint , can't breathe well or even feel like I will going to throw up , so I usually don't eat in the exam day to avoid feeling worse than I am in the exam day , once I was told to eat something light and avoid negative thought or overthinking and indeed I did what my relatives said and my state was the worst . I did not perform well in the final exam, and I got a C even

though I did good in midterm and quizzes, just because I ate that day. So now it is impossible to eat a meal even if it was four hours left until the exam. However, there is something I was doing that made me feel excited to do better in the exam also somehow relieved my anxiety little bit, after finishing the exam , I reward myself with anything that makes me happy , also I inhale and exhale deeply during the exam .

Student D: usually I have a physical symptoms when I anxious such as rapid heartbeat , hyperventilation , shaking that I can not move or sit still . professor may be calm my anxiety dealing with us in exam (his/ her treatment in exam time) also, I calm down when I saw easy questions .

Student E: I eat a lot , I do not move so much and my brain is preoccupied .

8. Is being anxious impact your thinking, can you elaborate?

Student A: Being anxious before an exam impacts my thinking. I become fast paced in everything I don't memorize well. During the exam, if I reach the panicking stage, I try to breathe deeply, inhale, and exhale slowly

Student B: Yes, it impacts my thinking during and before taking the exam. Before the exam or studying time if I get anxious I can't memorize a thing , or correlate information together . I feel lost. During the exam, if I get anxious, I will feel lost too, I feel blank, and I don't remember things that I have studied.

Student C: yeah actually it affects my thinking , it can affects me while studying and during the exam. I have a strong memory that I cannot forget little things that happens so , when I'm anxious I forget information and this made me panicking .

Student D: yes , sometimes I forget information that I learned and memorized by heart . it like I blanked, or information flew

Student E: yes , being anxious make me not thinking well , all my thinking turns into negative thought and it increases according how anxious I am.