

Anxiety in English Academic Writing of EFL Students

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Abstract. Academic writing in English is an essential skill for EFL students and a critical criterion for determining their eligibility for graduation. The issue of academic writing anxiety among second language (L2) learners has attracted significant attention from researchers in the field of L2 learning anxiety. Despite this interest, many studies predominantly focus on data analysis, with few offering practical recommendations. This paper examines the factors contributing to L2 academic writing anxiety, categorizing them into external environmental factors and internal factors, specifically confidence-related issues and difficulties in generating ideas. These factors can lead to writing anxiety among students. Based on this analysis, the paper proposes several recommendations: instructors should create a more supportive writing environment, provide more guided assistance, and develop fairer grading standards for writing. Additionally, it is suggested that EFL students should enhance their English language skills, effectively summarize literature post-reading, cultivate critical thinking, acknowledge their writing proficiency when experiencing anxiety, and adjust their self-efficacy accordingly.

1 Introduction

Academic English writing is playing an increasingly important role in the field of academic research. As for English Foreign language (EFL) learners, they must be qualified and able to write an academic paper. At present, a lot of researchers have conducted surveys on second language learning anxiety, most of which are about the influence of second language learning anxiety on the overall learning effect. This article will focus on one aspect--writing anxiety of second language learners.

Many EFL students feel very anxious about how to write academic writing in English, which affects their writing progress and even impacts their lives. Most of the subjects' second language academic writing anxiety is at a moderate level [1].

However, while many studies have reported on the causes of academic anxiety and the likelihood of developing it, few have reported on what can be done to reduce it. This paper aims to explore the phenomenon of anxiety in English students' academic writing and how to better solve the problem.

By exploring the underlying factors contributing to anxiety and its effects on writing performance, this paper aims to shed light on the complexities of the issue and offer insights into effective strategies and interventions for mitigating its adverse effects.

2 Definition of foreign language writing anxiety

Academic writing is used in universities and scholarly publications. It aims to be clear, unbiased, concise, consistent, and well-structured. It is a compulsory course for college students to master

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academic writing ability. However, a growing number of students are experiencing writing anxiety. Writing anxiety is a term for the tension, worry, nervousness, and a wide variety of other negative feelings that may occur when given a writing task. In the context of the current research, students appear to find it challenging to meet academic requirements that involve writing, such as term papers or undergraduate theses. Most students suffer from writing anxiety [2]. EFL students are even more anxious about producing an academic essay in their second language.

Currently, from the perspective of second language acquisition (SLA), second language acquisition anxiety (SLAA) remains a central topic of EFL students. The concept of language anxiety, distinct from general anxiety, was first introduced by Horwitz, who developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) [3]. This scale identifies three primary anxiety factors: communication anxiety, class anxiety, and test anxiety. However, recent research has revealed that the FLCAS primarily focuses on assessing students' anxiety levels related to classroom oral expression. This discovery has raised questions about the scale's ability to accurately reflect learners' anxiety in other language skill areas.

In response to these concerns, Cheng developed the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), drawing upon previous studies. The SLWAI, designed specifically to measure anxiety in foreign language writing, has demonstrated high reliability and validity. Within this inventory, the factors influencing second language writing anxiety are identified as Somatic Anxiety, Cognitive Anxiety, and Avoidance Behavior [4].

Building on this foundation, Guo Yan and Qin Xiaoqing translated the SLWAI into Chinese for a study conducted in the Huazhong region in 2010. Their findings indicated that non-English major university students in China experience a moderate level of foreign language writing anxiety. They identified four key anxiety factors: classroom teaching anxiety, idea generation anxiety, avoidance behavior, and confidence anxiety [5].

This paper will classify the factors of writing anxiety according to this previous research, and better analyze the aspects of EFL students' writing anxiety.

3 Effects of anxiety on writing performance

3.1 Writing anxiety negatively affects writing quality

Language anxiety is one of the most important affective variables governing foreign language learning. Research has shown that anxiety is the biggest effective barrier to foreign language learning and the best example of the interaction between cognitive and affective factors. Anxiety is a common issue for many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student during their learning sessions. However, it is important to question why Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) plays a significant role in determining the quality of students writing. To further explore the factors involved in FLA, experts investigated what aspects of a second language essay would decline in quality when students felt anxious while writing in English.

Writing quality depends on a student's comprehensive performance in vocabulary, grammar, discourse structure, and thematic content. When second language learning anxiety arises, these elements can be adversely affected, leading to severe writing anxiety and a consequent decline in writing quality.

Students who develop academic writing anxiety may be more careful about the words they use. Vocabulary constitutes the fundamental building blocks of an essay. If a student lacks sufficient vocabulary proficiency, compounded by the impact of writing anxiety, they may struggle to express their ideas effectively. This can result in essays lacking depth and breadth. The richness of vocabulary directly influences the expressiveness and persuasiveness of the writing.

Students who suffer from academic writing anxiety may make many more grammatical errors when completing their writing than those who are not anxious. This is most evident in time-limited writing exercises. Grammar serves as the backbone of an essay. Inadequate grammatical knowledge can lead to various errors, such as subject-verb disagreement and tense inconsistencies. When students

experience writing anxiety, they tend to prioritize rapid production over grammatical accuracy, resulting in numerous mistakes. These errors can confuse readers, diminishing the readability and comprehensibility of the text, and thereby affecting the overall writing quality.

When students are unable to produce an essay, likely, they will likely not be able to construct their logical thinking and form an essay structure. Discourse structure pertains to the organization of an essay. A coherent structure enables clarity and logical flow, making it easier for readers to understand and accept the author's viewpoints. However, if students lack proficiency in organizing their essays, their writing may appear disorganized and illogical. Anxiety about structuring their work can cause confusion and stress, leading to a lack of clear logical progression and coherence. This anxiety can impair a student's ability to effectively manage the overall architecture of their essay, resulting in a fragmented composition.

Academic writing anxiety can cause students to keep trying to find ways to accurately express their thoughts in writing, but due to the vocabulary issues, grammatical errors, and logical thinking mentioned above, the essays that students produce may not be very precise content-wise. Thematic content is the essence of an essay. A compelling theme enhances the essay's appeal and persuasiveness. Students may worry about their ability to accurately convey the theme or make it engaging and significant. This anxiety can cause them to focus excessively on whether their ideas are adequately expressed, potentially neglecting the essay's overall quality and the needs of the reader.

3.2 Writing anxiety produces inappropriate attitudes

Some students may adopt an avoidant attitude as a result of experiencing writing anxiety. In other words, students with high levels of anxiety in EFL writing are less likely to engage with writing tasks, perceiving them as threats rather than challenges. Consequently, they are often unwilling to invest the effort required to improve their writing skills [6]. Once students with writing anxiety develop an avoidance mindset towards writing tasks, they tend to exhibit procrastination behaviors.

Writing is a form of communication, and teachers often provide feedback on students' assignments. However, students frequently experience writing anxiety before and after receiving this feedback. They typically exhibit three attitudes towards their writing: reluctance to revise, fear of revising, and inability to revise. These attitudes reflect a tendency to avoid writing. Consequently, many students procrastinate or fail to submit their writing assignments as a means of avoiding academic writing in English. In both cases, procrastinating in this way does not mean that students are lazy, but it does mean that there aren't invisible factors keeping students from writing their best work.

Writing anxiety is negatively correlated with writing speed, with higher levels of writing anxiety often associated with slower writing speeds [7]. When students feel anxious while writing, they may overthink each sentence and word choice, leading to a slower writing process and reduced efficiency. Their fear of making mistakes can cause them to repeatedly reread and revise their text, further slowing their writing progress. Additionally, writing anxiety can result in mental blocks, making it difficult for students to find appropriate words or phrases or to organize their thoughts. Distraction is another common consequence of writing anxiety, as anxious students may struggle to maintain focus on their writing tasks and frequently become sidetracked. While in some cases, a certain level of anxiety might motivate students to complete writing tasks more quickly to alleviate their anxiety, this is uncommon and typically only occurs when anxiety levels are high enough to be stimulating but not so high as to incapacitate the student.

4 Factors contributing to EFL students' anxiety in English academic writing

Combining the literature, mainly the questionnaire indicators for assessing second language writing anxiety mentioned above, this paper delineated three factors that mainly contribute to EFL students' writing anxiety, which are external environmental factors, internal confidence-related anxiety, and internal conceive ideas anxiety.

4.1 External environmental factors

In today's interconnected world, students have access to an abundance of resources, which often leads them to recognize their knowledge gaps, thereby inducing anxiety. As the social environment becomes more and more stressful and informative, the child becomes more and more aware of his or her insignificance. In class, many students tend to gauge their standing and sense of purpose through comparisons with their peers. Students measure how well they are learning by comparing their grades. Students' academic writing output is generally influenced by their peers around them and the expectations of their teachers [8]. The teacher's expectations will also produce certain psychological pressure on the students. If the student's self-identity is not high, the students will not dare to write because of the teacher's high expectations, and they will doubt their writing level and fear living up to the teacher's expectations.

The teaching methods and learning environment may influence students, causing them to internally compare themselves with others. During the writing process, students often compare themselves to their peers rather than focusing solely on their evaluations. Based on these comparisons, this tendency leads them to form conclusions about their writing abilities. When teachers set high expectations, students may overlook their current writing level, striving instead to meet these elevated standards. This pursuit of meeting higher or teacher-expected standards can result in increased anxiety.

4.2 Internal confidence-related anxiety

The sources of confidence-related anxiety can be attributed to students' low self-efficacy and weak achievement motivation in writing.

Self-efficacy, a concept introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to complete specific tasks. In the context of writing, self-efficacy reflects students' confidence in their capacity to effectively accomplish writing tasks. In a second language writing context, self-efficacy is prominently manifested as the learner's confidence in their ability to utilize English writing knowledge and skills to complete a specific writing task [9]. When students possess low self-efficacy, they may doubt their language skills, organizational abilities, and capacity to express ideas. This uncertainty and doubt lead to feelings of insecurity during writing, thereby generating anxiety.

Achievement motivation pertains to an individual's psychological inclination to pursue success and avoid failure. In academic writing, students with weak achievement motivation might lack the drive to confront challenges and improve their writing skills. They may fear potential failure, worry about the quality of their work, or hold a pessimistic view of their writing progress. Students also hold back because the grading standards are too strict, believing that their writing vocabulary and grammar are far below what the grading standards require. The formulation of evaluation standards will also affect students' achievement motivation, and unscientific standards will make students discouraged and produce writing anxiety. Currently, the majority of students experience significant writing anxiety when faced with academic writing tasks due to these issues.

Individuals with low self-efficacy tend to hold negative attitudes toward their abilities, magnifying the perceived difficulty of a task. This amplification of difficulty weakens their achievement motivation, resulting in poor writing performance and a vicious cycle. Students' anxiety stemming from a lack of confidence further diminishes their performance and writing quality, which in turn undermines their self-efficacy and achievement motivation. This cycle can lead to consistently poor writing performance, exacerbating their anxiety and lack of confidence. A study of Iraqi college students who speak English as a foreign language supports this view. Most of them have low levels of motivation to succeed and are not willing to put in the effort. Their lack of willingness to take on challenges is seen as an obstacle they must try to overcome [6].

4.3 Internal conceive ideas anxiety

Based on their cognitive characteristics, students develop habitual learning structures during the learning process. Typically, after reading numerous pieces of literature, students may lose their research direction and experience idea-generation anxiety due to a lack of critical thinking methods. Many students struggle to begin writing due to their inability to produce a fixed structure. This issue commonly arises in tasks such as topic-based essays, open-ended writing exercises, or academic papers requiring them to identify, articulate, and solve problems independently. Improving conceptual training is crucial as it forms the foundation of English writing [6]. A study on Indonesian EFL learners revealed that the choice of writing topics is a significant factor contributing to students' writing anxiety [2]. When students face unfamiliar or complex topics, their anxiety levels increase, further inhibiting their ability to organize their thoughts and begin writing effectively. Students may lack confidence in their language skills, particularly in EFL writing contexts, which can hinder their ability to articulate ideas fluently.

5 Strategies and interventions for reducing academic writing anxiety

5.1 Suggestions for instructors

5.1.1 Cultivation of writing environment

Most classrooms still adhere to the traditional model: lecturing on writing in class--completing writing assignments outside class--teacher correcting and providing feedback--students revising [5]. This model neglects the series of cognitive processes involved in selecting a topic, outlining, or finding writing materials necessary to complete a piece of writing [5]. This lack of scaffolding leads students to perceive writing tasks as highly challenging. Teachers should reflect on this issue and refine their instructional processes. By designing step-by-step instructional methods for teaching academic writing, teachers can better facilitate student learning. As mediators between students and knowledge, teachers should guide students in generating ideas, stimulate their thinking, and provide targeted support in the classroom. First, instructors should assist students in becoming familiar with their assigned writing topics through various reading activities. Strengthen students' English input to better output. Second, instructors can enhance the practice of the writing style of the target writing. Students should be made aware of the appropriate language for writing and how to effectively express their ideas. Third, students should be encouraged to write on topics that interest them, with teachers providing support based on these interests. Teachers should encourage active thinking and offer assistance when necessary. In simpler terms, teachers can choose to create writing assignments that relate closely to what students are learning and that will be interesting to them. This will provide students with plenty of material to work with. Additionally, teachers should come up with creative and varied writing tasks and activities, such as continuation writing, free writing, and online composition, to get students more involved and engaged in their writing assignments [10].

5.1.2 Scoring criteria

The conventional approach to evaluating writing courses traditionally revolves around assessing the linguistic proficiency, thematic relevance, and logical coherence exhibited in the final composition. Language proficiency is gauged through considerations of grammar, vocabulary usage, and sentence structure. Content evaluation focuses on the alignment of the composition with the designated theme, while logical coherence assesses the centrality of the viewpoint and structural organization.

However, the presentation of such grading criteria often induces pressure on students, as adhering to numerous rules for each sentence or paragraph becomes daunting. Consequently, this indirectly impedes students' creative output in writing. Thus, there is a pressing need for a shift in the feedback and correction methodologies employed by educators [5]. Embracing methods like peer assessment,

group critiques, and guided revisions by instructors in the evaluation of English writing can foster a diversified learning environment. Through such approaches, both teachers and students assume multifaceted roles in the writing-learning process. Students gain a deeper understanding of the underlying logic behind grading standards, enabling them to think critically from the perspective of educators and thereby elevating their writing proficiency.

5.2 Suggestions for students

Basic English skills play a vital role in students' writing. A significant obstacle contributing to writing anxiety among students is the lack of proficient English language skills, particularly deficiencies in vocabulary breadth and grammar comprehension. Primarily, students should prioritize bolstering their foundational English language competencies to fundamentally enhance their writing proficiency. Additionally, students ought to engage in extensive reading to augment second language input, thereby accruing authentic expressions and broadening relevant background knowledge [11].

Reading literature is the first step for students to complete academic writing. When confronted with an abundance of resources and information, information overload and confusion refer to the state in which students struggle to discern which content is useful, leading to confusion and indecision. Especially when students finish an academic writing paper, they will read a lot of previous studies and summaries on the Internet, limiting their ideas. Indeed, it is imperative for students to promptly synthesize the viewpoints of numerous literature sources following extensive reading. This process entails timely consolidation and articulation of personal perspectives, initiating a discourse framework. This approach facilitates the production of academic writing.

Self-adjustment is also very important. To correctly understand their writing level and ability, self-efficacy should not be too low or too high, which will negatively affect the output of writing. Academic writing presents itself as a formidable undertaking, often accompanied by various challenges and obstacles for students. Students must cultivate the ability to relax and recalibrate their mindset, fostering a positive outlook and maintaining confidence throughout the process.

6 Conclusion

Research indicates that the academic writing anxiety experienced by EFL learners stems from both internal and external factors. However, these two categories of factors are intrinsically interrelated, and should not be considered in isolation. The primary cause of writing anxiety among students is the impact of external environmental factors on their internal self-efficacy and achievement motivation levels. Simultaneously, these internal factors also influence the external environment.

To effectively mitigate academic writing anxiety, it is essential to enhance the English proficiency of EFL students fundamentally. This involves strengthening their foundational knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Teachers should provide targeted guidance on English academic writing practices, increase the frequency of practice sessions, utilize appropriate assessment criteria, and offer specific assistance to students.

It is hoped that this paper can alleviate some students' writing anxiety and offer instructors some strategies to help reduce students' academic writing anxiety.

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