

WRITING ANXIETY: A CASE STUDY OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The ability to write in English language is essential for postgraduate students in the Department of English. Therefore, this study assesses the level of writing anxiety amongst students in a public university in Malaysia. This study adopts Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). The SLWAI have proven to have a high internal consistency. The participants for this research were 20 postgraduate students. This study was conducted when the students were writing a conference proceeding for their assessment. The reliability of the instrument was carried out and the result shows a strong reliability of .847. The analysis and its elucidations show that most of the students have moderate anxiety. 60% of the students have moderate anxiety, 10% have high anxiety and 30% have low anxiety. On the preponderance of the types of anxiety, somatic anxiety has the highest mean. The study, therefore, concludes that most of the students exhibit physiological symptoms such as nervousness, sweat, and tension when writing in English.

Keywords: Writing anxiety, Postgraduate students, Applied Linguistics, SLWAI

Introduction

English Language plays a vital role in many countries in the world. According to Lyons (2017), "Out of the world's approximately [7.5 billion](#) inhabitants, 1.5 billion speak English — that's 20% of the Earth's population". This language has been adopted by many institutions all around the world as a language of instruction for most or some of their courses. Importantly, students in the Department of English anywhere in the world are expected to have a good grasp of the English language in order to excel in their studies. Consequently, postgraduate students in the Department of English are required to write assignments, research papers, dissertations and to make presentations in English. However, this researcher have observed that a number of students still have difficulties in their command of the English language (Wahyuni&Umam, 2017). As essential as writing in English is to these set of students, they become anxious while writing in English (Kara, 2013). In line with this, Baez (2005), Hilleson (1996) and Zhang (2001) discovered that students experience considerable amount of anxiety when they perform activities that require productive skills. Also, Horwitz & Cope (1986), in their study, point out the detrimental effects of writing anxiety on students.

Writing anxiety is a pessimistic feeling that one has about writing. According to Thompson (1980), writing anxiety is "a fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write". As mentioned earlier, the ability to write in English language is essential for postgraduate students in the Department of English. However, writing generates higher anxiety amongst students (Aydin, 2008). According to Cheng (2004), writing anxiety is also

related to students' poor performances on English writing exams and in jobs requiring writing. Writing anxiety can be assessed by using two types of questionnaires: Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) and Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). The former was proposed by Daly and Miller (1975) to measure writing anxiety of learners. However, this test was originally developed with reference to first language learners (Atay& Kurt, 2006; Cheng 2004; Erkan&Saban, 2011). The latter was developed by Cheng (2004) and has been widely used to estimate the degree of writing anxiety perceived by ESL and EFL learners. Many research studies on writing anxiety report that SLWAI has good internal consistency (Atay& Kurt, 2006; Cheng, 2004; Erkan&Saban, 2011; Oztürk&ÇeÇen, 2007). Using Cheng's (2004) SLWAI, this study seeks to account for writing anxiety amongst postgraduate students in a public university in Malaysia while they were writing a conference proceeding in English by answering the following questions:

1. What is the level of anxiety of the students?
2. Do the students possess the different types of writing anxiety?
3. What is the most prevalent type of writing anxiety amongst the students?

Literature Review

Several studies have been carried out to assess writing anxiety amongst students and even teachers. In an L2 writing anxiety study, Hassan (2001) carried out a study using 182 third year students enrolled in the English Department in Egypt. He prepared and administered an English Writing Apprehension Questionnaire (EWAQ) and a Foreign Language Self-Esteem Scale (FLSES) to measure writing anxiety and self-esteem respectively. He also asked participants to complete a 40-minute composition to examine writing quantity and quality. Raters trained by the researcher evaluated the compositions for quality, and word count was tallied to examine quantity. The results show that a significant negative relationship exists between writing apprehension and self-esteem. Students with low apprehension showed a higher level of self-esteem while students with high apprehension exhibited a lower self-esteem.

Hassan (2001) also concluded that students with low self-esteem and with low apprehension scored less than their counterparts on the writing task. Hassan suggested that reducing student writing anxiety by changing the context of foreign language learning is the most important task for teachers to try to achieve. Moreover, he suggested that teacher evaluation should be reduced and supplemented with peer or self-evaluation when applicable. In this way, students would be more involved in communicative writing tasks.

Also, Atay& Kurt (2006) carried out a study on English as Second Language prospective teachers (PTs). 85 Turkish prospective teachers (PTs) of English participated in this study. Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory and open-ended questions were used for the study. Results of the SLWAI showed that more than half of the participating PTs had high or average writing anxiety. PTs' responses to the open-ended questionnaire indicated that those with high and average anxiety had difficulties in organizing their thoughts and producing ideas while writing in L2. In addition, PTs cited university instructors and their past L2 writing experiences as the major factors affecting their attitudes towards L2 writing, and discussed the psychological and physiological reactions they had during the writing process. Finally, the responses of the PTs revealed that their writing experiences may affect their future

teaching practices. If teachers of the English Language are anxious about writing in English, how much more the students?

In line with Atay and Kurt's study, Öztürk&ÇeÇen (2007) examined the effects of portfolio keeping on writing anxiety of English as Foreign Language (EFL) students. Data were gathered by means of the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), a background questionnaire and two reflective sessions. Findings of the study revealed that portfolio keeping is beneficial in terms of overcoming writing anxiety. The results also indicated that the experience with portfolios may affect the participants' future teaching practices positively. The study, therefore suggests that portfolio keeping deserves to be taken into consideration in the programme of Foreign Language Education Departments.

Since teachers get anxious when they write in English, students, undoubtedly, will exhibit some level of anxiety. In explaining anxiety levels, Karakaya&Ülper (2011) investigated what variables explain anxiety levels of students to what extent and, whether writing anxiety levels of prospective teachers significantly varied in terms of various variables. The study consisted of 202 junior students from Departments of Classroom Teaching, Elementary School Mathematics Teaching and Turkish Language Teaching at a Turkish university in the spring term of 2008-2009 academic year. The data were collected using Writing Anxiety Scale which was developed by the authors to measure writing anxiety levels of students and personal forms to describe personal traits of the students. The development of a scale by these researchers is a contribution to the literature. The data were analyzed by SPSS 13.00 and LISREL 8.70 package programs. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to confirm the construct obtained by exploratory factor analysis. There were not statistically significant correlations between writing anxiety levels of university students and gender and educational background of parents. As a result of stepwise regression analysis, used to determine the predictive variables of writing anxiety levels in terms of personal traits, it was seen that out-of-school writing practice, in-class writing activities by 1-8 grade teachers, amount of time spent watching television, and gender were significant predictive variables and those variables explained only 9.5% of writing anxiety.

Also, Adeoye-Agboola and Evans (2015) examined the relationship between anxiety and academic Performance of postgraduate international students in a British University. Using a cross-sectional questionnaire survey, a purposive sampling of 105 postgraduate international students (66 male and 39 female) was done. They submit that anxiety is significantly correlated to academic performance. In addition to this, they identified the types of anxiety affecting the participants which include workload, choice of coping with stress, future prospect, and change in the system of education. These showed a significant relationship when cross-tabulated with gender and ethnicity. In the aspect of difficulties in focusing on their studies, more than 50% disagree showing a significant relationship when compared with gender. To these researchers, "anxiety is seen as a tool to explain academic performance". Hence, they opine that the level of anxiety of students is considered to make learning experience more fulfilling.

The previous researches have focused on the effect of writing anxiety on writing, the teacher's role on students' attitudes toward writing, and variables that explain anxiety levels. Despite the various studies carried out on writing anxiety with regards to the English Language, there

seems to be the need for more studies to be done on writing anxiety. This is so because of the widespread use of the English Language and especially, its importance for postgraduate students carrying out their research in English. Therefore, this study seeks to assess the level of writing anxiety amongst the students and the most prevalent type of anxiety amongst them. After examining some of the studies carried out on writing anxiety, we would now outline the types of writing anxiety as proposed by Cheng (2004). Writing anxiety, according to Cheng (2004) can be grouped into three. They are cognitive Anxiety, somatic Anxiety and avoidance Anxiety.

Cognitive Anxiety

Cognitive Anxiety (CA), according to Cheng (2004), is the cognitive part of experiencing anxiety, which refers to concern about others' perceptions, preoccupation with performance, and negative expectations. This is the mental component, which is characterized by negative expectations about success or self-evaluation, negative self-talk, worries about performance, images of failure, inability to concentrate, and disrupted attention (Jarvis, 2002)

Somatic Anxiety

Somatic Anxiety (SA) refers to the way one perceives one's nervousness, tension, and other physiological effects resulting from the anxiety experience (Cheng, 2004). It is the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as butterflies in the stomach. It is also known as somatization (Gelenberg, 2000). It is commonly contrasted with *cognitive anxiety*, which is the mental manifestations of anxiety, or the specific thought processes that occur during anxiety, such as concern or worry. These different components of anxiety are especially studied in sports psychology,^[3] specifically relating to how the anxiety symptoms affect athletic performance. According to Gelenberg (2000), "Symptoms typically associated with somatization of anxiety and other psychiatric disorders include abdominal pain, dyspepsia, chest pain, fatigue, dizziness, insomnia, and headache." These symptoms can either happen alone or multiple can happen at once.

Avoidance Anxiety

Avoidance Anxiety (AA) is the behavioral aspect of avoiding to write whenever possible (Cheng, 2004). Avoidance behaviors are any actions a person takes to escape from difficult thoughts and feelings. These behaviors can occur in many different ways and may include actions that a person does or does not do. People with panic disorder often take on avoidance behaviors to sidestep fearful thoughts, feelings of dread, and overall anxiety-related symptoms.

Research Design

The research design will focus on the sample size, criteria for selection, method of sampling, the Instrument used in the study and the limitations of the study.

Sample size

The participants in the present study were postgraduate students who were studying in their first-year program of Applied Linguistics at a Public University in Malaysia. The students would have used English in their previous undergraduate studies before enrolling for a postgraduate degree in Applied Linguistics.

Criteria of Selection

The participants were selected because at the time of the research they were writing a conference proceeding for an international conference. The researchers decided to measure the level of their anxiety during the process of this writing.

Method of sampling

The sampling method used was convenience sampling. This is because of the time constraint during the study. The research had to be done within a very limited time, therefore, the choice of this method.

Instrument

The instrument used in the study was the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) as proposed by Cheng (2004) to assess the degree of writing anxiety individuals feel when writing in a second language. The SLWAI consists of twenty-two (22) items, all of which are answered on a five-point Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (see appendix). Many studies have reported the effectiveness of this questionnaire in terms of reliability and validity (Atay& Kurt, 2006; Cheng, 2004; Öztürk&ÇeÇen, 2007; Guo& Fan, 2009) and can be used to determine writing anxiety levels perceived by either ESL or EFL learners (Cheng, 2004; Guo& Fan, 2009). Consequently, the SLWAI was employed in the current study to establish the level of anxiety and the most prevalent type of writing anxiety amongst the students.

Limitations of the Study

The study focuses on the level of writing anxiety and the most prevalent writing anxiety amongst the students. Other variables, such as age, gender, and cultural background of the students were not taken into account. Also, the causes of their writing anxiety are not included in this study.

Results and Discussion

This section of the study will include the results obtained in the study and its discussion. Attention will be on the reliability, the item statistics, the level of anxiety and the t-test conducted for the three types of anxiety: cognitive, somatic and avoidance. The table shows that reliability test carried out for the study. This shows the number of cases analyzed and the reliability statistics obtained for the instrument. Despite the fact that several writers have submitted that SLWAI is reliable, there was the need to carry out the reliability test because this study is done on a different set of participants.

Table 1: Reliability

Case Processing Summary			
		N	%
Cases	Valid	20	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	20	100.0

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.847	22

The result shows that this test is reliable. A score of .847 shows a good reliability.

The level of writing anxiety of the participants was determined, as in the study of Atay and Kurt (2006), by calculating the mean score of the scale. The scale has 22 items and the mean score can range from 22 to 110. Therefore, the participants having a total score lower than or equal to 58 were described as having low anxiety, those having a total score higher than or equal to 83 as having high anxiety, and the ones who have a total score between 58 and 83 were considered to have moderate anxiety. The table below shows the level of anxiety of the students and the percentage of each of the levels. This answers the first research question, “What is the level of anxiety of the students?”

Table 2: Level of Anxiety

Level	N	Percentage (%)
Low Anxiety	6	30%
Moderate Anxiety	12	60%
High Anxiety	2	10%
Total	20	100%

The participants of the study were twenty (20) Applied Linguistics postgraduate students who were writing a conference proceeding at the time of the study. The results of the study reveal that 60% (n: 12) of the participants have moderate anxiety about writing in English. 30% have low anxiety and only 10% have high anxiety. This result is identical with Atay and Kurt (2006), Kara (2013), and Kirmızı and Kirmızı’s (2015) studies. Most students exhibit moderate anxiety when writing.

Also, the item statistics was carried out. Each item’s mean was determined as can be seen in the table below.

Table 3: Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Item1	2.5500	1.09904	20
Item2	3.1500	1.26803	20
Item3	3.4500	1.35627	20
Item4	2.1000	1.02084	20
Item5	2.9000	1.20961	20
Item6	2.8500	1.34849	20
Item7	3.1000	1.16529	20
Item8	3.1500	1.30888	20
Item9	3.4500	1.27630	20
Item10	2.7000	1.45458	20
Item11	3.4000	1.09545	20
Item12	2.8000	1.15166	20
Item13	3.0500	1.27630	20
Item14	3.0000	1.25656	20
Item15	2.7000	1.03110	20
Item16	2.4000	1.18766	20

Item17	3.2500	1.11803	20
Item18	2.3500	.87509	20
Item19	3.6000	1.04630	20
Item20	2.8500	1.08942	20
Item21	3.0500	1.23438	20
Item22	2.4000	.88258	20

After the item statistics was carried out, it became necessary to group each item under the types of anxiety in order to determine the type of anxiety that has the highest mean. T-test was conducted for each of the levels of writing anxiety. The table below shows the mean for each of the types of anxiety.

Table 4: Types of Anxiety and their mean

Types	Mean	Std. Error Mean
Cognitive	3.0875	.09566
Somatic	3.1286	.10231
Avoidance	2.5214	.09589

Somatic anxiety has the highest mean (3.1286). This shows that most of the students have physiological symptoms such as nervousness, sweat, and tension. The Somatic anxiety of the students when they are writing English compositions are very diverse, for example I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint, My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition, I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure, My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint, I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint, I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions, and I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.

This result is similar to what Min and Rahmat (2014) found in their study. However, it is different from the results of Olanezhad M. (2015) and Zhang (2011). In their finding, Cognitive anxiety came as the most dominant type. Olanezhad (2015) assert thus, "Cognitive anxiety is the main type of writing anxiety" and Zhang (2011) submits thus, "The most common type of ESL writing anxiety is Cognitive Anxiety". This difference may be as a result of the different respondents used for the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study revealed that most of the students have moderate anxiety and they experience somatic anxiety more. The results show that cognitive anxiety is also experienced by some of the students and avoidance anxiety that has the lowest mean is also experienced by the students. These findings, as mentioned earlier, is not in line with some studies carried out on writing anxieties. These studies found that cognitive anxiety is experienced more by the students. However, this study identifies somatic anxiety as being preponderant amongst the students. Since, this study concentrated on the level of anxiety and the most preponderant

anxiety amongst the students, it is recommended that future studies take into account the age, gender and cultural backgrounds of the respondents.

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