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Exploring Writing Anxiety of the ESL University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

In this study, engineering students at UiTM had their levels, types, and causes of writing anxiety evaluated. The participants were 172 diploma engineering students. The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and Causes and Strategies to Alleviate Writing Anxiety (CSWAS), which were developed by the researcher based on classroom observations and previous research on this issue, revealed a high degree of writing anxiety, with somatic anxiety being its main type, as reflected in a racing heart, dry mouth, sweating, butterfly in the stomach, twitching, and yawning as its main sources. It was concluded that fear of the feedback from teachers, lack of confidence, insufficient subject understanding, weak writing skills, and pressure with time-constraint are responsible for this deficit. It was suggested that the educational system in Malaysia should adopt a less critical and intimidating tone, concentrating on the writing requirements and expectations of ESL students rather than setting lofty objectives and applying pressure for flawless work. This study provides some recommendations for those working in the sector that will help improve the writing abilities of ESL students in Malaysia.

Keywords: SLWAI, CSWAS, ESL Learners, Writing Anxiety

Introduction

Effective writing is an essential skill that may be applied in a variety of situations, from academic writing to commercial communication. It is distinguished by its easy-to-understand, succinct, and well-organized language that interests the reader. One of the most important elements of excellent writing is a clear objective (Cheng, 2004). It is important to consider the audience, the message, and the desired outcome before beginning to write because doing so will make the writing process easier and ensure that the final product is appropriate for the audience's specific needs (Suvin, 2020). For many people, the writing process might be difficult. Finding the perfect words, organising thoughts, and effectively communicating the ideas can be challenging (Hassan et. al., 2021). Nonetheless, one's writing abilities can be improved with effort and practise. L2 students have expressed concerns about the complexity

of writing skills, and according to studies, L2 students develop writing anxiety when given writing assignments in ESL classes (Shidrah et.al., 2021).

As the act of writing can be difficult for many people, both genders are susceptible to the common condition known as writing anxiety. It can take many different forms, including procrastination, self-doubt, and dread of judgement. Perfectionism, a lack of confidence in one's writing ability, and a worry that one won't live up to others' expectations are all possible causes of writing anxiety (Liu, 2006). Despite the fact that writing anxiety can be difficult to deal with, there are methods that can be used to curb the anxiousness. These include creating attainable objectives, breaking work down into smaller pieces, and getting feedback from others.

Writing anxiety can take many different forms, such as avoidance behaviour, physiological, and cognitive symptoms. When someone has writing anxiety, their behaviours and cognitive behaviour are referred to as their thoughts and mental processes (Cheng, 2004). They might involve negative self-talk, and these ideas can lead to self-doubt and uncertainty, making it difficult to start or complete writing assignments. Somatic conduct describes the possible physical manifestations of writing anxiety. Symptoms could include migraines, stiffness in the muscles, exhaustion, and trouble focusing. These physical symptoms can make it difficult for the learners to focus on the task at hand and can lead to further anxiety and procrastination (Dar and Khan, 2015). Avoidance behaviour describes the steps a person may take to stay away from writing-related tasks or situations. This could involve putting off doing specific writing duties or coming up with an excuses and justifications for the procrastination. This conduct makes it more challenging to overcome writing anxiety and may exacerbate the problem (Kurniasih, 2017).

It is crucial to remember that each person may have a unique blend of these behaviours, and their intensity might change. However, people who experience writing anxiety frequently exhibit the aforementioned behaviours. People can develop coping mechanisms for writing anxiety by recognising and addressing the specific behaviours that contribute to it. The fear of writing is a problem that many students in Malaysia experience. When faced with the work of writing, it may appear as feelings of anxiety, tension, or fear. This may make it difficult to start writing, experience writer's block, or have trouble expressing oneself. Numerous things, such as lacking writing experience, lack of writing confidence, and fear of failure, can contribute to this issue (Cheng, 2004).

Literature

Writing skills are essential for success in university, and they play a crucial role in several areas. Writing can be a powerful tool for personal growth and self-expression. Whether it is through journaling, creative writing, or academic writing, the act of writing can help students clarify their thoughts and emotions and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and enable them to communicate effectively (Suastra and Menggo, 2020). Academic success: Strong writing skills are crucial to academic success. Essays, reports, and other written assignments are the primary ways that students are assessed, and good writing skills can make the difference between a passing and a failing grade (Mulyono et.al., 2020).

However, academic writing is usually recognised as one of the most difficult tasks to complete for university students. Higher education students, particularly diploma students whose primary basis of assessment often includes written tasks ranging from laboratory reports to essays, require them to possess good written expression (Cetin, 2011). The academic writing practices that students carry with them from their previous level of

education which is secondary school diverge from the standards of a graduate community of practice. This has put the students who have significant general-writing errors at the time of entering the university or diploma programme study considered “at risk” because in addition to learning how to write in a more academic genre, they must also address their pre-existing problems in order to produce high-quality writing, which can be difficult (Baydarova et al., 2021; Cetin, 2011).

According to published research, psychological elements like anxiety, self-efficacy, and confidence frequently play a big part in L2 writing challenges (Altukruni, 2019; Cheng, 2020; Zian and Safi, 2020). While anxiety can make it difficult for students to concentrate and write, low self-confidence and self-efficacy can make it difficult for them to take risks and try new things in their writing. The majority of ESL students, according to Horwitz (2001), struggle with language anxiety in varied degrees. Horwitz and Young (1991) also expressed worry about the increased proportion of language learners who expressed anxiety during their language classes. A learner's brain's language acquisition area may be blocked from receiving information by anxiety related to learning a foreign language. According to Krashen (1982), learning a foreign language anxiety may operate as a barrier that inhibits information from entering the learner's brain's language acquisition area. This has a negative impact on the process of learning the new language, which results in low accomplishment and performance among learners (Riasiti, 2011).

There are numerous varieties of writing anxiety, and ESL writers frequently experience it when they learn how to write in the language (Altukruni, 2019; Badrasawi et al., 2020; Nor Shidrah et al., 2021). Three different types of writing anxiety, including cognitive anxiety, physical anxiety, and avoidance behavioural anxiety, are reportedly experienced by L2 learners, according to Cheng (2004). In many studies on writing anxiety in L2 learners, it was discovered that cognitive anxiety was more common in ESL writers than the other two types (Cheng, 2004; Ee, 2018; Cheng, 2020; Saravanan and Azlina, 2021; Kamaruddin et al., 2021). This is mostly because they are unable to handle feedback and remarks from classmates and teachers that are critical of them in both verbal and written form. According to the literature on the different types of writing anxiety experienced by L2 learners, exposure to the target language and the L2 classroom environment, which condition the learners' readiness to deal with the skill, are the main causes of the various types of writing anxiety that students experience, ranging from physical to psychological aspects (Robichaud et al., 2019; Dirgeyasa (2017); Syarifuddin (2020)).

There are several factors that can cause writing anxiety among L2 learners. According to a study by Shidrah et al (2016) on the causes of writing anxiety among 186 Diploma in Accountancy and Business course students at Universiti Teknologi MARA, low proficiency learners' inability to acquire writing knowledge is the biggest contributor. According to correlational study, the main element that can reduce students' writing anxiety is the effort made by L2 instructors to guide and mentor them in L2 classes, particularly during writing lessons. Another factor that makes pupils anxious when asked to write are unfamiliar themes and topics. This demonstrates that in order to provide a seamless learning process, students need to increase their general knowledge. According to past studies, there are two primary categories of factors that contribute to writing anxiety in ESL classrooms: external and internal factors (Jawas, 2019; Syarifuddin, 2020; Prasetyaningrum et al., 2021; Wern and Rahmat, 2021). While internal factors are those that are connected to the learners' feelings and emotions while engaging in writing activities, external factors are those that are directly related to the topics of essays and their writing ability. Writing-related anxiety is common and

often a sign of a writer who is committed to their craft. However, the majority of research indicates that writing anxiety negatively affects students by impeding their ability to write quality essays, but it is also crucial to emphasise that this stress-induced attitude and mindset might lead to other problems.

Table 1.0

Factors of Writing Anxiety

| External Factors | Internal Factor |
|--|---|
| Problems related to topic – little idea, no idea, unfamiliar topic | Afraid of feedback given by the instructors |
| Linguistics Difficulties – lack of vocabulary, sentence structures, grammatical errors | Pressure to produce good essays |
| Stagnant English Writing Skill | Stress about not knowing what to write |
| Lack of composition technique | Not motivated to write |
| Time constraints | Low self -confidence to write |

Since Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) only offers courses in English, diploma students must pass particular English courses in order to graduate. In a study by Nor Afifa (2019), it was discovered that UiTM students suffer anxiety when they fear that their professors would criticise or comment on their writing. But given that writing is an essential skill for succeeding in college, it is clear that students must manage their anxiety while learning to write in ESL writing classes because this could have a negative effect on their grade. Therefore, this study examined the level of anxiety among diploma engineering students at UiTM as well as the underlying causes of this problem.

Methodology*Participants*

The sample for this study included 172 graduate students from the Faculty of Engineering at UiTM, including 122 men and 50 women. Due to the small number of diploma engineering students enrolled at UiTM in the third semester of 2022/2023, this group of participants was chosen. In this context, Krejcie and Morgan (1970) suggested that 100 students take part in a study with a population of 150–170 students. To choose participants who have an equal and independent probability of being included in this study, simple random sampling was performed.

Instrument

A quantitative approach was applied in this study. Two instruments were used in order to identify the level and factors contribute to writing anxiety among the respondents. The first tool used in this study was the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), which was created by Cheng (2004) and contains three independent factors: cognitive anxiety, physical anxiety, and avoidance behaviour anxiety. The purpose of this questionnaire, which

consists of 22 items to assess writing anxiety in English as a second language (ESL) and is scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), is to determine which of the somatic, avoidance-related, and cognitive anxiety factors affects participants' writing anxiety the most. After taking English classes at UiTM for three consecutive semesters, the SLWAI was given out for all respondents to complete. Additionally, a set of questionnaires known as the Causes and Strategies to Alleviate Writing Anxiety Survey (CSWAS) was developed based on four different established questionnaires, including the CWAI, WAT, ESL Writing Anxiety Questionnaire, and ARSS, in order to investigate the causes or reasons that trigger writing anxiety among L2 learners and the strategies employed to alleviate the anxiety in L2 writing classes. The 25-item CSWAS is scored using a Likert-type 5-choice response system, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree," 2 denoting "disagree," 3 denoting "neither agree nor disagree," 4 denoting "agree," and 5 denoting "strongly agree."

Data Analysis

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences programme, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data. The sum of each respondent's scores across all 22 items was used to get their overall score. To determine the degree of writing anxiety based on the type of writing anxiety, the Mean (M) value from the descriptive analysis was examined. To ascertain which of the aspects most frequently induced writing anxiety in the respondents, the mean (M) value for each of the twenty-five (25), CWAS items was computed.

Results and Discussion

In this study, students enrolled in the Diploma Engineering programme at UiTM will have their degrees of cognitive, somatic, and avoidance behaviour assessed. With 172 sample sizes, Table 1 provides a descriptive statistical analysis of writing anxiety levels across the three factors.

4.1 A descriptive investigation of writing anxiety levels By providing details on the data's distribution, descriptive analysis enables the discovery of correlations between variables.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of writing anxiety levels across the three factors

| Item | N | Mean | SD | Rank of Item |
|---------------------|-----|-------|-------|--------------|
| Cognitive | 172 | 32.92 | 12.56 | 2 |
| Somatic | 172 | 45.17 | 26.24 | 1 |
| Avoidance Behaviour | 172 | 10.76 | 6.56 | 3 |

As shown in Table 1, with a sample size of (N=172), diploma engineering students scored highest for the somatic anxiety factors (M= 45.17 and SD= 26.24). The respondents scored a slightly lower mean for cognitive anxiety (M= 32.92 and SD= 12.56). The mean scores for the factors of fear of avoidance behaviour were lowest among the respondents (M= 10.76 and SD= 6.56). All three components can be said to have an impact on respondents, although

students are more impacted by the somatic anxiety factors than they are by the cognitive anxiety and fear of avoidance behaviour aspects. This shows that UiTM Diploma engineering students experience physical symptoms of anxiety more often when they are required to write in their L2. The results suggest that the respondents in this study tend to experience excessive thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to physical symptoms that make them believe they are ill when learning to write in the ESL classroom. This is in contrast to the study by Nor Afifa et.al. (2019) which found that UiTM Melaka diploma students were the most anxious when it came to factors associated with cognitive anxiety. A study by Chin et.al. (2018) among UiTM Sarawak students came to the same conclusions as the respondents had the highest score for cognitive anxiety, which is also consistent with the research of Kamisah et.al. (2012) as cognitive anxiety was also recorded as the most influenced type of anxiety among diploma students in UiTM.

Descriptive statistics for causes of writing anxiety

Descriptive analysis on the causes or reasons that lead the L2 learners to experience writing anxiety in ESL Writing classes is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for causes of writing anxiety

| Item | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Rank |
|--|-----|------|----------------|------|
| 1 I am concerned about the teacher's comments and evaluation. | 172 | 4.06 | 0.9 | 2 |
| 2 I am afraid of writing tests | 172 | 3.29 | 1.15 | 7 |
| 3 I don't have a good command of English writing techniques. | 172 | 3.19 | 1.07 | 8 |
| 4 I don't know what to write on the topic given by the teacher. | 172 | 2.94 | 1.13 | 9 |
| 5 I often encounter some linguistic problems such as inadequate mastery of vocabulary and poor sentence structures issue. | 172 | 3.82 | 0.92 | 3 |
| 6 I am frustrated because I am under pressure to deliver perfect work. | 172 | 3.33 | 1.08 | 6 |
| 7 I feel anxious due to the high frequency of writing assignments. | 172 | 3.37 | 1.03 | 5 |
| 8 I feel worry when I have to write under time constraints. | 172 | 3.69 | 1.04 | 4 |
| 9 I have a low-confidence in English writing. | 172 | 4.09 | 0.94 | 1 |
| 10 The teacher's feedback on my English writing is insufficient | 172 | 2.31 | 0.93 | 12 |
| 11 I can't put what I learn in writing classes into practice. | 172 | 2.59 | 1.03 | 11 |
| 12 I don't get enough writing practice inside and outside classroom. | 172 | 2.89 | 1.05 | 10 |

Table 2 above addresses causes of writing anxiety among the 172 respondents involved in this study. Based on the mean results for each of the 12 test items, the items were ranked from 1 to 12 in order. As item 9 has the greatest mean score ($M = 4.09$), it is ranked first. Poor self-confidence among L2 learners is often seen among the prominent factors that arouse the L2 learners' anxiousness. Self-esteem develops as a result of interactions with the

environment, as well as through various accolades, acceptance, and consideration from others (Yucens & Uzer, 2018). Usually, the root of student worry is the presumption that students are unable to complete their writing tasks and afraid of getting low marks. The root of students' worry is the presumption that they are unable to complete their writing tasks or afraid of failing which lowers their self-esteem (Guo et. al., 2018). The finding of this study is unparallel to a study conducted by (Widagdo et. al., 2022) as the respondents involved were recorded able to accept and respect their capabilities hence making them disagreed that low self-esteem affects their skills in writing. The results, however, are consistent with a study by Salikin (2019), in which poor self-esteem was found to be the main cause of anxiety among L2 learners when it comes to L2 writing classes and tasks. The second-ranked factor, with a recorded M value of 4.06, is of receiving negative feedback from the lecturers. Additionally, the respondents scored the lowest on item 12 (M = 2.31) regarding inadequate feedback from the English teacher as one of the prominent causes of their anxiety in ESL writing classes. They also ranked their inability to put what they learn in writing classes into practise and lack of practise as the second and third last causes, with (M= 2.89) and (M= 2.59) respectively, ranking as the second and third last reasons that cause their writing anxiety. This supports research by Cheng (2015); Liu (2010); Olagbaju (2011); Kamaruddin et al (2021) indicating environment-related elements, such as feedback from instructors and peers, are among the causes of anxiety in L2 writing. With a documented M value of 3.82, 3.69, and 3.37, respectively, linguistic issues, time constraints, and a high frequency of writing assignments are also among the significant causes of writing anxiety for this study. All of the contributing factors are consistent with research by (Ningsih, 2015; Robichaud et al., 2019; Dirgeyasa, 2017; Syarifuddin, 2020). They have shown that in addition to the students themselves, the environment is one of the key causes of students' writing anxiety

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the descriptive analysis of the three categories' levels of writing anxiety show that the respondents' scores on somatic anxiety factors were the greatest, followed by cognitive factors, and the avoidance-behavior domain was thought to have the least impact on the respondents. Insufficient linguistics expertise ranked as the third most important factor for writing anxiety among the respondents, following low self-confidence and fear of comments or feedback from lecturers as the most common causes of writing anxiety among students. According to several studies, excessive and unnecessary emphasis on minor spelling and grammar mistakes rather than content may be the root of writing-related stress and frustration. When students spend too much time trying to avoid mistakes, they may lose confidence in their writing skills and find it difficult to communicate their ideas clearly (Elias et.al., 2005).

In light of the aforementioned findings, practitioners must be mindful of the significant effects anxiety has both on the performance of ESL students and on the learning environment as they work to raise student achievement. Like to many abstract mental notions, anxiety raises more questions the more one studies it. It's crucial to note the limitations of this study. One of the drawbacks of the study is the possibility that the results could be skewed due to the insufficient number of samples. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies on writing anxiety include more participants in order to take more factors into account for a more in-depth study of the data on gender differences in anxiety in L2 writing courses. Although anxiety is frequently thought to have a detrimental impact on L2 learners, numerous studies show that healthy anxiety has a positive impact and can encourage students to

continue their academic endeavours. The real challenge for teachers is to support students in maintaining appropriate anxiety that is neither too high nor too low, as research has shown that some level of anxiety can be advantageous for learning and performance as it can motivate students to work harder and pay more attention to the task at hand (Mesri, 2012). In conclusion, it's important to stress that completely avoiding all situations that create anxiety is neither practical nor advantageous because kids need to learn how to control and cope with anxiety in a variety of situations. All L2 instructors should instead aim to help students gain the knowledge and abilities needed to deal with their anxiety in a healthy and effective way.

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