Writing Anxiety Among ESL Learners: Implications for Teacher Education

Mohammad Azim M. Saiyad & Shemal Mevada

Abstract

Many ESL (English as a second language) learners, particularly beginners, have writing anxiety while seeking to express themselves in their newly learned language, which is a common and complex problem. This paper tries to understand writing anxiety and its relation to writing performance in ESL. It also discusses the causes of writing anxiety and suggests a few strategies for teachers to use to deal with writing anxiety. The paper ends with emphasizing the affective component in teacher education.

Keywords: ESL writing anxiety, causes of writing anxiety, strategies for reducing writing anxiety

Introduction

Writing is vital for academic communication, allowing people to communicate their ideas, opinions, and information. Writing well in English as a second language (ESL) may be difficult and unnerving for learners, often triggering writing anxiety. It is crucial to comprehend the nature of writing anxiety in learners of ESL as it impacts writing abilities and academic achievement. Understanding writing anxiety in these early-stage ESL learners is crucial for educators and learners alike. It helps teachers target the writing anxiety of ESL learners. This study describes the nature and causes of writing anxiety and suggests a few strategies that teachers can use to reduce it.

What is Writing Anxiety?

Writing anxiety is a common and significant challenge faced by many ESL learners, particularly those who are just beginning to acquire English. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) characterize language anxiety as the unease experienced by students when tasked with using a second or foreign language. Furthermore, Horwitz et al. (1986) elaborate that foreign language anxiety encompasses a unique combination of self-perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours linked to language learning within an educational setting. These definitions highlight students' emotional and psychological challenges when engaging with a new language in an academic context. Writing anxiety is expressed in fear of failure, thinking about what others think, avoiding writing in English, and afraid of making mistakes.

Is Writing Anxiety a Separate Construct?

The theoretical concern on writing anxiety comes from the issue of whether writing is a separate construct or a part of general or language disposition. A corollary of this issue is the relation between writing anxiety, disposition and writing performance. The extent of involvement and persistence in writing and the confidence with which students engage in the writing processes are a part of writing disposition.

Some studies that have looked at the relationship between writing anxiety and general disposition report a positive correlation between the two. Research studies have reported a positive correlation between writing anxiety and general anxiety (Fritzsche et al., 2003; Yaman, 2014). In a study on 707 students from grades five through eight attending a Turkish language course, Cocuk et al. (2016) report that students' disposition towards the course influences writing anxiety. The higher their liking for the course, the greater the writing anxiety. These findings lead to the conclusion that writing anxiety is a part of general anxiety.

On the other hand, DeDeyn (2011), drawing from studies of Cheng (2004) and Cheng et al. (1999, cited in Dedeyn, 2011), believes that while writing anxiety is related to general language anxiety, it "is a separate and more specific construct". (p. 6). The scholar investigating the relationship between the two did not find any correlation in a sample of 33 international undergraduate students of advanced English proficiency enrolled in an introductory university writing course. This finding is

attributed to the fact that students should know the components of good writing to improve writing performance, and a lack of this knowledge leads to writing anxiety.

Research has looked at the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance. Nawaz (2021) studied students' views on the effect of writing anxiety on writing using a five-point scale. The findings show that anxiety plays a positive role in the students' English language writing skills. Karahan (2021) did not find any relationship between writing anxiety, attitude and disposition. The sense of self-efficacy, writing anxiety and writing performance reveal that students' self-perceived writing abilities may be a mediator in the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance. Students who perceived themselves as good writers performed better than those who perceived themselves as poor writers. While writing confidence was statistically related to writing anxiety in these studies, perceived writing abilities were predictive of writing performance; and writing anxiety was not. Sabti et al. (2019) studied the relationship between writing anxiety, writing self-efficacy, and writing achievement motivation in 100 Iraqi EFL undergraduate students. The findings show that the higher the writing anxiety levels, the poorer the writing performance. The study also showed that as self-efficacy increased, writing anxiety decreased, and as writing anxiety increased, writing achievement motivation decreased.

Overall, the relation between these variables is complex and inextricably woven, and its strands are difficult to separate. These variables cut across cognitive and affective factors and are played out in social and educational contexts, further complicating the relationship. This is an area that must be investigated in greater depth, capturing the dynamics of the relationship.

Causes of Writing Anxiety

Rezaei and Jafari (2014) studied the cause of writing anxiety among 120 students specializing in English from two universities in Iran. The results show that the causes of anxiety are fear of the teacher's negative comments, low self-confidence in writing, high frequency of writing assignments, time pressure, pressure for perfect work, linguistic difficulties, problems with topic choice, insufficient writing technique,

insufficient writing practice, and fear of writing tests. Fear of the teacher's negative comments, followed by low self-confidence in writing, were cited as widespread responses. The frequency of writing assignments was the least frequent cause of writing anxiety. The study also found that the cause of writing anxiety is related to the level of anxiety. For students with high anxiety—poor knowledge of grammar and inability to organize thoughts and generate ideas were the causes of writing anxiety. In contrast, for those with low levels of writing anxiety, fear of the teacher's negative evaluation and lack of sufficient time for writing practice were causes of writing anxiety.

Nawaz (2021), analyzing data on writing anxiety from secondary school level ESL students, reports insufficient writing practice, avoidance behaviour, and loss of vocabulary expertise in the performance of writing as the primary sources of writing anxiety among students. In Sabti et al.'s study (2019), fear of making mistakes and being negatively assessed by teachers and classmates are the main reasons for high writing anxiety. Personality variable is identified as one more cause of writing anxiety. These could be in terms of introversion or extraversion (Brown et al., 2001), personal and interpersonal anxieties (Young, 1991), and attitude towards writing (Yetis, 2017). To sum up, there are both internal and external causes of writing anxiety. In schools, teachers must understand the causes of writing anxiety to target these in teaching.

How Can Teachers Reduce Writing Anxiety?

High levels of writing anxiety affect performance and language proficiencies. In ESL classes, teachers must deal with writing anxieties' affective and cognitive aspects. So, they need to be educated in the strategies they can use to reduce writing anxieties. In the affective filter hypothesis (1985), Krashen observes that effective language learning requires low affective filters—where the learner is willing and open to learning. The affective filter can be lowered by teachers creating conditions in the classroom that are motivating, non-judgmental and conducive to learning. The teacher must be approachable so students can talk to them about their anxieties; better still, the teacher can encourage students to share their writing anxieties and their narratives so that students understand that they are not alone in feeling anxious about their writing. They can also use face-to-face meetings with students regularly to provide person-related mentoring.

The teacher can design tasks/ tests that are authentic and make sense to the learners. The goal expectations for each student must be realistic and customized to their proficiency levels. The tasks should be neither difficult nor easy. It must be just right to challenge students.

The teachers must give constructive feedback—point to the positives first and then move to what must be improved. A student's performance should be compared with their own earlier performance so that they see progress in learning and develop self-confidence.

The perspective on errors should also change in the classroom. The classroom climate should be such that errors should be taken as learning opportunities and not as instances calling for punishment. Teachers must provide examples from their lives and others on learning through mistakes. Such sharing of stories will reduce the fear of making mistakes.

Teachers can ask students to maintain a diary documenting their daily activities and experiences to enhance their writing proficiency. Additionally, it may serve as a means of reinforcing or reviewing the material covered in the classroom session by prompting students to summarize or synthesise the information. This will help students self-regulate their learning.

The teacher must promote writing as a process rather than a product. This approach involves students working in pairs or groups to plan, draft, edit, and get feedback from peer groups. Students develop writing skills, and their writing anxieties will decrease.

Tarkan-Blanco (2021) advocates a process-and-collaboration-centred approach to teaching composition to address writing anxiety in ESL classes. In this method, the teacher gives an assignment and comprehension questions to verify their understanding. The students discuss with their peers to arrive at answers. Some of these questions could be as below:

1. What is the assignment? Describe it in a few sentences.
2. What is its purpose?
3. What are its specific requirements (content, structure, style, etc.)?
4. What questions do you have that cannot be answered by the assignment sheet?

Students fill in a self-regulation checklist, which will make it evident

to them what they know and what should be done—giving them the feeling that they are ready to write the assignment and freeing them from anxiety.

Darrington and Dousay (2015) advocate using Multimodal composing to reduce writing anxieties. This strategy combines visual, auditory, and textual modes to write assignments. In doing this, students feel motivated, have a sense of autonomy, feel connected to the assignment, and feel they have the skill to complete it.

Discourse-oriented pedagogy also has the potential to reduce writing anxiety. In this pedagogy, students engage in tasks—and, in the process, acquire language unconsciously. In this pedagogy, students acquire the registers and the modes of discourse related to the genre of the text. One of the objectives of discourse-oriented pedagogy encompasses the development of learners' emotional intelligence and cognitive abilities (Khanna & Ananda, 2014). This objective will help learners deal with their writing anxiety.

Conclusion

Understanding the complexity of writing anxiety, teachers must teach to meet students' emotional requirements. This will help create a welcoming learning environment that supports language learners' academic performance and well-being. It is vital to educate teachers to implement pedagogical practices that address the writing anxiety of students. These pedagogical practices must be a part of pre-service and in-service training. To sum up, learning is not just cognitive; it is social and affective. So, teacher education must also cover the three components of teaching.

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Mohammad Azim M. Saiyad *is a Research Scholar (ELT) at CVM University, Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat. His areas of interest include English Language Teaching, Language Acquisition, and Translation Studies in English.*

saiyad999@gmail.com

Shemal Mevada *is a Research Guide and teaches English at CVM University, Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat. His areas of interest include English Language Teaching, Computer Assisted Language Learning, and English Literature.*

shemalmevada@gmail.com