

An Investigation on the Effects of Writing Anxiety on Readiness of Writing among Low Proficiency Undergraduates

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Abstract

Writing anxiety is a common problem affecting ESL learners' proficiency. As writing skill is the most difficult skill that needs to be acquired by ESL learners, it is pertinent to manage the anxiety level to encourage learners to write. The facilitative effect of anxiety is important in enhancing writing skills, particularly among low proficiency students. This study investigates the effects of writing anxiety on the readiness towards writing tasks in English among low proficiency undergraduates in Universiti Malaysia Sabah. A total of thirty undergraduates with MUET band 1 or 2 participated in the study. The anxiety level was measured using Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). The data showed that students with high cognitive, somatic and avoidance anxiety have a greater apprehension towards writing tasks compared to those with low level of cognitive, somatic and avoidance anxiety. This affects their readiness to do writing tasks in English. This study has implication on the facilitating of classroom practices to enable students to involve and participate more effectively in their writing tasks.

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Keywords: Low English proficiency level; Second language writing anxiety; Writing tasks

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is one of the factors that makes the process of learning a second or foreign language difficult for many language learners. Although its effects may vary from one individual to another, it plays a significant role in determining the performance of a language learner in a target language, in this case, the English language. According to Chastain (1988), anxiety refers to uneasy feeling or emotion caused by something aggressive that is always associated with nervousness, excessive emotional reactions, apprehension and lack of confidence (Vitasari, Wahab, Othman, Herawan & Sinnadurai, 2010). It influences attention, and this may result in poor language performance (Field, 2004). According to Riasati (2011), anxiety is one of the key factors influencing second language learning. It causes problems for language learners attempting to perform in the target language (Hussein, 2010; Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Marwan, 2007; Riasati, 2011). Studies show that when students do not enjoy learning the target language, they will perform negatively in the language (Andrade & Williams, 2009; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2005; Tuncay & Uzunboylu, 2010).

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In the context of anxiety types, Cheng (2002) has conceptualized three types of anxiety, mainly Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety and Avoidance Anxiety. It is important for teachers to identify the types of anxiety students face, in order for them to provide a supportive teaching and learning process. Cheng (2004) has also introduced a self-report second language writing anxiety measure, namely the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) that is used to assess the levels and types of second language writing anxiety. Cognitive Anxiety (CA) refers to subjective forms of anxiety experience like negative beliefs, obsession towards achievement and concern about others' opinion. Somatic Anxiety (SA) likewise, refers to one's idea of the psychological influence of anxiety experience, which is shown by intense bad feeling, such as agitation and stress. Avoidance Anxiety or (AA), on the other hand, refers to the observable condition of the anxiety experience, such as restraining of writing. SLWAI specifies the physiological and cognitive effects of writing anxiety on writing processes and behaviors.

For this study, the researchers adapted SLWAI and used the categories of anxiety proposed by Cheng (2002) to explain respondents' writing anxieties. As observed by the researchers, the respondents of this study are still unable to write fluently in English despite having been taught paragraph and essay writing from primary school level. They also obtained low grades in Reading and Writing in English (RWE) examination, which was conducted at the Centre of the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB) of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). RWE is a compulsory course in PPIB for students with Malaysian University English Test (MUET) bands 1 and 2 to take. Feedback from these respondents shows they fear writing. According to Erkan and Saban (2011), students are afraid to engage in writing tasks due to their poor command of the language. They think it is difficult to learn writing. Also, they see writing as a subject or skill that they simply must take to pass the exam (Erkan & Saban, 2011).

The respondents' fear of writing has prompted the researchers to investigate the level and factors contributing to their anxiety in writing and its effects on their readiness on writing. If the fear of writing is not addressed, this may impact the respondents' attitude towards writing specifically and affect their English language proficiency in general. This study therefore aims to identify the relationship between the respondents' anxiety levels on writing and its effects on their intentions towards writing tasks in English. It attempts to answer the question on what extent do the levels of writing anxiety experienced by these respondents affect their intention towards doing writing tasks in English.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Many language learners find writing the most difficult of language skills to master (Kurt & Atay, 2007; Latiff, 2007). The term writing anxiety, introduced by Daly and Miller (1975) refers to a person's inclination to avoid writing especially when it is graded (Daly, 1978; Hassan, 2001). It also refers to psychological effects faced by learners during a writing task due to learners' excessive fear that are triggered by learners' feelings, beliefs and behaviors (Al_Sawalha & Chow, 2012). Studies have shown that writing anxiety has debilitating as well as facilitative effects on students' writing performance. It can either lower the quality of the writing (debilitative effect) (Daly, 1978; Rezaei, Jafari & Younas, 2014), or improve the quality of the writing (facilitative effect) (Hassan, 2001). These debilitating and facilitative effects influence students' anxiety level – it can either debilitate or facilitate their anxiety. Scovel (1978) stated that debilitating and facilitative anxiety serve as a warning as well as a motivation for students to learn or discover new knowledge. They can either choose not to participate in the learning task (avoidance behavior) or they can participate actively in the learning task (approach behavior) (Scovel, 1978). Therefore, teachers should pay more attention to students' anxiety level in class before asking them to write.

In addition, writing anxiety can also influence learners' attitude towards doing writing tasks. Cheng (2002) discovered that students with high writing anxiety tend to avoid taking writing courses as the courses involve a lot of writing activities. Instead, they prefer to take courses with minimal writing tasks. Daly (1978) also found that learners with high anxiety level avoid classes involving writing assignments. A study conducted by Jebreil, Azizifar, Gowhary and Jamalinesari (2015) discovered that debilitating anxiety causes students to avoid classroom activities (avoidance behavior). The debilitating effect of writing anxiety on EFL/ESL learners' writing performance and quality is also found in other studies, as posited by

Cheng, Horwitz and Shallert's (1999); Atay and Kurt's (2007) and Naghadeh, Naghadeh, Kasraey, Maghdour, Kasraie and Naghaded (2014). For example, a study done by Rahim and Hayas (2014) on anxiety effect on learners' willingness to write found that learners with high anxiety level can choose not to write. This is very relevant to low proficiency students who tend to be more apprehensive towards writing because of their lack of exposure to vocabulary and language skills (Daud, Daud & Kassim, 2005). Lack of knowledge in English structure and negative attitude towards writing are also among the causes contributing to students' fear to write (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015). All these show that anxiety can cause debilitating effects on students' attitude towards doing writing tasks.

Likewise, writing anxiety can also have facilitative effect on learners' writing performance. Students become motivated to perform well in any given writing tasks (Scovel, 1978). When a learner's level of writing anxiety is low, he or she writes better than a learner with high level of writing anxiety (Hassan, 2001). A study conducted by Hassan (2001) on third year students of the English Department in Egypt revealed that students with low writing anxiety write better essays because of their high self-esteem. These students are confident that they can write, and they enjoy doing the writing (Hassan, 2001). Similar findings were also shown in Jebreil et al. (2015) study on Iranian EFL students with different proficiency levels. They discovered that students with intermediate and advanced levels, who had lower level of English writing anxiety than students with low proficiency level, are confident in writing because they do not fear writing.

Teachers' way of teaching and interacting with students is one of the factors affecting students' anxiety level (Kara, 2013; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Young, 1991). Some teachers believe there is a constant need to correct students' errors, so they need to act, however, like a "drill sergeant" and not as a "facilitator" (Young, 1991). This 'drilling' approach has certainly created a tension in the classroom, which has elevated students' anxiety level (Aida, 1994). Yet, this teacher-centered-instruction is still practiced especially in writing class (Watanabe, 2014).

In addition, peers' behaviors can also affect learners' anxiety. According to Aragão (2011), peers' criticisms and laughter at learners' performance in class have caused language learners to feel shy and embarrass to participate in tasks given to them, as they feel more anxious when they need to participate in speaking or writing tasks. The complexity of writing is another factor affecting learners' anxiety level and subsequently invokes a negative attitude towards writing. Writing is a complicated activity that requires a certain level of knowledge of linguistics, writing conventions, vocabulary and grammar (Erkan & Saban, 2011). Due to its complexity, learners become anxious whenever they are asked to produce an essay. Their lack of confidence in their ability to write in the target language due to factors, such as poor understanding of grammatical rules and limited vocabulary of the language has discouraged them from writing in the target language (Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015). The debilitating effects of these factors can be lessened if the teaching approach and style in a classroom accommodate students' needs and preferences.

One of the approaches that teachers can apply in their classrooms is collaborative learning (CL). CL provides students with opportunity to practice language among them (Storch, 2011). In writing class, collaborative writing (CW) can be introduced. CW is one of the examples of collaborative learning that offers many advantages to L2 learners. It is a joint-ownership-essay that a group of learners has produced collaboratively (Storch, 2011). CW encourages learners to share ideas, find sources related to the topic assigned and to write and edit their essay together before submission (Shafie, Maesin, Osman, Nayan & Mansor, 2010). By doing this, learners' anxiety level will decrease as CW creates relax and friendly environment (Arumugam, 2011; Mason, 2006). In addition, learners' competitive attitude affects their anxiety level (Bailey, 1983). When learners start comparing their essays with others' essays, they become more anxious with the mistakes found in their essays, and this may heighten their anxiety level. However, with the application of CW in class, learners' competitive attitude can be 'toned down' because in CW, learners share common goal that is to produce a better essay than the essay they write individually. As claimed by Storch (2011, p. 284), "collaboration leads to the production of more accurate texts and may lead to language learning gains". Thus, learners can gather and share their linguistic resources through CW whenever they encounter problems in writing.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted at the Centre of the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) that is located at the northern part of Kota Kinabalu city in Sabah, East Malaysia. A total of 30 respondents, taking a foundation course, Reading and Writing in English, participated in this study comprising 50 per cent of Malay students from Peninsular Malaysia, and 11 local Sabahan, of different ethnicities, namely Kadazandusun, Rungus, Bajau, Bisaya, Banjar and Murut, and three respondents from Sarawak, another state in the Easy Malaysia, namely Lundayeh and Iban; only one student has a mixed parentage. Table 1 shows the ethnicity of the respondents.

Table 1. Respondents' Ethnicity.

Ethnicity	No. of Respondents (N=30)
Kadazandusun	1
Rungus	2
Malay (Peninsular)	16
Bajau	3
Bisaya	1
Banjar	1
Iban	2
Lundayeh	1
Murut	2
Others (i.e. Malay & Bajau)	1

3.2 Instruments

Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was adapted and used to measure students' writing anxiety level. The questionnaire's validity and reliability have been proven by means of correlation and factor analysis (Cheng, 2004; Zhang, 2011), and it has subsequently been used in many second language writing studies. The questionnaire has a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions, as well as multiple-choice items. The questionnaire was also translated into Malay in order to maximize respondents' understanding of the items in the questionnaire. There are 28 items in the questionnaire, namely six items in Part A (items no. 1 to 6), and 22 items in Part B (items no. 7 to 28). Part A of the questionnaire elicits the demographic information of the respondents, while Part B of the questionnaire determines the level of anxiety of these respondents. In Part B, a five-point Likert Scale was employed, where respondents were asked to state their opinion on the statements by choosing one of five responses: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree or strongly agree. The 22 items of the SLWAI (Part B) were divided into three types of anxiety, namely Cognitive Anxiety (CA) (items no. 7, 9, 13, 15, 20, 23, 26, 27), Somatic Anxiety (SA) (items no. 8, 12, 14, 17, 19, 21, 25) and Avoidance Anxiety (AA) (items no. 10, 11, 16, 18, 22, 24, 28). To gather qualitative data, respondents were asked to provide reasons for their choices for items no. 7 to 28 in the spaces provided in Part B.

3.3 Data Analysis

To measure students' usage and exposure to the English language at UMS, analysis of the SLWAI was based on Rahim's (2010) method. In her study, she assigned a numerical score to the variables studied, e.g. occupation and income. The numerical index scores were added up to determine the students' social class. The same method of analysis was also used by Trudgil (1974) in his study on language and social class in Norwich. The scores for each item in Part B were totaled to determine each respondent's level of

writing anxiety. The scores were then divided into two categories, namely high and low, in order to indicate the respondents' writing anxiety level. For data collected in Part A, the frequency count of each item was converted into a percentage for each respondent.

To determine the level of Cognitive Anxiety (CA) it was necessary to calculate the range of scores (based on Rahim's (2010) method of analysis). The total cumulative score, which was based on eight items (items no. 7, 9, 13, 15, 20, 23, 26, 27), ranges from 8 (minimum) to 40 (maximum). Based on this range of score for each category, it is determined that the level of CA of the students is low if they score 8.0 to 23.0, and high if they score 24.0 to 40.0 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Range of Scores for Anxiety Level.

Types of Anxiety	Level and Score	
	High	Low
Cognitive Anxiety (CA)	24.0 – 40.0	8.0 – 23.0
Somatic Anxiety (SA)	22.0 – 35.0	7.0 – 21.0
Avoidance Anxiety (AA)	22.0 – 35.0	7.0 – 21.0

The same analysis was also used to determine the level of Somatic Anxiety (SA) (items no. 8, 12, 14, 17, 19, 21, 25) and Avoidance Anxiety (AA) (items no. 10, 11, 16, 18, 22, 24, 28) of the respondents. There are seven items describing SA and AA respectively. The scores appointed for each variant in items no. 8, 12, 14, 17, 19, 21, 25 and items no. 10, 11, 16, 18, 22, 24, 28 of the questionnaire were accumulated to determine the level of SA and AA respectively. It is determined that the respondents' SA and AA was as low (if they scored 7.0 to 21.0) and high if they scored 22.0 to 35.0 (see Table 2).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondents' Demographic Information

It is found that almost 99.9 percent of the respondents used Malay at home as this is the main language of communication (Malay language is also a common mode of communication by the Sabahan). Only six of the respondents used English with their friends. In terms of exposure to English, more than half of the students were exposed to the language via reading materials. However, these respondents only read English text and reference books. The other 40 percent of the respondents did not read English reading materials. In contrast, more than 90 percent of the respondents watched English language programs, while only seven percent gave a negative response. These results show that the respondents receive enough exposure to the English language (via reading material and TV programs) despite not using English with their family and friends.

4.2 Respondents' Anxiety Level

The data show that the respondents showed different levels of anxiety types when it comes to writing. The respondents displayed a high CA compared to SA and AA. About 87 percent of the respondents have high CA. Only 13 percent of the respondents have low CA as shown in Table 3. This was followed by SA whereby more than 50 percent of the respondents have high SA. About 40 percent of the respondents have low SA. The findings also show that nearly 60 percent of the respondents have low AA, whereas the other 43 percent of the respondents have high AA. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. Level of Anxiety.

Types of Anxiety	Category	No of Respondents and % (N=30)	Range of Scores
Cognitive Anxiety (CA)	High	26 (87)	23 - 26
	Low	4 (13)	20 - 22
Somatic Anxiety (SA)	High	18 (60)	11 - 22
	Low	12 (40)	23 - 33
Avoidance Anxiety (AA)	High	13 (43)	23 - 32
	Low	17 (57)	13 - 22

The above findings show that almost 90 percent of the respondents have high CA (n=26). As defined by Cheng (2002), students' CA is associated with external factors such as peer or teacher evaluation of their writing. Clearly, respondents worried that their writing would be laughed at by readers, and from the responses gathered, they noted that their essay grades correlate with the level of effort invested in writing the essays: a poor grade, such as C or C-, indicates insufficient effort while a good grade, such as B+ or A, indicates sufficient effort. According to the respondents' feedback, which was based on the qualitative data obtained in Part B of the questionnaire, this would influence the lecturers' perceptions as almost 50 percent of them noted that they may be considered lazy, and this may lead to their lower achievement of in their grades. The students felt that the lecturers would think that the poor grades they obtained for the essay writing tasks were due to their laziness. Based on this finding, it is important to create a friendly atmosphere in a writing class for students to feel relax around their teachers and peers (Jebreil et al., 2015) so that their fear of being laughed at and fear of being criticized by their teachers will decrease.

In addition, peer perceptions are also an important factor as negative peer perceptions affect the respondents' confidence levels. Peers' comments, both verbal and non-verbal, are considered to embarrass them and lower their self-esteem (Aragão, 2011). The anxiety arises from the potential negative comments received from their peers, and the respondents also felt ashamed to voice out or share their opinions verbally with their classmates. For these respondents, perceptions and comments from lecturers and peers play a significant role in determining their level of writing anxiety, which in this case, is CA. Conversely, four respondents are noted to have experienced low CA (see Table 3). According to these respondents, the feedback they received from lecturers and peers helps them to improve their writing. Their lecturers' or peers' perceptions of them have little effects on the quality of their writings and their anticipated grades. They believed that their grades are solely based on the quality of their work, and that assessment is not based on the perceived effort to produce it. This finding conforms to Hassan's (2001) findings, which showed that students with low writing anxiety are able to write due to their high self-esteem. It validates the idea that writing anxiety can also have facilitative effect on students' writing performance.

Next, the findings also illustrate that about 60 percent of the respondents have high SA (see Table 3). SA focuses more on students' physiological conditions (Cheng, 2004). When respondents' SA is high, they sweat, tremble and have palpitations. They also suffer from mental blocks and muscle spasms, as well as feeling disoriented and panic stricken. All these symptoms are due to poor command of the language. Based on the qualitative data gathered, whenever the respondents have trouble in finding the right vocabulary or in building a sentence or sentences, or applying the correct tenses for the writings, they experience the feelings and sensations described above. They do not know what to write because they do not have vocabulary in English that they can use to express themselves in writing. Students' inability to apply correct grammatical rules, and limited vocabulary of the language, which in this case, English, have inhibited them from writing (Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015). Nevertheless, the remaining 40 percent of the respondents did not panic, tremble, sweat or feel disoriented although they had difficulty in writing English essays (see Table 3). For them, these difficulties are 'normal'. They know that they are not fluent in the

language, incapable of expressing themselves verbally nor in writing. Despite their weaknesses in the language, they are still determined to master the language. Thus, they do not show any physiological conditions related to their writing difficulties. All these due to their low level of English writing anxiety.

Although the findings show that the respondents have high levels of both CA and SA, they did not attempt to avoid the task of essay writing. Based on the findings, more than 50 percent of the respondents have low AA (see Table 3). Regardless of their weaknesses in the language, they do not avoid writing because for these respondents, trying is better than quitting. "Practice makes perfect" is what they believe in. They realized that if they keep on practicing writing essays in English, they will eventually master the task. According to the respondents, guidance and feedback from lecturers are the key factors that will help them to learn from their mistakes and to improve their writing. These respondents are still determined to improve their writing skill although they have high levels of CA and AA. This finding shows that anxiety can also have facilitative effect on students' readiness to write.

On the contrary, the remaining 43 percent of the respondents have high AA. Generally, the respondents noted that their anxiety arise due to their low competence in conventions of writing, mainly in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction. Their inhibition leaves a negative impact on their interest in writing in English. As a result, they try to avoid writing as much as possible because despite the many years of learning the language, they are still unable to write essays in English. This frustrates them. This finding agrees with Cheng's (2002) and Daud et al. (2005) findings that showed students with high writing anxiety prefer not to take writing courses because they focus heavily on writing activities that require adept vocabulary knowledge and language skills. In addition, these students stated that speaking is much more important than writing, as their communication skills will be evaluated during interviews. As such, for these students, the ability to speak in English - rather than the ability to write - is important as it offers the assurance of a securing a job. This is the major factor that contributes to their high AA.

These various manifestations of anxiety can impede students from expressing themselves in both written and spoken English (debilitative anxiety), and they can also encourage students to express themselves in English, orally and in writing (facilitative anxiety). Scovel (1978) explained that facilitative and debilitative anxiety can operate well together. For example, in this study, respondents with high CA, who considered their lecturers and peers as determinants for their success in getting good grades for writing, and respondents with high SA (those who experienced physiological conditions such as trembling, sweating and panic) do not avoid writing tasks. They may feel nervous, worried or panic stricken, but that does not influence their belief that the more they write the better they will become. The study also shows that anxiety can be debilitating. When respondents with high AA avoid writing tasks, it is because in their opinion, it is speaking skills that will guarantee them a job eventually, and not writing skills. For them, writing is not important because at the end of the day, it is their speaking skill that will be evaluated, and not their writing skills. All these findings support Scovel's statement which claims that "in spite of the debilitative effect of anxiety, it can be facilitative too" (Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012, p. 2580).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings illustrate that the level of students' cognitive, somatic and avoidance anxiety has affected students' intention to do writing tasks in English. The levels determine the severity of the effects on students' physiology, which in the end, prevent them from doing the writing task in English. This is clearly supported when students with high cognitive and somatic anxiety chose not to do the writing task in English due to the perceived perceptions of their writing by others and the physiological effects such as sweating, trembling and disorientation. Furthermore, students with high avoidance anxiety chose not to do the writing task in English because they do not think writing skills are as important as speaking skills. For these students, the ability to speak in English is more essential than writing because it will help them in securing a job. In contrast, students with low levels of cognitive, somatic and avoidance anxiety believe that more writing practice will help to improve their writing skills in the English language.

The findings also show that writing anxiety can have either a facilitating or debilitating effect on students' willingness to do writing tasks in the English language. Therefore, it is recommended that lecturers teaching writing course need to create more relaxing and less stressful atmosphere in the

classroom. It is found that teachers' style of teaching and interaction with students influence students' anxiety level, and this has significant effects on students' participation in class (Cao, 2011; Young, 1991). By reacting 'coercively' in class, teachers create tension in the classroom (Furrer, Skinner & Pitzer, 2014). One of the ways to decrease this pressure, lecturers can have ice-breaking sessions at the beginning of the class. This will reduce the tension felt in the classroom by getting to know the students in the class, and the lecturers should take up the role of a facilitator in assisting students so that students become more relaxed and less pressured. This is shown in Bekleyen's study (2004), where she found that teachers' positive attitude such as being kind, energetic and a good listener to students' problems in writing, will provide a relaxing and tension-free classroom atmosphere. This perhaps will diminish their level of anxiety towards writing.

In addition, a collaborative learning strategy such as collaborative writing task can be introduced in class. Collaborative learning (CL) affects language learning significantly (Batstone, 2010; Van de Branden, Bygate & Norris, 2009). Studies have shown that students improve their writing competence (Brown, 2008) and linguistic knowledge development (Swain, 2010) when they collaborate. Currently, in PPIB, the essay writing tasks in the English writing class are done individually. It is about time that the writing pedagogy employed in a writing class be changed to CL. A CL strategy can encourage students to learn more about writing through their peers by talking and listening to them, and through tasks such as CW, any writing-related-problems faced by them can highly likely be solved (Swain, 2010; Yong, 2006). Compared to writing individually, students' written ability improves with CW; new knowledge are discovered while engaging with one another and they become more creative (Yong, 2006), and participate more in language learning activities (Biria & Jafari, 2013). Students can share ideas and work together to write and edit their essay before submission (Storch, 2011). CW creates a relaxing and friendly atmosphere in the classroom, and as students overcome the hurdles in writing, they will slowly become more ready to participate in any writing tasks given to them because their anxiety level has decreased, and they have the confidence to write due to the stress-free environment in the classroom.

Although this study points the impact on the writing anxiety on students' readiness to write, it should be noted that this study involved a small number of participants within a specific setting. It is therefore important for more studies to be conducted or a larger sample to be used to investigate the robustness of the findings. A correlational investigation among the three types of study and classroom practices on the effective methods to address anxiety in writing should also be an area to be explored further to maximize the involvement of students in writing task to produce more proficient students.

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