

A Review of Studies on Foreign Language Writing Anxiety

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Abstract: Foreign language writing is often used in work and daily communication. At the same time, it has a great weight in many important examinations, reflecting the students' comprehensive application level of foreign language. Related studies have found that students experience anxiety when writing due to lack of confidence, fear of evaluation, being influenced by local culture, procrastination, and a high level of epistemological beliefs. This will not only inhibit their cognitive activities and affect their writing performance, but also discourage their enthusiasm for learning and hinder the improvement of their writing ability. However, on the contrary, some researchers have found that writing anxiety may also stimulate students to work harder and more efficiently on writing tasks. This paper will review the related studies on writing anxiety in foreign languages, summarize its classification, effects and causes, then find ways to reduce students' writing anxiety and improve the level of their writing. Finally, some incompleteness of the current research will be reflected, with a view to providing implications for future research.

Keywords: writing anxiety, classification, effects, causes, strategies

1. Introduction

The research on “anxiety” started out in educational psychology as early as the 1930s. Horwitz et al. defined anxiety as the subjective perception of stress, restlessness, and unease arising from the autonomic nervous system [1]. Other researchers believe that the threat of failing to meet goals or overcome obstacles can hinder the writer's dignity and self-efficacy or fill him with guilt and a sense of loss, which can take shape “anxiety” [2]. By the 1970s, more and more attention had been placed on the involvement of anxiety in second language acquisition. Horwitz et al. pointed out that foreign language anxiety is a unique psychology of self-cognition, belief, feeling and behavior in connection with language learning in classroom [1].

Daly and Miller first proposed that writing apprehension would cause students to exhibit a series of avoidance and rejection behaviors [3]. Subsequently, Daly and Wilson defined it as the specific anxious behavior that learners show during the process of writing, like evading or refusing the writing task, being afraid that their articles will be read or evaluated by others [4]. At the same time, they pointed out that this anxiety can lead to writing difficulties, feelings of distress and negativity, and lowered expectations for writing success [4]. Some researchers have developed specific scales for writing anxiety. In the early stage, the relevant studies and scales were mostly aimed at native language learners. However, Cheng et al. believe that foreign language writing anxiety is “language-skill-specific anxiety” that closely has to do with writing performance [5]. Therefore, more targeted

tools are needed for measurement [6]. In this case, Cheng compiled the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) ground on previous studies and scales [6]. This scale has high reliability and validity, which provides an effective basis and standard for researchers to measure and study writing anxiety later.

At present, in many large-scale and important examinations (such as college Entrance Examination English test, IELTS, TOEFL, CET-4 and CET-6), foreign language writing is an essential evaluation standard. It accounts for important marks and can effectively test the comprehensive ability of students to use a second foreign language. Furthermore, with the increase of international communication, individuals often need to use foreign languages to write resumes and emails at work. However, many students show obvious fear and evasive behavior towards foreign language writing. They often lack initiative in completing writing exercises or get caught up in writing and repeatedly revising their essay. This can lead to poor writing performance, a lack of fluency within written works, and ultimately undermine their confidence, interest and enthusiasm in foreign language learning [6,7].

As writing anxiety has become a major affective disorder in foreign language writing and even foreign language learning, this paper will review its relevant theories and empirical studies to summarize its common categories, effects on students' writing performance, causes and corresponding mitigation strategies. The shortcomings of the current research will also be reflected on, so as to better find the future research directions, reduce students' anxiety, stimulate their interest in learning and improve their writing ability.

2. The Classification of Writing Anxiety

Horwitz et al. classified foreign language anxiety into three subtypes: communicative anxiety, examination anxiety and the worry of negative evaluation [1]. Specifically, communicative anxiety means the worry that people have when communicating with others by using a foreign language [1]. Examination anxiety is the worry that one won't do well in a test [1]. Negative evaluation anxiety refers to the fear of being evaluated, the perception that others' evaluations are negative, and the avoidance of evaluable situations (including evaluations by teachers and classmates) [1]. Similarly, the properties of writing anxiety are multi-dimensional and complex, so the researchers have further subdivided its concept from different perspectives.

2.1. Three-Classification

When studying and measuring writing anxiety, many researchers adopt Cheng's classification method, which starts from the three aspects of learners' physical, behavioral and mental states, through factor analysis, dividing writing anxiety into 1) physical anxiety; 2) avoidance behavior anxiety; and 3) cognitive anxiety [6, 8, 9]. To be specific, physical anxiety is the discomfort that occurs in a person's body while writing. For example: sweating, shaking, headache, rapid heartbeat, stomach pain, muscle stiffness and so on. Avoidance behavior refers to giving up writing innovative ideas in the essay, trying to avoid writing tasks, or being unwilling to engage in writing activities. It is important to note that the behavior here may be a specific behavior, or there may be some behavioral tendency. Cognitive anxiety means negative mental expectations, worries about one's writing performance and negative judgement from others. Cheng's classification method comes from the research results of Lang, P. J. in the field of psychology [10]. It uses a three-part framework to conceptualize anxiety and these three parts are relatively independent.

In addition, some researchers subdivided writing anxiety from three aspects: writing attitude, writing work evaluation and self-evaluation [7]. The anxiety in writing attitude refers to the tension and anxiety produced in the process of writing. Evaluation anxiety is the fear that others will judge the ideas in the writing, or that the language and content in the essay may be flawed. Self-evaluation

anxiety refers to the worries generated by authors when they evaluate their mastery of the topic and writing level [7].

2.2. Four-Classification

Some researchers divide writing anxiety into four subcategories. For example, Rankin Brown classified writing anxiety as fear of being evaluated by peers, dread of loss of identity, fear of being evaluated by instructors and frustration with self-evaluation [11]. Some researchers conducted factor analysis and then subdivided writing anxiety into four types based on Cheng's SLWAI: ideation anxiety, classroom anxiety, avoidance behavior and anxiety caused by not having enough confidence [6, 12]. More precisely, ideation anxiety means the anxiety generated during the thinking process before writing. Classroom anxiety is the pressure caused by teacher evaluation, time-limited training, peer performance and writing tasks. The concept of avoidance behavior is the same as that of Cheng in the above trichotomy [6]. The last type of anxiety arises from a lack of confidence due to concerns about poor writing content or low scores. Meanwhile, they also found that in these four dimensions, the students' anxiety experience from high to low is avoidance behavior, confidence anxiety, ideation anxiety and classroom teaching anxiety [12]. Wu Yuhong and Gu Weixing analyzed the factors in SLWAI and held that English writing anxiety includes four types: physical anxiety, avoidance behavior, confidence anxiety and evaluation anxiety [6, 13].

In many classification results, "avoidance" and "worry about negative evaluation of others" are mentioned, which indicates that students' awareness of avoidance and anxiety about negative evaluation are relatively common in writing.

3. The Effects of Writing Anxiety

3.1. Negative Effect

Most experimental results show that writing anxiety can negatively affect learners' writing performance.

For instance, some researchers analyzed 453 students' writing anxiety in a key university in China through questionnaire (Chinese version of SLWAI) and interview [6]. By analyzing Pearson's correlation coefficient, they concluded that the more anxious students are while writing, the worse their writing performance [12]. This conclusion conforms to the findings of many other researchers [1, 5, 14]. At the same time, the study also found that ideation anxiety determines the quality of students' essays [12].

Emre Güvendir and Kutay Uzun have studied how the syntactic complexity (SC) of written discourse is potentially influenced by foreign language anxiety. [9]. They used working memory (a limited system in which individuals temporarily store and process information while performing complex cognitive activities) as a mediator, and then measured the capacity of working memory through a complex cognitive task called the operation span task (OSPAN) [15,16]. The college students were divided into two groups and assigned to complete a writing task. By analyzing the data obtained from 126 students eventually, it was found that writing anxiety may inhibit learners' working memory, leading to a decrease in the syntactic complexity (SC) of written texts [9].

3.2. Two-Sided Effect

Through empirical research, some scholars have found that writing anxiety may bring both positive and negative impacts.

Ren Fenglei and Xu Chunshan have studied the connection between writing anxiety, writing strategies and English writing. By testing students on their anxiety, writing and English levels, they

found that writing anxiety may prevent students from monitoring and regulating their writing process and reduce their writing fluency [7]. What's worse, during the writing process, students may overconsider others' evaluation [7]. For example, they may not dare to express novel ideas for fear of criticism and ridicule, and even delete them after writing them down, resulting in a lack of innovation in their essays. However, it is also worth noting that moderate anxiety can promote writer's focus on language and time constraints, thus enabling them to complete writing tasks more effectively [7].

Zhang Li collected questionnaires from 401 English majors in Chinese universities, and analyzed the data with Statistic Package for Social Science (SPSS) [17]. The findings suggest that the influence of writing anxiety may be two-sided. On the one hand, strong writing anxiety can hinder students' access to cognitive resources. On the other hand, it can also stimulate students' "conscious efforts" to offset the negative effects [17]. Meanwhile, writing anxiety will also affect students' choice of writing strategies [17]. In other words, when writing anxiety is high, students may either use fewer writing strategies or tend to use better writing strategies and improve their self-efficacy.

4. The Causes of Writing Anxiety

4.1. Fear of Evaluation and Insufficient Confidence

Fear of evaluation and insufficient confidence are important factors leading to writing anxiety [5, 12, 18, 19]. Cheng et al. pointed out that students with insufficient confidence may think poorly of their own writing capabilities and expect to perform poorly, resulting in anxiety and restlessness [5].

Ahmed Abdulateef Sabti et al. collected data from 100 first-year students at two Iraqi universities and studied the connection between writing anxiety and self-efficacy. Students were asked to complete a 200-250 words essay in 45 minutes, and their writing skills were assessed in five areas: content, grammar, writing skills, organization and vocabulary. The findings showed that the pressure brought by limited time, not enough English writing exercise and negative comments from teachers will reduce students' self-efficacy in writing and intensify their writing anxiety [14].

4.2. Cultural Factor

Yu Yue and Zhou Dandan conducted a qualitative survey of junior English majors at a Chinese university [19]. This study divided culture into four parts based on the perspective of Chinese culture, including local culture, academic culture, disciplinary culture and ethnic culture [19]. Results show that cultural factors can affect the degree of writing anxiety [19]. For example, in terms of ethnic culture, China has always carried forward the traditional virtues of diligence and modesty, which may cause students to have excessive pursuit and lack of self-confidence, and then lead to increased cognitive anxiety in the writing process. Another example concerns academic culture. Since Chinese students often practice a lot of English writing tasks, they are accustomed to writing activities and rarely avoid it. This result is consistent with the views of Guo Yan and Xu Jinfen [18].

Based on unique cultural factors, this investigation provides a new perspective for further research on the factors that trigger writing anxiety.

4.3. Academic Procrastination

Academic procrastination is the behavior of putting off tasks related to learning [20]. Through questionnaires and writing assignments, Zhang Chen and Zhang Wenzhong analyzed how academic procrastination affects writing performance and the effects of writing anxiety in this process [21]. In particular, when measuring students' text quality, they assessed text readability through an online computing tool (Coh-metrix) rather than manually, which reduced the influence of subjectivity and

personal preferences on the assessment results. According to the outcomes, they concluded that the later students put off the writing task, the more intense their writing anxiety [21].

4.4. Epistemological Beliefs (EBs)

Epistemological beliefs are learners' ideologies about the occurrence and nature of knowledge and how to construct and evaluate it [22]. Mohamad Heidarzadi et al. surveyed 240 English learners and found a relationship between writing anxiety and EBs. They used SLWAI to measure writing anxiety, and adapted Epistemological Belief Questionnaire, a widely used cognitive belief assessment tool, to assess students' EBs [6, 23]. The final results indicated that the higher the level of EBs, the more anxiety the students experience in second language writing [8].

There are many reasons to induce writing anxiety, and its occurrence is often the result of many factors at the same time. Plus, it is important to notice that anxiety can interfere with writing performance, hinder the improvement of writing ability, and then weaken students' confidence again, ultimately plunging the learning process into a vicious spiral.

5. Strategies to Relieve Writing Anxiety

According to the causes, writing anxiety can be alleviated from three aspects: teachers, peers and learners themselves.

5.1. Teachers

When designing teaching activities and syllabus, teachers need to consider how to better stimulate students' interest in writing. They should propose more interesting writing tasks around topics that students are familiar with or interested in, play the role of multimedia, and add videos and interactive games to the teaching content to increase classroom interaction and improve student engagement. Also, more task-driven and situational teaching methods should be adopted, and appropriate reward mechanisms should be set up to improve students' motivation.

Before assigning writing tasks, teachers should attach importance to inspiring students to think deeply [12]. For example, they need to fully introduce the background cultural knowledge to make students more familiar with the writing topic [19]. It is also necessary to guide students to find more writing materials and master critical thinking methods, thereby students can broaden their thinking, get writing inspiration, and reduce ideation anxiety. At the same time, teachers need to have a good insight into students' writing ability and carry out appropriate teaching activities accordingly. The writing task should be subdivided into concrete and feasible steps. In this way, students can have sufficient thinking time and less cognitive load [9].

In the teaching process, teachers should give students more positive feedback to improve their writing confidence [14]. Specifically, teachers should try their best to find and praise the highlights in students' essays, such as fluent and coherent expression, original insights, novel ideas, appropriate sentence patterns, etc.

When setting the evaluation standards, teachers need to flexibly adjust evaluation forms according to students' level and current teaching conditions [12, 21]. It is important to avoid using rigid and fixed standards to measure students' writing ability. When commenting on the articles, teachers should pay more attention to students' thinking and efforts, rather than sentence patterns or grammar. Furthermore, a euphemistic way should be adopted when pointing out mistakes in order to create an equal and relaxed communication atmosphere. This can not only alleviate students' worries about mistakes and failures, ease their evaluation anxiety, but also reduce students' avoidance behavior, which is conducive to their positive writing practice and writing ability.

5.2. Peers

Group cooperation can effectively reduce anxiety [9]. For example, students can form small groups and work together to brainstorm ideas, create mind maps, etc. These activities can help students gather ideas before writing, giving them more inspiration to build a basic writing framework and relieve ideation anxiety. In addition, group members can help each other and exchange writing skills while working together. This allows them to improve writing performance and text quality, thereby boosting self-confidence.

In terms of peer evaluation, students should assess each other's compositions and make suggestions for revision. On the one hand, this can reduce their fear and anxiety about teacher evaluation, enable them to conduct writing exercises in a more pleasant and relaxed state of mind. On the other hand, through the positive feedback of peers, students can improve self-confidence and stimulate their writing enthusiasm. More importantly, when assessing others' compositions, students themselves can better understand the evaluation criteria, thus reducing mistakes in future writing and relieving the anxiety and uncertainty caused by not understanding the evaluation standards [13].

5.3. Learners Themselves

Learners themselves should consciously relieve writing anxiety. An effective approach is to face the writing task with an optimistic attitude. In other words, positive self-suggestion can help maintain confidence even in the face of failure or mistakes. Meanwhile, a sound writing plan should be developed by the authors before writing, so that they can constantly monitor and adjust their performance in the writing process [7]. Furthermore, learners ought to take the initiative to master more writing skills and strategies in order to effectively control their cognitive resources. It is necessary for learners to enhance their subject consciousness and understand the significance of writing. This can improve their motivation to write. Last but not least, more possible causes that can trigger writing anxiety should be learned to help learners actively avoid anxiety-provoking situations and improve the quality of their writing.

6. Conclusion

From the above research, the existence of writing anxiety will inevitably have different degrees of negative impact on students' writing performance and achievement. On this occasion, students can become less confident and shy away from writing tasks. This will not only make students lose their interest in writing activities, but also undoubtedly hinder the improvement of their writing ability and foreign language level. As a consequence, it will be of great significance to investigate more about the reasons for writing anxiety and find effective ways to mitigate it.

Although the current research is becoming more and more complete, some inadequacies remain to be improved. First, as for measuring writing anxiety, there are few scales with high reliability and validity. Many researchers have used Cheng's SLWAI, which was originally compiled for college students in Taiwan. However, due to the specific educational background and student level, its scope of application may be limited to some extent.

To conclude, in future studies, more scales for writing anxiety should be designed and related reliability and validity tests should be conducted. Plus, writing anxiety must be studied from a broader perspective. For instance, to more fully analyze the factors and effects of writing anxiety, the differences and impacts of gender, age, educational background, and foreign language learning time should be further explored. Equally important, most of the data in the current study came from university students. In such cases, the types of future research subjects should be more diverse, including secondary and primary school students, social personnel and so on, to increase the richness of research data, as well as help more people ease writing anxiety.

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