

A Study on Writing Anxiety of EFL Learners in Senior High Schools : A Case of Wenjiang No.2 Middle School

Zerun Yang

China West Normal University, Nanchong city, China

Abstract

As a language output skill, writing is the focus and difficulty in English learning, so it has always attracted the attention of researchers. However, there is not much research on English writing anxiety of high school students. This paper uses questionnaires to survey 80 students in grade one in Wenjiang No. 2 Middle School in Chengdu to probe into two questions: (1) What is the general degree of writing anxiety of Chinese senior high school students? (2) Are there any differences in the degree of English writing anxiety between the high-level students and low-level students? According to the analysis of data, senior high school students exhibit a moderate degree of English writing anxiety, with respectively the highest being avoidance behavior and the lowest somatic anxiety among three dimensions, and high-level students experience lower English writing anxiety than low-level ones. Based on the analysis and discussion of the two questions above, this paper puts forward suggestions on alleviating English writing anxiety of high school students and points out the limitations of the research and the direction of future research.

Keywords

English writing anxiety; high-level students; low-level students.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, English is becoming an international language for people to communicate in. To communicate in English mainly comes in two forms: speaking and writing, the latter more complex and formal than the former. English writing is a distinctive testimony to the mastery of the language of a student. In my experience, faced with writing assignments, some high school students often choose to translate Chinese directly and feel that they do not have enough knowledge to complete the given task. At the same time, they also lack confidence in their writing ability and they are afraid of the evaluation of teachers and classmates. Accordingly, these students are increasingly reluctant to write.

Taking the discussion above into account, this study intends to take high school students as the research object to find out the current situation of writing anxiety of senior high school students in China and the differences in anxiety levels of students in different levels. Through this study, senior high school English teachers and students can improve their understanding of writing anxiety and find their own shortcomings. In order to mitigate students' writing anxiety and improve their English writing performance, some strategies are put forward.

The whole thesis consists of five parts. Part 1 introduces the background of the present research, the purpose and significance of the study. Part 2 is the literature review. The main points are showed as followings: the definitions of writing anxiety and the research on writing anxiety at home and abroad. Part 3 provides a description about the research methodology which consists of research questions, research subjects, research instruments, data collection and data analysis. Part 4 analyzes the writing anxiety of senior high school English learners on the basis of questionnaire data analysis, and compares the differences of writing anxiety levels of senior

high school English learners at different levels. Part 5 makes a conclusion of this research which includes the major finding, the pedagogical implication, the limitation as well as the suggestion for further study.

2. Literature Review

The literature review is divided into three parts. First, the author introduces the previous definitions of writing anxiety and puts forward the definition in this study. Then, the previous studies of foreign language writing anxiety at home and abroad are introduced. Finally, the author summarizes the literature review.

2.1. Definition of Writing Anxiety

Foreign Language learning anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system, which often shows in the form of negative feelings of having no confidence in oneself, nervousness and worrying. After the development of the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test (1975), more and more researchers have devoted to the systematic study of writing anxiety. Writing Anxiety is coined by Daly and Miller (1975). It refers to the situation and subject-specific individual difference concerned with people's general tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to demand writing accompanied by some amount of evaluation (Daly, 1977). This is the most widely adopted definition of writing apprehension and is followed in this thesis. Writing anxiety involves anxiety associated with writing situations, a tendency to avoid such situations, frustration and low productivity while writing. Writing anxiety belongs to the category of situation-specific anxiety to most researchers. Tompson (1989) defined English writing anxiety as a "fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write". Bloom (1980) define writing anxiety as "a combination of feeling, beliefs, or behaviors that interfere with a person's ability to start, work on, or finish a given writing task that he or she is intellectually capable of doing". Cheng (2004) thought that writing apprehension involved what kind of avoidance approach the learners would take on their thoughts, beliefs and behaviors when they had a poor performance in the English writing.

In this study, English writing anxiety is regarded as a kind of emotion having a negative influence on a writer's performance. It appears in different types and is caused by different factors.

2.2. Previous Studies of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety at Home

The study of foreign language writing anxiety in China began in the 21st century. Zhou Baoguo and Tang Junjun (2010) explored the impact of foreign language writing anxiety on the writing process. They found that there was a negative correlation between second language writing anxiety and the quality or level of second language writing, which was also related to the use of mother tongue in the writing process. Li Hang (2015) and Chen Liyuan (2019) found that writing anxiety is an important factor affecting writing performance, which is negatively correlated with writing performance. For the relevant applied research, Wu Ronghui and He Gaoda (2014) discussed the application effect of cooperative learning in College English writing teaching, and found that cooperative learning can overcome students' writing difficulties and anxiety, improve students' language use skills and writing strategy ability, and help improve their writing level. In the correlation study, Li Hang and Liu Ruide (2013), Xu Lingling (2018) and Cui Ruining (2019) investigated the relationship between students' writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy, investigated the differences of students' writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy at different writing levels, and summarized the enlightenment of the research results on English teaching. The experimental teaching research on writing anxiety was conducted by Wu Yuhong and Gu Weixing (2011) through cooperative learning. Through the experiment of

cooperative learning in English writing teaching, the relationship between cooperative learning and English writing anxiety is studied. The results show that cooperative learning has a positive effect on reducing writing anxiety, which can effectively reduce the overall anxiety, evaluation anxiety and body anxiety of Non-English Major College Students in English writing, but it can reduce the overall anxiety, evaluation anxiety and body anxiety of Non-English Major College Students in English writing avoidance and self-confidence anxiety had no significant effect.

2.3. Previous Studies of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Abroad

Foreign Studies on foreign language writing anxiety began in the 1970s. Daly and Miller (1975) put forward writing anxiety for the first time. It refers to a situation and subject-specific individual diversity concerned with people's general tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to demand writing accompanied by some amount of evaluation (Daly, 1977). Many researchers have tried to explore the impact of anxiety writing on language learners by writing courses and effective solutions to this problem (Rollinson, 2015). They designed Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) to measure the comprehension of writing. Y-S Cheng (2004) designed the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLAWAI), a new scale with high reliability and efficiency. Some scholars have conducted a study on the correlation between writing anxiety and writing performance, and many people have come to the conclusion that writing anxiety has a negative impact on writing performance. For example, Daly (1977), Bloom (1980), Powell (1984) and Rahimi and Zhang (2018) all think that the writing performance of high anxiety learners is lower, and writing anxiety and writing performance are significantly negatively correlated. Especially, Sabti (2019) did the research in Iraqi and conducted the same results. For the study of writing anxiety and individual factors, Masny and Foxall (1922) and Pajares (2007) all studied from the perspective of gender factors, but the former conclusion is that girls are more likely to have writing anxiety than boys, while the latter conclusion is the opposite. Daly and Miller (1975) studied the relationship between learning expectation and writing anxiety. They believed that high anxiety students had lower learning expectation and tended to avoid writing. Latif (2007) makes a more comprehensive analysis of the causes of writing anxiety, and summarizes a series of reasons for English writing anxiety: lack of language knowledge, low self-evaluation, low perception of writing and low self-efficacy. Lindy (2011) conducted a questionnaire survey on 738 college students' writing anxiety and self-efficacy. He also made a concrete analysis of the factors affecting students and established the relevant measurement model.

2.4. Summary

To sum up, the study of writing anxiety in foreign countries started far earlier than that in China, and the scope of research is relatively wide, from measurement to relevance, causes and other aspects. In recent years, the field has made considerable progress in the quality and quantity of relevant research, and the scope of research involved has gradually expanded, in both theory and practice. Nevertheless, the research gap is that most of the research is still concentrated on college students, and there is little research on writing anxiety in junior and senior high school. Consequently, teenagers' English writing anxiety is still a problem worth exploring, and the future research should be expanded.

3. Methodology

In this part, the methodology which is the soul of a research study will be described from five aspects: research questions, subjects, instruments, data collection and data analysis.

3.1. Research Questions

The thesis aims to find out the current situation of writing anxiety of senior high school students in China and the differences in anxiety levels of students at different levels, so the thesis focuses on answering the following questions:

- (1) What is the general degree of writing anxiety among Chinese senior high school's students?
- (2) Are there any differences in the degree of English writing anxiety between the high-level students and the low-level students?

3.2. Participants

The participants are the students respectively chosen from grade one of high school in Wenjiang No.2 Middle School. The total number of population sample is 80 and is selected from two classes which are taught by the same teacher. The whole process of choosing subjects can be divided into two steps. Firstly, 80 subjects will be selected from two classes taught by the same teacher, which means that the students can receive the same education. Secondly, according to the scores of last final examination, two groups will be divided into the high-level students (group A) and the low-level students (group B). And the scores of high-level students are above 110 while the scores of low-level students are below 90 (see in table 1). In order to ensure the reliability of this study, the sample was chosen randomly.

Table 1 Division principle of the two groups

	Score (150)	Number
The high-level students (A)	≥ 110	31
The low-level students (B)	≤ 90	29

3.3. Instrument

The English writing Anxiety questionnaire used in this study includes two parts. The first part is about participant's personal information including their name, class and the scores in last final exam. The second part is the English Writing Anxiety Questionnaire. However, Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory will be modified slightly and it makes reference to Guo Yan & Qin Xiaoqing's (2010) version of the SLWAI (see Appendix 1).

All the items are translated into Chinese in order to facilitate the subjects to understand and complete this questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 22 items, all of which are answered on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=either agree nor disagree; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree). Among these 22 items, items 1, 4, 7, 17, 18, 21, 22 are negatively worded and required reverse scoring before being summed up to the total scores. The total scores of these 22 items represent anxious value ranging from 22 to 110 scores. The higher the scores obtained, the higher the writing anxiety is.

The writing anxiety questionnaire is divided into three parts: Somatic anxiety, Cognitive anxiety and Avoidance behavior. Somatic anxiety is concerned with the increased physiological arousal (Items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15 and 19). The Avoidance behavior is made up by items (Items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18 and 22). Cognitive anxiety is a subjective component that deals with perception of arousal, especially worry or fear of negative evaluation (Items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20 and 21). All the negatively worded items (Items 1, 4, 7, 17, 18, 21 and 22) are reversely scored. A student's score of writing anxiety is the total points of all the items. Therefore, the higher the score of SLWAI the participant gets, the more anxious he is.

Regarding the reliability of SLWAI, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the 22-item SLWAI was 0.90 in the Cheng's study (2004), and Cheng indicates that a scale whose coefficient alpha is between

0.8 and 0.9 could be used very well, between 0.7 and 0.80 could be considered to be reliable. According to the data, the questionnaire shows good reliability.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Before the questionnaire survey, the author explained the concept of English writing anxiety to the students, and introduced the methods of questionnaire answering to the high school students in detail. Then, 90 English writing anxiety questionnaires were distributed to the students. After the completion of the questionnaire, 85 questionnaires were collected, 80 of which were valid. Then, after sorting, screening and numbering all the collected questionnaires, the data was entered and sorted out by using the statistic software Society Philosophy Statistic System version 25.0 (SPSS 25.0), and the data was processed and analyzed in detail.

4. Results and Discussion

In this part, data collected from quantitative studies are presented, the two research questions are to be explicated with reference to results from statistic analysis. All the quantitative data are computed and analyzed by SPSS Software version 25.0.

4.1. The Degrees of Senior High School Students' Writing Anxiety

This study first makes a descriptive statistical analysis of the overall situation of senior high school students' English writing anxiety, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of senior high school students' writing anxiety level

	Number of questions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Somatic anxiety	7	2.76	0.726
Avoidance behavior	8	3.23	0.718
Cognitive anxiety	7	3.78	0.780
Total	22	3.03	0.738

In Table 2, the mean of students' general English writing anxiety for senior high school students is 3.03 and the standard deviation is 0.738. According to Oxford Burry-Stock (1995), in the five-point Likert format, the mean with an average value equal towards some situation with higher than 3.5 can point to high frequency or a positive attitude. Moderate frequency ranges from 2.4 to 3.5, whereas a mean under 2.4 can denote as low frequency or negative attitude (see in Table 3).

Table 3 Judgement of English Writing Anxiety based on Oxford

Frequency	Mean
High Frequency	3.6-5.0
Moderate Frequency	2.4-3.5
Low Frequency	0-2.4

The statistic shows that first-year students in senior high experience a moderate-level anxiety in English writing.

The general degree on avoidance behavior, cognitive anxiety and somatic anxiety of students in grade one is demonstrated in Table 2. The mean of somatic anxiety is 2.76 and a standard deviation is 0.726; the mean of cognitive anxiety is 3.78 while standard deviation is 0.780, and the mean of avoidance behavior is 3.32 while standard deviation is 0.718.

According to Oxford Burry-Stock (1995), the consequence in Table 2 demonstrated that first-year students in senior high have a moderate degree on somatic anxiety, a high level on cognitive anxiety as well as a moderate level on avoidance behavior. From the lowest to the highest, the rank is somatic anxiety, avoidance behavior, cognitive anxiety.

Based on the analysis above, it can be seen that the overall status of English writing anxiety of first-year students is in a moderate degree, and the mean of cognitive anxiety is the highest one. The results of the present study is different from the results of previous studies (Guo & Qin, 2010; Xu, 2018; Cui, 2019). In their studies, the avoidance behavior is the highest one. The reason for the difference may be that the participants of this survey are first-year students who are not very mature psychologically and not familiar with high school English writing. They are also more worried about negative evaluation from their teachers and classmates. While the previous studies mainly focus on students in grade two or three, or even college students, who are more mature than the first-year students.

4.2. The Comparison on General English Writing Anxiety between the High-level Students and the Low-level Students

In this section, the author will give a detailed description about the second research question regarding the comparison on general writing anxiety degree between the high-level students and the low-level students. The following data on this question are provided below and elaborately describe relevant findings.

In order to better compare the differences between the two groups, the author uses the Independent Samples *t*-test to analyze the data (see in Table 3). Table 3 juxtaposes the general degree of English writing anxiety for the high-level students with that of the low-level students. The general mean of the high-level students' writing anxiety is 2.41 and standard deviation is 0.718. However, the general mean is 3.27 and 0.803 for its standard deviation students in low level. According to Oxford Burry-Stock, the results manifest that students in the high level experience low level writing anxiety. In contrast, students in the low level experience high level English writing anxiety. From the above analysis, it is obvious that students in low level are more likely to experience the English writing anxiety than students in high level. Accordingly, the high-level students are defined as the low-anxiety students and the low-level students as the low-anxiety students.

Table 4 The Independent Samples *t*-test of English writing anxiety of students with different levels

	Number of questions	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig.
Somatic anxiety	7	A	2.25	0.652	-3.488	0.010
		B	3.15	0.757		
Avoidance behavior	8	A	2.60	0.718	-0.757	0.042
		B	3.68	0.801		

Cognitive anxiety	7	A	2.38	0.784	-2.571	0.013
		B	3.00	0.851		
Total	22	A	2.41	0.718	-2.610	0.011
		B	3.27	0.803		

In order to analyze the anxiety degree of high-anxiety students in somatic anxiety, avoidance behavior and cognitive anxiety in detail, this paper makes a statistical analysis on the writing anxiety degree of high-anxiety students. In Table 4, for high-anxiety students, the mean of somatic anxiety is 3.15 and the standard deviation is 0.757; the mean of cognitive anxiety is 3.00 and standard deviation is 0.851; and the mean of avoidance behavior is 3.68 and standard deviation is 0.801. In Table 4, the index of the results proves that the high-anxiety students exhibit a moderate degree in somatic anxiety as well as cognitive anxiety and a high degree in avoidance behavior.

In contrast, for low-anxiety students, the mean of somatic anxiety is 2.25 and standard deviation is 0.652; the mean of cognitive anxiety is 2.38 and standard deviation is 0.784, and the mean of avoidance behavior is 2.60 and standard deviation is 0.718. In Table 4, the index of the results proves that the low-anxiety students have a low degree on somatic anxiety as well as cognitive anxiety and a moderate degree on avoidance behavior.

As is shown in Table 4, $\text{Sig.}=0.011<0.05$, which exhibits that highly significant differences are observed on the general degree of writing anxiety between the high-level students and the low-level students as well as the three dimensions. According to the data above, it can be concluded that students in high anxiety have a comparatively higher level on general English writing anxiety than those in low anxiety. Moreover, both the general means of avoidance behavior of students in high anxiety and those in low anxiety are the highest among the three dimensions, which indicates that the high-level students and the low-level students all experience a relatively higher degree on avoidance behavior than the other two.

To conclude, for both the high-level students and the low-level students, the general mean of avoidance behavior is the highest, which means that the high-level students have a higher degree on avoidance behavior than other two dimensions. Results of the present study consist with results of previous studies (Guo & Qin 2010; Cui, 2019). It means that when facing an English writing task or in the actual writing process students are most inclined to avoid or escape the assignment.

5. Conclusion

In this part, the author summarizes the major findings of the research by analyzing the collected data. And some advice will be given about English writing teaching and learning as well as the limitation of this research.

As for the major findings, from the research above, we can conclude that the general degree of English writing anxiety of students is in moderate degree in senior high school and the highest degree is the avoidance behavior somatic anxiety is the lowest among three dimensions. Also, the statistic shows that grade one students in senior high school experience a moderate-level anxiety in English writing. The students in high level have lower English writing anxiety than those in low level, and they have highly significant differences on the general English writing anxiety. In regard to somatic anxiety, students in high level experience low degree on somatic anxiety, a moderate degree for students in low level; with respect to cognitive anxiety and

avoidance behavior, there exists a moderate degree in students in high level and those in low level. No matter students in high level or those in low level, the highest degree is avoidance behavior among somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety and avoidance behavior.

From the findings above, it is essential to figure out some effective strategies to reduce writing anxiety because writing anxiety has a negative impact on EFL students' writing. First, when students are writing in English, because of the unreasonable time allocation, they will write immediately when they see the topic, which will lead to many mistakes and obvious anxiety. Therefore, teachers should emphasize the importance of reasonable distribution of writing time to students in teaching, so that students can set a schedule before writing, and write with confidence. Second, students are worried that their writing will be judged by teachers and their essays will get a low grade. Therefore, teachers can encourage students to evaluate their classmates' compositions by means of group assessment, so as to relieve their writing anxiety. Third, the degree of writing anxiety of students with high anxiety and those with low anxiety varies greatly. Therefore, in the process of teaching, teachers should guide and teach differently. Teachers can set up different writing groups, and students with high anxiety and students with low anxiety can be interspersed into different groups. Each group will have students with different levels of anxiety. Teachers can ask students to review each other's essays and make progress together. Finally, English writing anxiety has an impact on students' psychology and physiology. Therefore, teachers can take a different way of talking, through psychological counseling to students, and as a friend to listen to the students' inner thoughts, guide students to learn self-suggestion, stay optimistic, full of confidence, help them avoid anxiety, and improve their English writing performance.

Due to the limitation of objective conditions, this paper only selected a high school in Chengdu as the survey sample, without data to be connected from others school to form a contrast group, which may make the research data have certain limitations, and thus affect the generality of the research results. In the future, research can be extended to different regions, schools and grades for specific in-depth comparative research. In addition, the research methods should be more various. In most of studies, researchers adopted the quantitative method, dairies, questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data. Therefore, in future study, researchers can combine other research methods to conduct studies, such as case analysis, interaction analysis, discourse analysis and think-aloud method.

References

- [1] Bloom, Z. L. (1980). Teaching anxious writers: implications and application of research. *Composition and Teaching* (2):47-60.
- [2] Cheng, S. Y. (2004). A measure of second language writing anxiety: scale development and preliminary validation. *Journal of Second Language Writing* (13): 313-335.
- [3] Daly, A. J. (1977). The effects of writing apprehension on message encoding. *Journalism Quarterly* (54):566-572.
- [4] Daly, A. J. & Miller, M. D. (1975). Apprehension of writing as a predictor of message intensity. *Journal of Psychology* (89):175-177.
- [5] Latif, A. M. (2007). Factors accounting for Egyptian EFL university students' negative writing affect. *Essex Graduate Student Papers in Language and Linguistics* (9):57-82.
- [6] Lindy, W. (2011). College English writing affect: Self-efficacy and anxiety. *System* (39):510-522.
- [7] Masny, D. & Foxall, J. (1922). Writing apprehension in L2. *Academic Achievement* (5):19.
- [8] Pajares, R.&Usher, E. L.&Johnson,M. J. (2007). Sources of writing efficacy beliefs of elementary. middle and high school students. *Research in the Teaching of English*(42):104-120.
- [9] Powell, B. (1984). A comparison of students' attitudes and success in writing. *Journal of Negro Education* (5):114-123.
- [10] Rahimi, M.& Zhang, L. (2018). Writing task complexity, students' motivational beliefs, anxiety and their writing production in English as a second language. *Reading and Writing* (8): 18.

- [11] Rollinson, P. (2015). Using peer feedback in the ESL writing class. *ELT Journal* (59): 23-30.
- [12] Sabti, A.; Md Rashid, S; Nimehchisalem, V&Darmi, R. (2019). The Impact of Writing Anxiety, Writing Achievement Motivation, and Writing Self-Efficacy on Writing Performance: A Correlational Study of Iraqi Tertiary EFL Learners. *SAGE Open* (9): 215-217.
- [13] Tompson, A. (1989). Writing expertise and second language proficiency. *Language Learning* (39): 81-141.