

Investigating Practicable Strategies for Reducing Writing Anxiety in EFL Students

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Abstract:

Communication has long been an inseparable aspect of inherently-sociable human life, whether through spoken or written means. In order to effectively communicate via writing, it is necessary to possess a high level of mastery in both language and writing skills, which is a demanding and laborious goal to accomplish. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the concept of writing anxiety, which is one of the several factors that hinder English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners from acquiring efficient competency in writing. In order to investigate practicable anxiety-reduction methods, five EFL writing instructors were interviewed, sharing their extensive expertise and experience of teaching writing, as well as the strategies they employ to lower writing anxiety in their students. The findings indicated that properly managing language anxiety, utilizing effective teaching methods and level-appropriate authentic materials for instruction, and enhancing learners' linguistic knowledge and writing skills can all contribute to reducing writing anxiety in EFL learners and significantly impact the development of their writing proficiency.

Key Words: Communication, Language skills, Writing, Writing Anxiety, EFL Learners

1. Introduction

Establishing relationships with individuals is an essential aspect of human behavior, stemming from the intrinsically social characteristics of humankind. People inherently acknowledge the necessity of social interactions and communication that are indispensable for the countless crucial aspects of life: such as survival and reproduction, forming emotional bonds, engaging in work and leisure activities, and facilitating the exchange of knowledge and skills (Hall & Davis, 2017). Chappell and Read (1984) provide a definition of communication as any means through which a thought is transferred from one person to another. However, communication implies more than simply conveying information; it is the transmission of understandable messages and the reception and comprehension of such messages. It is crucial to acknowledge that communication consistently occurs via a means which is called medium. This medium, often described as a communication channel, may take various forms including radio, television, printed materials, or even face-to-face interaction (Misau, 2023).

1.1 Essential Language Skills for Communication

The utilization of language for conveying information is common among all of the above-mentioned media; a tool that plays a critical role in communication by facilitating the expression of complicated concepts and emotions, cultural values, and societal norms. Language exceeds a mere system of symbols; it represents a flexible and dynamic framework that is crucial for providing peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding within communities. Therefore, effective communication necessitates grasping and employing language functions within diverse cultural and contextual settings.

The realm of language acquisition encompasses four essential skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, that are further categorized into receptive skills and productive skills. Reading and listening fall under the former category since individuals are not required to generate language but merely comprehend and absorb it. Throughout the language acquisition process, learners initially acquire a receptive grasp of new linguistic elements before progressing to their productive application. Learners typically begin their language learning process by acquiring listening skills at first, followed by speaking, then moving on to reading, and eventually writing. (Sa'adah, 2020).

1.2 Writing Proficiency

According to Harmer (2001), writing serves as a means of sharing thoughts and expressing emotions through the written form of language. Writing encompasses the act of collection, organization, and reinterpretation of data in order to generate written content with accurate grammar and spelling. This practice serves as both an outcome and a cognitive procedure that mirrors personal encounters. Every act of writing represents the writer's effort to produce and convey meaning (Hacker et al., 2009). Writing proficiency, as one of the four essential components of language, demands a various set of competencies, and as a result must be thoroughly mastered and developed in educational institutions such as schools and universities, as well as in other contexts where writing proficiency is necessary (Sa'adah, 2020). Still, due to the complex nature of writing, a considerable number of educators tend to simply bypass this crucial language skill. Nevertheless, writing remains indispensable for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly at advanced stages. Although instructing writing may present challenges initially, the benefits far outweigh the difficulties (Kord, 2022).

The deficiency exhibited by EFL learners in their ability to write in the second language as proficiently as expected may be ascribed to a range of factors. These may encompass the quality of instruction in L2 writing, insufficiency of motivation, feedback on L2 writing, inadequate mastery of the target language and vocabulary, the intrusion of the first language into the second, and psychological factors such as anxiety (Younas et al., 2014).

1.3 Language Anxiety

Psychologists define anxiety as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (Hilgard et al., 1971), as referenced in Scovel (1991). Language anxiety is only one of the several types of anxiety

that have been identified to date, which can be perceived either as a component of broader anxiety categories or as an independent manifestation of anxiety that emerges in second language learners and foreign language learners during the course of language acquisition (Horwitz & Young, 1991).

1.3.1 Writing Anxiety

As English writing is considered a challenging activity due to its complex nature and components, students are likely to experience writing anxiety, which is considered one of the affective elements that disrupts or hinders the writing process (Blasco, 2016). The reluctance to engage in writing and the presence of debunked notions such as "writers are born, not made" and "good writers are inherently creative and inspiring" contribute to the heightening of writing anxiety and have an unfavorable impact on writing proficiency (Shunk, 2009). Functioning as an affective element, writing anxiety induces stress and apprehension in students, leading them to either avoid writing altogether or prematurely abandon it (Katranci, 2015; Blasco, 2016), as referenced in Balta (2018).

Several research studies have identified various factors contributing to writing anxiety, such as linguistic challenges, difficulties in selecting writing topics, and the fear of receiving negative evaluations from teachers. Kelly and Gaytan (2019) have highlighted that students may experience anxiety as a result of inadequate explanations regarding course materials and the behavior exhibited by teachers in the classroom. Within the spectrum of writing anxiety, encompassing somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behavior, it is predominantly cognitive anxiety that students grapple with, characterized by mental disturbances associated with apprehension and trepidation of being negatively judged by teachers and peers (Cheng, 2002; Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017; Zhang, 2011). The origins and triggers of this anxiety cause intensified anxiety levels among students, consequently impacting their writing capabilities (Kurniasih et al., 2023).

2. Literature Review

Upon reviewing the literature pertaining to language anxiety, Scovel (1978) concludes that determining the complications and consequences of language anxiety proves to be challenging due to the inconsistencies in the assessment tools used across studies to gauge anxiety, as well as the impact of peripheral factors beyond those related to language learning, such as individual traits and motivational levels, which can either heighten or lessen learner anxiety in the language acquisition process (El Shimi, 2017).

In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, there has been a noticeable increase in interest towards investigating the phenomenon of second language writing anxiety starting from the 1990s (Cheng, 2004). Subsequently, a considerable number of academic publications have emerged to investigate this particular concern. Notably, the research conducted by Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert (1999) has shed light on the distinctions between anxiety experienced in speaking and writing. Cheng (2002; 2004) has explored the various factors linked to anxiety in foreign language writing and its implications within educational settings. Following scholarly works on this topic have further researched into the realm of second or foreign language writing anxiety and its interconnections with various related aspects, including the origins of anxiety (Gkonou, 2010; Zhang, 2011; Latif, 2012; Pimsarn, 2013; Rezai & Jafari, 2014), strategies for managing it (Zhang, 2011; Dacwang, 2014; Qashoa, 2014; Nuranifar, 2014), and its repercussions (Delvi Wahyuni et al., 2019).

Research on writing anxiety does not pertain to psychological characteristics, rather, students tend to encounter this anxiety in specific situations due to their negative or challenging writing experiences (Al-Sawalha & Chow, 2012; Hjortshoj, 2001). There are conflicting findings in studies regarding the influence of anxiety on writing proficiency. Certain academics argue that writing anxiety significantly affects writing skills by enhancing students' focus and precision (Brown, 2007; Lehrer, Goldman, & Strommen, 1990). Conversely, other scholars contend that students should not confront anxiety as it could impede the progress of their writing abilities (Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012). Multiple studies have illustrated that anxiety results in decreased writing output (Lee, 2002; Rezaei, Jafari, & Younas, 2014; Shang, 2012; Shang, 2013). Furthermore, according to the results of various researches conducted by Negari

and Rezaabadi (2012), and Shang (2013) in language education, it has been validated that anxiety could obstruct the advancement of students' writing skills and lead to weakened writing performance (Jawas, 2019).

Subsequently, several studies have been conducted to identify the causes of writing anxiety in various contexts. Causes fall into two categories: those related to learners and those related to teachers. Learner-related causes include absence of writing habits, unfamiliarity with writing strategies, weak educational background, lack of confidence, fear of criticism and negative feedback from readers, perceived language competence, and low writing self-efficacy (Aljafen, 2013; Kara, 2013; Latif, 2007, 2012). Additionally, Rankin-Brown (2006) stated four sources of writing anxiety: frustration, fear of teacher and peer evaluation and nervousness of losing self-identity. Atay and Kurt (2006) also identified the causes encompassing the inability to generate ideas and to organize thoughts, the impact of the first language, limited vocabulary, poor grammar, writing as a mandatory discipline, and the stress of achieving low grades. Furthermore, among factors relating to teachers, pedagogy has been identified as the most common cause of writing anxiety. Additional teacher-related factors that contribute to writing anxiety include teaching strategies, instructional practices, feedbacks, and the anticipated perfection in writing (Fareed et al., 2021).

3. Statement of The Problem

The study of second language anxiety is highly required and of extreme significance since it may negatively impact language acquisition, performance, achievement, and the perspective on the whole educational process (Dornyei, 2005; Pajares, 2003). Along with its interference in the three phases of learning—input, process and output (Tobias, 1986)—a lot of studies have reported the detrimental impacts of anxiety on learners' language achievement (e.g., Horwitz et al, 1986) and on social communicative interaction (MacIntyre, 1995). Krashen (1982) emphasizes the necessity of establishing a low stress educational setting in order to enhance learner's language competency by presenting the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which demonstrates that anxiety, motivation, and other affective factors greatly influence second language acquisition. Further investigations, namely Price (1991), also assert that the psychological aspects of the learner toward language acquisition influence the process of learning and achievements. Recognizing language anxiety provoking factors will thus enhance awareness of that affective concept and assist language instructors and teachers in setting up a less anxious learning environment (Qashoa, 2014).

Several pieces of research has been conducted with the intention of discovering the relationship between language anxiety and other types of anxiety and identifying the factors contributing to writing anxiety; still, more studies appear to be needed to investigate strategies for reducing writing anxiety, particularly in EFL learners. In order to fill the gap in the field, the purpose of the current study is to seek practical, effective, and employable strategies that teachers may utilize to help EFL students overcome their writing anxiety. This study aims to figure out:

- What strategies and techniques may English teachers employ in order to reduce the writing anxiety of EFL students?

4. Methodology

The current study is conducted to identify practicable strategies implemented by English teachers in order to help EFL students overcome their L2 writing anxiety. This study adopts a qualitative approach in which the qualitative data are gathered through interviews with teachers in order to determine the strategies used for alleviating students' writing anxiety.

4.1 Participants

The participants were selected following the convenience sampling technique. Five writing instructors (three women and two men) were selected based on specific criteria, including their expertise in teaching writing, availability, and willingness to contribute to the data gathering process. The tutors possess expertise in instructing advanced levels of writing proficiency, including essay composition and academic writing, to EFL learners. In order to preserve confidentiality, the individuals' identities have been substituted with the designations T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5. The

convenience sampling technique was employed to pick the participants, as they were recruited based on their voluntary participation and ease of access.

4.2 Instruments

The research data was collected through interviews with teachers in order to determine their methods in helping students overcome anxiety. The interview session was documented and converted into written form. The interview session was conducted using a series of questions, which included inquiring about the participants' perceptions of language anxiety and whether they differentiate writing anxiety from other types of anxiety. The subsequent inquiries pertained to the strategies employed to mitigate students' writing apprehension, particularly in relation to its underlying causes. For instance, how do educators address linguistic challenges, insufficient topical knowledge, brainstorming, data organization, fear of criticism, and time-constrained writing assessments? Additional inquiries were formulated according to the responses provided by the participants.

4.3 Procedures

1- What are the typical challenges that you and your students have been confronted with in the field of language teaching and writing acquisition?

T1: In my writing classes, I often run across students who lack language proficiency due to a poor educational background and inadequate commitment to practice English regularly.

T2: Most of my students who struggled with writing were too afraid of the talent to give it a try, mostly due to their fear of not writing good enough.

T3: I remember some of my students hated writing as they thought it was too complicated and they were not capable of meeting the standards of a well-written paper.

T4: Not dedicating enough time and effort to practice writing was one of the most frequent issues I had to deal with. It felt like they did not take this skill seriously.

T5: Some of my students were complaining about not being able to express themselves fully through writing, which I assume is because they were unable to properly organize their thoughts and to choose the right words before writing them down.

Result: Writing classes seem to be mainly challenged by the complex nature of writing and students' lack of language knowledge, which can lead to subsequent issues including insufficient vocabulary and writing knowledge, fear of failure, and ultimately not enough time and effort dedicated to learn and practice writing.

2- How do you perceive language anxiety and writing apprehension?

T1: Well, to be honest, after all this time working in this field, I still feel overwhelmed and stressed while presenting to students, especially those at higher academic levels.

T2: Making mistakes in delivering the correct materials in the correct possible manner has always been my main concern in English teaching, given my significant influence on my students.

T3: Indeed. language anxiety has long been one of the major challenges of teaching and learning English, associated with a range of psychological, social, and cultural factors.

T4: Given that even I myself occasionally struggle with this tricky, complicated skill, I can understand if writing makes my students feel anxious and stressed.

T5: Language anxiety and writing apprehension are inseparable features of language acquisition, which could be rather beneficial if one knows how to handle them.

Result: English teachers perceive language anxiety as a significant challenge in language acquisition and instruction. They personally experience feeling overwhelmed and stressed, especially while giving presentations to students at a higher academic level. Making mistakes in delivering materials correctly is a major concern for English teachers, as they recognize their great influence on students. Language anxiety is associated with psychological, social, and cultural factors and is considered a common obstacle in language acquisition. However, teachers also acknowledge that language anxiety and writing apprehension can be beneficial if managed effectively.

3- How do you identify the factors that contribute to writing anxiety among your students?

T1: Some of my students had needed additional writing practice; others had lacked proficiency in writing because of their poor linguistic knowledge and vocabulary.

T2: A few of my students had been concerned about my negative feedback on their writing assignments, so I had reassured them that this does not imply they cannot write—they just need to practice more and not give up.

T3: Students who possess low writing competency, often struggle with writing anxiety since they lack the ability to clearly express their ideas and opinions as well as insufficient grammar and vocabulary.

T4: Several students had complained about time pressure while taking writing tests. They suggested the time for these tests is so short that they cannot write a good piece; yet, I believe the issue is with their time management skills and writing techniques.

T5: Some students, as I have already mentioned, are not quite familiar with writing techniques; for example, choosing a good topic and organizing their ideas, which results in poor writing performance and eventually writing anxiety.

Result: Writing anxiety can be attributed to several factors, such as inadequate linguistic proficiency, insufficient grammar and vocabulary, fear of criticism and negative feedback on writing tasks, unfamiliarity with writing procedures, time constraints during writing assessments, and limited writing practice.

4- How do you effectively alleviate writing anxiety among your students?

T1: Giving my students self-regulating writing assignments, combined with peer review, resulted in rather remarkable improvements in their writing. Since their peers examine and review their work, students feel less anxious about my feedback on their assignments.

T2: For me, I aim to create a motivating classroom where my students view critical comments on their pieces as chances to get better at writing rather than being afraid of them.

T3: I realized that giving samples could potentially help much with improving one's writing skills. In their own tasks, learners often mirror the style and language components of the sample. Using authentic samples greatly influenced my students' writing proficiency; they got familiar with the suitable style and register of writing in several contexts.

T4: I have been implementing effective instruction methods in order to enhance learners' critical thinking and writing organization lately. Creating a mind map before every writing task and reading and composing problem-solution passages have been quite beneficial in teaching writing skills to my students; they no longer feel lost within the mess of their thoughts while writing.

T5: I usually provide my students with authentic materials in our writing sessions as this not only helps them gather ideas and required information about the topic of their upcoming writing task, but also gets them familiar with the proper grammar and vocabulary. Finding the right authentic materials could be slightly challenging since they need to be chosen precisely according to the learners' proficiency level.

Result: Teaching writing techniques properly, providing self-regulating assignments, peer review and feedback, establishing motivating and supportive environments, providing samples with various writing styles, supplying level-appropriate authentic materials, offering required information about the topic of the writing task, utilizing effective instruction methods, can all contribute to reducing anxiety and improving writing skills among language learners.

5. Findings

Language anxiety is acknowledged by EFL teachers as a significant challenge in language acquisition and instruction, particularly in writing classes. It can lead to issues such as weak command of grammar and vocabulary, fear of failure, and insufficient time and effort dedicated to learning and practicing writing due to the complex nature of this skill. Even English teachers experience language anxiety while instructing their learners. Writing anxiety can be attributed to factors such as inadequate linguistic proficiency, insufficient grammar and vocabulary, fear of criticism, unfamiliarity with writing procedures, time constraints, and limited writing practice.

Effective management of language anxiety and writing apprehension can help reduce writing anxiety and improve writing skills among language learners. EFL teachers design and implement various linguistic, educational, and psychological strategies to provide a proper educational opportunity for their students in order to gain a good command of writing. Instructing writing procedures, applying peer review, self-regulatory assignments, providing level-appropriate authentic texts and samples, and enhancing students' critical thinking are typical strategies employed by EFL teachers participating in this study.

6. Conclusion

English teachers can reduce writing anxiety among students by implementing effective writing instruction and strategies. Studies have shown that teachers' explicit writing instruction and students' use of writing strategies significantly predict and help to reduce writing anxiety. Teaching writing techniques properly by utilizing effective instruction methods plays a major role in improving writing competency, which leaves no room for writing anxiety to arise. Furthermore, teachers can alleviate students' writing anxiety by providing appropriate feedback and assigning self-regulatory writing tasks. Teachers could also create a motivating educational environment to psychologically support their students and reduce writing anxiety. Implementing peer review before having their written tasks examined by teachers could be highly beneficial in lowering writing anxiety in language learners.

Additionally, creating English writing courses based on the process teaching method can enhance students' self-efficacy in English writing, reduce psychological anxiety levels, and increase confidence in writing skills. By focusing on targeted teaching activities and pedagogically sound approaches, teachers can play a crucial role in alleviating writing anxiety among students, ultimately improving their writing performance and overall learning experience.

Another factor that helps reduce writing anxiety is actually improving at writing. Both teachers and learners can implement several strategies to enhance writing skills in learners. In order to gain a strong language, grammar, and vocabulary command for efficient writing, students must be consistently exposed to authentic material in their target language—English—in consistent quality. For their forthcoming literary tasks, this exposure can also bring them a great wealth of information and inspiration. Therefore, reviewing various authentic books—such as journals, promotional materials, etc.—could be rather beneficial for recognizing numerous writing styles and registers.

Educational material must be designed and selected with utmost precision, taking into consideration the learners' educational and cultural background, as well as their level of proficiency. Students tend to concentrate on dealing with familiar and level-appropriate content over investing effort and attention on unfamiliar material. Dedicating one's time and energy to developing their writing skills, rather of struggling with the unknown content, undoubtedly reduces writing anxiety in language learners and eventually enhances their proficiency in writing.

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