The Conundrum of Second Language Writing Anxiety Among ESL Students

Nurul Ain Hasni[1], Norasyikin Abdul Malik[2], Muhd Syahir Abdul Rani[3] and and Syaza Kamarudin[4]

[1,2]*Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus*
Perak, Malaysia
[3,4]*Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Tapah Campus*
Perak, Malaysia

Email: nurul719@uitm.edu.my[1], noras967@uitm.edu.my[2], muhdsyahir@uitm.edu.my[3], syazakama@uitm.edu.my[4]

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the main causes of ESL writing anxiety experienced by Malaysian university students. The students' attitudes towards writing were also examined, which are believed to influence their writing anxiety. This study employed a quantitative method using a questionnaire consisted of causes of writing anxiety. The questionnaire was distributed to 346 undergraduate students from UiTM Perak. The results revealed that there were positive attitudes towards writing among UiTM students although they experienced anxiety towards writing. Respondents also believed that writing was not merely a skill but also a talent that only skilled people could perform. Furthermore, the writing course, task fulfilment, writing skill, instructors and materials were not the main causes of writing anxiety among the ESL students in UiTM since most of the responses had neutral attitudes towards the causes. However, some items were rated higher which could lead to possible causes of anxiety which were incompetent grammar knowledge as well as failure in expressing ideas in English. The study sheds some light on the problems of ESL writing anxiety and raises awareness of language instructors as well as syllabus designers.

1.0 Introduction

ESL learners confront with various difficulties and struggles that could lead to anxiety. According to Baez (2005), anxiety is prevalent among university students. Anxiety is one of the psychological factors which affect learners and hinder them from developing skills when learning English as a foreign or second language (Ali & Fei, 2017). Second language anxiety is defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension that are associated with second language contexts, especially concerning the major language skills which are known as speaking, listening, and writing. Research related to writing anxiety is crucial to be looked into and has already been the focal point of many language studies besides speaking anxiety. Cheng et al. (1999) are the first to venture into a study that differentiates anxieties related to different language skills using factor analysis. Many studies have also used second language writing anxiety (SLWA) to investigate further student's writing anxiety. By conducting studies on ESL writing, it helps to reveal that ESL writing anxiety can have profound effects on ESL writing performance (Cheng, 2004).

Many factors contribute to students' anxiety. However, high expectations or demands for writing are likely to affect university students the most since writing is considered a productive skill (Kara, 2013). Such productive skills in writing are highly related to the ability to have self-expression, smooth flow of ideas, growing confidence and enjoyment of L2 academic writing which is known to be the 'real-life' issues that students find hard to cope with (Baştürkmen & Lewis, 2002). Studies have also shown that students utilising productive skills are found to experience a considerable amount of anxiety in the process of learning (Hilleson, 1996; Zhang, 2001). Besides that, writing anxiety also occurs due to language complexity in general and the complexity of writing as a skill in particular (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000). It is undeniable that writing is a challenging skill for ESL students as it is a complex task to master compared with the other three skills (Daud, 2005). Some of the common challenges that provoke ESL students in performing writing include linguistic difficulties such as lexical items, vocabulary as well as grammatical rules, and coherency (Chamot, 2005).
Apart from that, several studies in the context of ESL writing have managed to highlight the crucial aspects of writing anxiety that affects the students. One of the effects is the negative attitudes towards writing and low motivation, causing them to lose interest and willingness to write and learn the skill (Chamot, 2005; Zhang, 2019). As a result, students are discouraged from expressing their ideas and unable to have writing self-efficacy which make them more intense, anxious, and feel insecure during the writing process (Kirmizi, 2015). Due to this, students

may suffer from anxiety while learning the language. This has raised concerns that led to this study since the issues have yet to be resolved. However, although writing has made learners uneasy, studies have shown that writing skills may contribute towards their ability to succeed in various academic subjects (Daly, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, 1997), which in turn influences academic and occupational choices (Daly & Shamo, 1976, 1978). Therefore, writing anxiety should be a central concern for all learning institutions. The current study seeks to investigate the students' attitudes towards writing as well as the main causes of ESL writing anxiety experienced by Malaysian university students. The following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards writing skills?
2. What are the main causes of ESL writing anxiety among ESL students?

2.0 Literature Review

Anxiety is defined as "a psychological construct, commonly described by psychologists as a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (Hilgard et al., 1971, as cited in Scovel, 1991, p:18). It is deemed as one of the main causes that could give an impact on the learning process. Previous studies showed that stress and anxiety that were linked to academics could decrease the learners' academic achievement, reduce their motivation, as well as intensify the risk of school dropout among them (Pascoe et al., 2020). Even though anxiety has been found to affect many kinds of learning, when it is related to learning a second or foreign language, it is referred to as second or foreign language anxiety (Hashemi, 2011). Several researchers (Horwitz, et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1995; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) believe that language subjects or courses are considered highly anxiety-provoking. This is especially true as when language learners are practising productive skills, such as writing and speaking, they are found to deal with a substantial level of anxiety in their learning process (Hilleson, 1996; Zhang, 2001). Thus, examining the learners' anxiety in learning specifically in the second or foreign language is believed to be highly significant in assisting the learners to achieve the intended performance goals in their target language (Tanveer, 2007). Since the current study is focusing on anxiety among second language learners in writing, the following sub-sections are specifically discussing writing anxiety and the causes of such anxiety to happen.

2.1 Writing Anxiety

Writing anxiety is different from personal trait-related anxiety and it is described as "a relatively stable personality characteristic" (Horwitz, 2001, p.113). In other words, it is situation-specific anxiety that only happens in a specific situation such as right before a writing task (Zhang, 2019). Following this line of thought, some research concerning students' language learning anxiety portrayed a negative linear relationship between students' anxiety and their academic performance (e.g., Abdul Malik et al., 2019; Cheng, 2002; Huerta et al., 2017; Sabti et al., 2019). As an illustration, in a study done by Huerta et al. (2017), a qualitative analysis of a survey on 174 students collected from one writing class revealed that students' anxiety was associated with their proficiency in regulating their writing. A similar finding was found in Cheng's (2002) study. The study that used the correlation analysis discovered that college English students in Taiwan displayed a negative linear relationship between their confidence in regulating writing and anxiety. In another study done by Abdul Malik et al. (2019), it was found that the unproficiency of language makes L2 learners have negative feelings towards their writing and their peers' writings. Several students claimed they had lack self-confidence in the knowledge of writing making them feel shy and humiliated when reviewing others' writing and vice versa. They also believed that they have low-quality reviews which are less helpful for their peers' writing.

Sabti et al. (2019) discovered that the Iraqi EFL students, who recorded a high level of writing self-efficacy, showed unsatisfactory writing performance. The findings of this study also indicated that both writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety, and writing anxiety and writing achievement motivation were negatively correlated, whereas writing self-efficacy and writing achievement motivation were significantly and positively correlated. All of these studies again endorse and conclude that a high level of writing anxiety leads a learner to a degrading academic performance, while those with a low level of writing anxiety are professed to attain better grades in their writing assessments (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Erkan & Saban, 2011; Pajares, 2003; Senko, 2016). The findings from the studies also support the notion that writing can be challenging, difficult to learn, and is feared by either second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learners (Gupta, 1998). Sabti et al. (2019) state that students with high anxiety in EFL writing tend to avoid a writing task as it is viewed as a threat rather than a challenge, making them unwilling into put more effort in enhancing their performance in writing. This is because writing demands language learners to connect suitable lexicon and grammar in crafting cognitive meanings and contents to be delivered (Hyland, 2007).

In addition, the idea of success in writing is usually linked with self-expression, the flow of ideas, outsider expectations, rising confidence, and enjoyment of L2 academic writing, and L2 learners are known to have difficulties dealing with this (Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002). Due to these demanding requirements in producing a good piece of writing, it makes writing a challenging and daunting task for students especially the L2 and FL learners. Thus, L2 or FL learners are mostly intimidated by the idea of writing especially when they are incompetent in the language that they are learning. With mother tongue interference, these F2 and L2 learners are further handicapped in writing, especially in creative and imaginative writing, due to their difficulties to go beyond the surface idea in writing (Chittra et al., 2010).

Despite the challenging task, it is one of the essential skills that language learners have to master because written assignments are typically required in many language courses. Hence, the obscurity of writing frequently causes problems for learners making them anxious when constructing their piece of writing (Huerta et al., 2017). Fortunately, writing anxiety can be mitigated by identifying the contributing factors which lead it to happen. When the related factors have been identified, teachers, lecturers, or language instructors can help to alleviate it and provide aid that their students need to perform and eventually improve their writing skills.

2.2 Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA)

Writing is professed as both cognitive and emotional activity; hence, it is highly connected with these affective factors: anxiety, self-efficacy, and motivation (Sabti et al., 2019). These effective factors play a substantial role in influencing ESL and EFL writing in various studies. Previous studies have identified that lack of confidence, achievement motivation, self-efficacy, and feeling of anxiety can negatively influence students' writing performance (Erkan & Saban, 2011; Pajares & Valiante, 2006; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016; Senko, 2016). Such studies have mostly affirmed that writing achievement motivation and writing self-efficacy may greatly boost writing performance, whereas writing anxiety could highly influence writing ability in negative ways. In other words, such factors play a considerable role in students' behaviour that could lead to either a good or disappointing performance. To exemplify, Sabti et al.'s (2019) study reported that negative characteristics such as fear of making errors and being negatively assessed by lecturers and classmates may have led the respondents to have a high level of anxiety and also led them to avoid the writing task. Similarly, in Abdul Malik et al.'s (2019) study, the peer review activity executed in a writing class caused the respondents to feel embarrassed and humiliated when their peers reviewed

their writing due to their unproficiency in the language that they were learning. Some of them also believed that the reviews from their peers were less helpful in improving their writing. These two studies indicate that fear of negative feedback causes students to have writing anxiety.

In a study done by Zhang (2019), it is revealed that the respondents who had writing classes using online resources felt challenged in using the knowledge to improve their writing. The immature knowledge of the online resources caused their anxiety as they believed the approach was "difficult" and "a bit overwhelmed" to them. Furthermore, Zhang also found that the respondents' emotional discomfort or anxiety was also heightened due to the continuous feedback from the teacher beyond language form. In other words, the findings indicate that apart from the teacher's feedback on the students' writing, the unfamiliar approach used by teachers can also trigger writing anxiety among the students.

In another perspective, having problems in proficiency, difficulty in elaborating ideas, and lacking subject knowledge and content details are listed as other reasons for writing anxiety to happen among students (Chittra et al., 2010). These causes are mainly related to the situation-specific anxiety that occurs right before executing a writing task (Zhang, 2019). Other than that, Price (1991) lists several factors which lead to writing anxiety. Levels of difficulty in language classes, learners' attitudes of their language proficiency, certain personality variables, and taxing classroom experiences are believed by Price to be the possible reasons for writing anxiety among students. The factor on personality variable was also supported by several researchers (Brown et al., 2002). These researchers state that learners' personality traits, such as introversion or extraversion, are linked with anxiety arousal.

In the same line of this thought, Young (1991) acknowledges six possible causes of language anxiety from three areas of arousal which are the learner, the teacher, and the instructional practice. He claims that language anxiety is instigated by the students' personal and interpersonal anxiety, students' beliefs about language learning, teachers' beliefs about language teaching, teacher-student interactions, classroom procedures, and language testing. In another study done by Yetis (2017) on the sources of writing anxiety in the French Language teaching, students found that the writing course, proficiency levels, attitudes towards writing, and the composing process were identified as the potential causes of writing anxiety. The data that were obtained from semi-structured interviews also exposed factors such as classmates, time pressure on writing activities, and teacher's attitudes towards students were other causes of writing anxiety. To deduce, there are a lot of contributing factors to anxiety in writing among students which include different

aspects and perspectives in both teaching and learning environment together with internal and external factors. Therefore, there is a dire need for language teachers or instructors to identify the factors that contribute to the students' anxiety in executing a writing task. Pedagogical considerations in course planning need to take into account students' emotional states (Zheng & Cheng, 2018) so, it can help to reduce the level of anxiety and eventually help the students to be proficient in their writing skills.

3.0 Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study was carried out using a quantitative approach as it seeks to investigate the attitudes towards writing as well as the causes of writing anxiety among diploma students of UiTM Perak.

3.2 Participants

A total of 346 students managed to participate in the study which consisted of 133 (38.4%) males and 206 (59.5%) females. The respondents were semester 1, 2 and 3 Diploma learners from the Art and Design Faculty, and Architecture and Planning Faculty of UiTM Perak Branch.

3.3 Instruments

An online questionnaire (Google Form) was adapted from Selma's (2013) study to investigate the students' attitudes towards writing as well as the main causes of writing anxiety that most ESL students encounter. The instruments include elements related to the causes of anxiety based on students' essay responses that were given out at the initial stage. The adaptation of the questionnaire was based on the researcher's teaching experience and secondary materials which include possible factors that cause ESL writing anxiety among Malaysian diploma students. The questionnaire contained 33 items, which consisted of five sections; section A (demographic profile), section B (writing course), C (writing as a skill), D (instructors) and E (materials). The questionnaire used the Likert scales to rate the participants' perception with five options (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree or Strongly, Agree).

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Only respondents who ticked or felt anxious towards writing, as well as fully answered questionnaires, were taken for data collection purposes, thus eliminating any possible outliers. The data were stored automatically in the hosted online survey service (Google Form) after submission of the responses. Descriptive data analyses such as frequencies, means and average were conducted using the Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS). The findings were tabulated and displayed using tables and graphs.

4.0 Findings

The overall findings and data analysis are presented and discussed based on the research questions.

RQ1: What are the students' attitudes towards writing skills?

Based on the results in Table 1, students relatively had positive attitudes towards writing. When respondents were asked to respond to the question of "I do not like writing", more than 50% (n=187) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. Out of 346 respondents, only 32% (n=111) of respondents stated neutral, whereas a total of 13.6% (n=47) somehow agreed and claimed otherwise as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Attitudes towards Writing

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	72	20.9
Disagree	115	33.3
Neutral	111	32.2
Agree	36	10.4
Strongly agree	11	3.2
Total	346	100

Table 2 indicates another result of showing students' attitudes towards writing. Although respondents had positive attitudes towards writing, they still believed that writing was a talent in which only skilled people could produce good pieces. Based on the results, a total of 41.7% (n=144) respondents agreed with the statement, whereas 36.7% (n=127) respondents claimed otherwise.

Table 2: Writing is a Talent

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	37	10.7
Disagree	90	26
Neutral	75	21.7
Agree	94	27.2
Strongly agree	50	14.5
Total	346	100

RQ2: What are the main causes of ESL writing anxiety among ESL students?

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for task fulfilment as a factor of anxiety towards writing

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Task Fulfilment	343	1.00	5.00	2.90	.789
Valid N (listwise)	343				

Table 3 shows the mean of responses for 'task fulfilment' as the factor of anxiety towards writing. The mean for this construct was 2.91, which indicates that the respondents had a neutral attitude (neither agree nor disagree) with the items listed under the task fulfilment construct. There were 14 items with means between 2.5 to 3.5 which are: 1) "I always feel anxious when I write something in English" (means= 3.08); 2) "when there is a topic"; 2) "I do not know what to write about that topic" (means=2.75); 3) "I cannot express myself in English because I'm lacking of grammar knowledge" (means=3.13); 4) "I have difficulty in finding topics to write" (means=2.98); 5) "I do not know how to begin writing" (means=2.95); 6) "I cannot organize my ideas to write" (means= 2.96); 7) "I cannot improve my writing because I do not read enough" (means=2.82); 8) "I find it difficult to combine or link ideas when I write" (means=2.92); 9) "I cannot organize what I want to write" (means=2.87); 10) "I cannot express what I think" (means=2.79); 11) "I have difficulty in writing because I am used to taking tests" (means=2.71); 12) "I organize my ideas in Malay while writing, therefore; it is difficult for me to express them in English" (means= 3.04); 13)"I cannot write because I lack vocabulary" (means=3.02), and 14) "I cannot generate ideas, so I am not creative" (means=2.74). This implies that 'task fulfilment' does not contribute to the learners' writing anxiety.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for instructors as a factor of anxiety towards writing

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Instructor	336	1.00	5.00	2.21	.901
Valid N (listwise)	336				

Table 4 shows the mean of responses for 'instructor' as the cause of anxiety towards writing. The overall mean for this construct was 2.21, and the mean for all items under the 'instructor' construct was under 2.5. This reveals that the respondents disagreed with all the statements, indicating that the instructor is not a cause of anxiety towards their writing ability.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for materials as a factor of anxiety towards writing

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Coursebook	342	1.00	5.00	2.51	.847
Valid N (listwise)	342				

Table 5 shows the mean of responses for 'materials' as the factor of anxiety towards writing. The mean for this construct was 2.51. The respondents were neutral where they neither supported nor opposed the suggestion of materials as a cause of anxiety towards writing. Three out of four items had means between 2.5 to 3.5 which are: 1) examples in the materials are not exploratory (mean=2.52); 2) materials do not contain enough examples (mean=2.56), and 3) materials are boring (mean=2.57). The results reveal that the respondents were neutral towards the three statements. Meanwhile, the mean of responses for the statement "there are not enough exercises" was 2.41, which reflects disagreement towards the statement.

4.1 Summary of Findings

The main purpose of the study was to determine the attitudes of students towards writing as well as the main causes of writing anxiety among diploma students in UiTM Perak. The findings indicate that the respondents of the study still had positive attitudes towards writing although they experienced anxiety when it came to writing skills. Students also believed that writing was not merely a skill but also a talent that only skilled people could perform. Furthermore, writing courses, task fulfilment, writing skills, instructors and materials are not the main

causes of writing anxiety among the ESL students since most of the responses had neutral attitudes towards the causes. However, a few items are rated higher which could lead to possible causes of anxiety, such as incompetence grammar knowledge as well as failure in expressing ideas in English.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Previous research has focused on writing anxiety and significant progress that has been made in improving the issue of both second language anxiety and second language writing anxiety. By conducting this study, it helps to uncover the reasons for second language writing anxiety faced by many ESL students. It also assists instructors to identify their learners' reasons for failure in writing classes and help their learners in overcoming the anxiety.

The findings of this study are inconsistent with the result reported in Selma's (2013) study related to the main causes of anxiety which are writing courses, task fulfilment, writing as a skill, instructors, and materials since not all elements were supported by the students. Although students claimed to have anxiety towards writing, however, majority of the items were rated neutral which contradict the results from many studies including Selma's (2013) study. Apart from that, a few elements were rated the highest, and this may also be considered as part of writing anxiety among ESL students in UiTM. The item is known to be the 'linguistic difficulties' which includes grammar incompetence, inadequate mastery of vocabulary, as well as expressing and organising ideas in English. The majority of ESL learners experienced writing insecurity, especially related to linguistic components whenever they are writing in English (such as grammar rules, sentence structure, and so on) as accuracy has always been the rule of thumb, especially in writing assessments. Learners tend to think a lot about the form of writing, causing them to be anxious which hinders them to write effectively since the mindset has already been stemmed from the grounded rules. Thus, learners' perception of their linguistic difficulties turned to be the utmost concern which indirectly contribute to writing anxiety. These are in line with the results reported by Zhang (2011) and Wahyuni and Umam (2019) which both stated the most obvious factor causing ESL writing anxiety was linguistic difficulties. The results are also consistent with the study of Hyland (2003) and Hongxia (2011) which claimed that the most obvious cause that distinguishes ESL writers was the difficulty expressing themselves in English due to linguistic incompetence.

These problems are essential for educators in Malaysia to take note which arouses fears as learners are being incompatible with the expectations in ESL writing.

There are many other factors involved in ESL writing anxiety which has been underestimated in the present context addressed by this study. Since ESL writing involves cognitive, emotional, and cultural processes, ESL writing anxiety and its role in ESL learning achievement need to be understood and deserve serious attention from ESL writing researchers, ESL writing teachers as well as ESL learners. By acknowledging the existence of ESL writing anxiety, including its causes and effects, would help to curb the prolonged issue successfully and effectively.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

The findings propose that educational goals in Malaysia should develop a clear understanding of the writing needs among ESL learners and assist them in any way to reduce the fear of writing according to their writing ability and language proficiency. It is crucial to be aware of their anxiety, taking into consideration a few aspects and factors including the students' burden during the writing process along with the fear of making mistakes due to their limited linguistic knowledge and the ability to develop ideas in English. Hence, it is plausible to note that these shortcomings which are mainly rooted in classroom practices can be investigated further and solved effectively by applying proper measures in terms of its assessment and ways in overcoming the long winding issue.

Language instructors as well as syllabus designers need to be aware of the existence of the problem (ESL writing anxiety) and also offer assistance to alleviate the fear of writing among students by creating the right implementation and guidance. Ideas for reducing graduate student writing anxiety include creating student-instructor interaction which is believed to have a significant contributing factor to cognitive anxiety arousal (Reem & Alexander, 2020), providing workshops in which students are equipped with specific productivity strategies and support, and other tactics such as self-regulating one's writing, writing regularly and having a writing support group. These strategies will help to lessen student's anxiety towards writing and become more self-efficacious (Goodson, 2017; Murray & Thow, 2014). It is in the universities' best interest in making sure that graduate students are well equipped with the tools which allow them to successfully communicate ideas and become innovative in writing. Furthermore, more studies should be conducted in exploring this issue, specifically in the Malaysian setting as the skill is considered to be crucial for graduate students to master. In conclusion, it is hoped that these findings provide a foundational understanding for future suggestions in coping with ESL writing anxiety as well as lend to a step in forging new studies and future directions to help reduce writing anxiety in the current Malaysian educational context.

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