
Reconsidering Writing Anxiety among EFL Learners

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Abstract

Having a level of writing anxiety is normal and often a sign that writers are concerned about writing well. If this type of anxiety motivates the writers to devote thought and effort to their writing, their mindset can have a certain positive value. However, in excessive quantities, writing anxiety can be a hindrance. In the EFL context, being a good writer depends on many factors, including learners' psychological factors. Writing anxiety is one of the most affective factors which is claimed to affect the learners' motivation and attitudes towards writing. Many studies have shown that when EFL learners have high levels of writing anxiety, the writing process becomes more complicated. This can lead to a negative effect on their writing performance. Therefore, this article provides an overview of the writing anxiety among EFL learners in terms of its aspects, factors, and effects based on literature and previous studies. There are three main types of writing anxiety: Somatic Anxiety, Cognitive Anxiety, and Avoidance Behavior. Writing Anxiety can be caused from lacking self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, having a low level of English proficiency, teachers' giving feedback, and peers' criticisms. When writing, the learners with a high level of the anxiety perform more poorly than those with a lower level.

Keywords: Writing Anxiety, Writing Performance, EFL Learners

Introduction

According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1985), anxiety is the affective filter or mental block such as motivation and self-confidence that profoundly influences language learners' output. The learners with clear motivation, strong self-confidence and less anxiety can produce more outputs because of the low filtering effects on language input. On the other hand, the language learners have less output as a result of the high filtering effects.

Typically, anxiety is a natural feeling that may happen in different situations. This phenomenon is significant in educational settings, especially in foreign language learning. Based on previous studies, when language learners face anxiety, they may avoid attending the class, never volunteer, and sit at the back of the classroom to reduce their

embarrassment of being called to speak. Additionally, when the learners have a high level of anxiety, they may have low performance and achievement, and as a result dislike learning the language (Horwitz et al., 1986; Fukai, 2000; Hassania, & Azizah, 2012). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), anxiety concerning foreign language anxiety is defined as “a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process” (p. 128). Fears of negative evaluation (FNE), test anxiety (TA), and communication apprehension (CA) are recognized as the components of foreign language anxiety which are observed when a language learner expects that others would evaluate them negatively. FNE means the learners are nervous about evaluation or being evaluated. TA means a type of anxiety in performance which derives from a fear. CA is a type of shyness derived from anxiety through communicating with others. Dörnyei (2005) also categorized anxiety as facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety, and trait and state anxiety. For facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety, it has been noted that anxiety does not necessarily hinder performance, but some cases can actually enhance it. Worry, which is considered the cognitive component of anxiety, is shown to have a negative impact on performance, while the affective component, emotionality, does not necessarily have negative effects. For trait and state anxiety, trait anxiety is the stable propensity to feel anxious in a variety of situations, whereas state anxiety is the temporary, moment-to-moment feeling of anxiety as an emotion connected to the current situation (p. 198). In addition, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) defined anxiety as a learner’s experience of feelings of uneasiness, worries, and physiological responses while doing a task for a specific language skill such as speaking, reading, or writing. It is also one of crucial affective variables that may have negative effects on second language acquisition.

Regarding writing anxiety or writing apprehension, the term was firstly coined by Daly and Miller in 1975 after the communication research conducted in 1970 pointed out a type of anxiety specific to written communication. It refers to a situation and subject specific difference related to an individual’s tendencies to approach or avoid situations requiring writing accompanied by evaluation. People with high anxiety find writing unrewarding, indeed punishing. Consequently, they avoid situations where writing is required if possible (Daly & Wilson, 1983).

Daly and Miller (1975) also defined writing anxiety as “the tendency of a person to avoid the process of writing-particularly when it is to be evaluated in some way” (p. 244). It is also considered the challenges that frequently happen when L2 learners are asked to write (Al Asmari, 2013). These challenges often negatively affect the learners’ writings. According to Al-Sawalha and Chow (2012), writing anxiety is known as a situation that hinders writers from performing well in the writing process. In learning L2 writing, writers need to ensure that their readers receive the intended message successfully even though the writers face language difficulties along the way. Knowing L2 writing as a demanding process, it is common for the writers to experience writing anxiety when they are in a writing process. This is one of the obstacles that the writers need to encounter in L2 writing (Aripin & Rahmat, 2021). As far as writing anxiety is concerned, the L2 writing problem

definitely gives various effects to the writers. For example, the writers develop negative perceptions about writing. In addition, they are worried about other's expectation including the negative evaluation or feedback (Jebreil et al., 2015; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Wahyuni & Khotibul Umam, 2017).

In the L2 writing context, there may be a large number of learners who fail miserably in an environment where writing is demanded because of an anxiety about writing (Golda, 2015). These learners are those who find the demand for writing competency exceedingly frightening (Daly & Miller, 1975). For example, the learners with high anxiety of writing may fear evaluation of their writing, feeling that they will be negatively rated on it. Consequently, they avoid writing when possible. Moreover, when they are forced to write, they express a high level of anxiety. They expect to fail in writing logically since they seldom engage in it.

Since the 1970s, a good number of studies have been conducted regarding L1 writing anxiety. One of the most significant works among them was conducted by Daly and Miller (1975), who coined the term "writing apprehension" to refer to the emotional difficulty and developed an instrument, the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT), to measure it. Daly and Miller (1975) stated that when observing students in classrooms, most writing teachers recognized their students seem to be apprehensive about writing. Simple observation is not enough. As well intentioned as observation may be, incorrect impressions may easily be derived from numerous misinterpretations of the students' behavior. They suggested that a more effective and efficient means of isolating apprehensive student writers should be through an empirically based, standardized instrument. WAT developed by Daly and Miller (1975) consists of 63 items. According to WAT, writing anxiety was divided into three categories: teacher evaluation of writing, peer evaluation of writing, and professional evaluations. This instrument was commonly used to measure second language writing anxiety (e.g., Cheng et al., 1999; Hadaway, 1987). However, as WAT was originally developed with reference to first language learners, particularly English native speakers, it might not gauge the most essential aspects of second language writing anxiety (Cheng, 2004).

There has been a substantial quantity of research considering the relevance of language learners' writing anxiety from the foreign language perspective in the past two decades (Arindra & Ardi, 2020; Cheng, 2004; Hassan, 2001; Kara, 2013; Kurt & Atay, 2007; Miri & Joia, 2018; Sabti et al., 2019; Wahyuni & Khotibul Umam, 2017). Cheng (2004) developed a multidimensional L2 writing anxiety scale, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), to assess the levels and types of second language writing anxiety. It is now very popular among researchers conducting writing anxiety, (Jebreil et al., 2015; Kabigting et al., 2020; Masriani et al., 2018; Solangi et al., 2021).

Although it is not easy to identify the presence of writing anxiety in a writing process, it is believed that writing anxiety can be recognized from writers' behavior that can be associated with anxiety. Additionally, according to Cheng (2004), writers who are anxious during the writing process usually show some symptoms or signs of writing

anxiety such as shaking, sweating, trembling and feeling guilty. In this paper, aspects of EFL learners' writing anxiety, factors causing writing anxiety, and effects of writing anxiety on EFL learners' performance will be discussed as follows.

Aspects of Writing Anxiety

As Cheng's (2004) SLWAI has been widely utilized to investigate writing anxiety of language learners in the ELT context since it was published, this part of the paper discusses it.

According to Cheng's (2004) development of writing anxiety scale, SLWAI conforms to three-dimensional conceptualized aspects of anxiety: Somatic Anxiety, Cognitive Anxiety, and Avoidance Behavior.

- *Somatic Anxiety* refers to one's perception of the physiological effects of the anxiety experience which is reflected in increased autonomic arousal and unpleasant feelings such as nervousness and tension. Individuals, sometimes, are feeling nervous or in high tension when doing a writing task under time limitation with having no idea. For example, in an essay writing class, language students are asked to write three-paragraph narrative essay within one hour. At the beginning, even though the students may not be nervous, they feel nervous when seeing some of their friends having finished their writing, while they have not completed their task yet.

- *Cognitive Anxiety* refers to the cognitive aspect of anxiety experience, including negative expectations, preoccupation with performance, and concern about others' perceptions. How students perform their writing is highly influenced by expectations from both their teacher and other students. For instance, the teacher highly expects the students to achieve the high standard from the teacher. This can negatively affect the students' writing performances because they will focus on the teacher's expectation rather than their own writing.

- *Avoidance Behavior* refers to the behavioral aspect of the anxiety experience where the students avoid writing. For example, the students do not come to the writing class or do not do their writing task. This aspect can be regarded as the most problematic because if the students avoid writing or do not attend to the class, they will not develop their writing ability.

Based on Cheng's (2004) SLWAI, it can be concluded that there are three types or aspects of writing anxiety: Somatic Anxiety, Cognitive Anxiety, and Avoidance Behavior. They specify the physiological, cognitive, and effects of writing anxiety on writing processes and behaviors.

Factors Causing Writing Anxiety

Factors that can cause EFL learners to feel anxious when they are asked to write might be various. General factors ranging from highly personal to procedural can be found in the studies in the field of second/foreign language writing as well as writing anxiety.

Self-confidence is one of the factors that cause writing anxiety. EFL students' lack of self-confidence is very decisive for determining writing anxiety (Hassan, 2001). Cheng (2004) affirmed that lack of self-confidence could be considered a major cause of anxiety. Even learners of high competence in writing might not perceive themselves as competent writers and might not be able to avoid writing anxiety.

Referring to Horwitz et al. (1986), another factor causing writing anxiety is fear of negative evaluation because writing is a productive skill influenced strongly by time limitation; even the smartest and well-prepared students frequently feel anxious when they are about to write. The fear of being negatively evaluated by the teachers and peers and the worry about timed writing makes the students uneasy to develop their English writing skills (Wahyuni & Khotibul Umam, 2017).

Moreover, for learners who are at the beginning level of English proficiency, lacking knowledge or understanding necessary to complete the writing task can cause writing anxiety as writing requires knowledge about how to develop a good piece of writing (Parichut, 2014; Wahyuni & Umam, 2017). When students have an inadequate grasp of vocabulary and grammar, they are unable to express their ideas in appropriate and correct English (Hyland, 2003).

According to Kara (2013) and Rezaei and Jafari (2014), teachers' ways of teaching and giving feedback are also the factors affecting the anxiety levels of the students. For example, some teachers act like a "drill sergeant" instead of a "facilitator" as they believe that there is a constant need to correct their students' errors (Young, 1991). This approach absolutely leads to tension in the writing class which can elevate students' anxiety level (Aida, 1994). Furthermore, the students' writing anxiety can also be affected by their peers. Peers' criticisms and laughter at the students' performance in the classroom have caused them to feel embarrassed and anxious to participate in tasks given (Aragão, 2011).

In this section, according to the previous studies, there are many factors that can cause writing anxiety: lack of self-confidence, fear of being evaluated negatively, having low English proficiency level, and receiving negative feedback from teachers and peers. All of these are the factors ranging from highly personal to procedural that can be found in the studies in the field of writing as well as writing anxiety.

Effects of Writing Anxiety on EFL Learners

Many studies have found that writing anxiety is linked to the trend of unwillingness to be involved in writing classes as it has a strong influence on learners' ability to grasp the writing course content. In other words, writing anxiety has negative effects on EFL

learners' writing performance. It makes the learners consider writing as difficult and an awful activity.

Writing anxiety significantly and negatively correlates with writing performance. The language learners with a high level of writing anxiety mainly have a low level of writing performance. For example, their written products are shorter than those whose levels of writing anxiety are lower (Cheng, 2004; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Furthermore, the effects of writing anxiety can likely weaken the learners' ability and confidence about their writing achievement (Abbas, 2016; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kara, 2013; Liu & Ni, 2015). Additionally, the effects of writing anxiety on writing performance can be predictors of the quality of the writing. For instance, the learners who have low anxiety tend to achieve higher grades in writing courses than other learners who have high anxiety. In addition, low anxious learners can write three times more words and incidentally make fewer spelling errors than those who are high anxious (Daly, 1978; Kassim et al., 2013).

Furthermore, apart from the aspect of the learners' writing performance mentioned earlier, Erkan and Saban (2011) assert that learners who find writing difficult to learn have the same problems such as being afraid of making writing errors. This feeling forms anxiety patterns because the learners who feel afraid of making mistakes in writing unconsciously will try to avoid it. This is also supported by Cheng (2004) who states that Avoidance Behavior, one of three aspects of writing anxiety, refers to the actions or behavior an individual takes to escape from difficult thoughts or feelings.

Conclusion

Writing anxiety has been mainly related to EFL learners' writing performance. It causes serious difficulties and challenges to the learners in the mastering of writing proficiency. The anxiety is also one of the psychological factors that can affect the learners' writing performance and their willingness to take opportunities to write. According to Cheng's (2004) SLWAI, there are three main types of writing anxiety. Somatic Anxiety refers to feeling nervous or in high tension when writing; Cognitive Anxiety refers to the perceptive aspect of anxiety experience such as negative expectations, and concern about others' perceptions; and Avoidance Behavior refers to the behavioral aspect of the anxiety experience where the learners avoid writing.

Writing Anxiety can be caused from lacking self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, having a low level of English proficiency, teachers' giving feedback, and peers' criticisms. When writing, the learners with a high level of the anxiety perform more poorly than those with a lower level. These problems are inherent in the nature of education in the context which provokes fears such as teachers as the main readers and evaluators of the learners' writings, pressure for perfect work, and goals of writing which are not compatible with the learners' expectations.

From a theoretical view, a high level of writing anxiety often leads L2 learners to disappointing performances, whereas those who have a low level of writing anxiety achieve

better results on writing performance (Cheng, 2004; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). This is consistent with the study of Erkan and Saban (2011) who affirmed that learners with high writing anxiety performed poorly in a writing task compared to those with low and moderate writing anxiety. Apart from writing performance which is affected by writing anxiety, students who have a high level of writing anxiety try to avoid writing tasks since they find the tasks as threats rather than challenges (Sabti et al., 2019). This appears very similar to and supports one of Cheng's (2004) findings, which is Avoidance Behavior. This refers to the actions or behavior that one takes to escape from tough feelings.

From this it can be concluded that English language teachers in the EFL context need to be aware of students' high level of writing anxiety as it mostly affects the students' proficiency negatively. To do so, the teachers should implement appropriate approaches or methods to teach literacy and motivate their students to write more and not try to avoid the writing class. It is also suggested that, in order to minimize learners' writing anxiety, their beliefs about their writing abilities should be fostered by providing positive feedback from teachers and encouraging positive feedback from peers.

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