

English Writing Anxiety in Chinese High School Students: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract: Second language (L2) writing anxiety has been widely discussed by researchers, for writing anxiety has its specific causes and may affect people's L2 writing performance. In the Chinese context, high school students undergo exam-orientated education and face the college entrance exams. They may have special causes and may suffer from specific consequences of English writing anxiety. The research is done in a normal high school in Zhejiang Province, focusing on the causes and consequences of English writing anxiety in Chinese high school students. The research used a questionnaire to collect data and analyze them in SPSS. Through exploratory factor analysis (efa), the research finds out that exams, fear of errors, and writing difficulties may be the main causes of Chinese high school students' writing anxiety. The research also collected students' recent exam grades and conducted correlation analysis and regression analysis, which shows that English writing anxiety exerts negative impact on Chinese students' English writing performance.

Keywords: English, writing, anxiety, Chinese, High school students

1. Introduction

According to the Oxford Learner's dictionaries, anxiety is the state of feeling nervous or worried that something bad is going to happen. It has multiple impacts on people. For example, it can cause horror and tiredness. People suffering from extremely high levels of anxiety may be disabled in acting, planning and always have low living quality. In Second language (L2) writing, anxiety is a common emotion that people can feel from time to time. Different people have different causes for their L2 writing anxiety, but some general causes are similar. As for high school students, English writing anxiety may affect their writing performance because of its unique impact on students' mood and motivation.

The Chinese context is worth special research, for Chinese high school students have accepted exam-orientated education for more than 10 years. They also need to compete in the college entrance exam, suffering from extremely severe peer pressure. It is obviously different from other countries, especially western countries. Their English writing anxiety level may be much higher than students in other contexts due to the exam-oriented education. Most of the time, high school teachers in China do not know much about the main causes of students' English writing anxiety, so they may feel difficult in coming up with correct suggestions to help their students when students' English writing performance are severely affected by English writing anxiety. There is an urgent need for both high

school teachers and students to know the causes and consequences of Chinese high school students' writing anxiety, so teachers can find out the original source of students' writing anxiety, evaluate students' writing performance comprehensively and apply targeted measures. This paper is aimed at getting to know the main causes and consequences of English writing anxiety in Chinese high school students, thus helping teachers and students come up with solutions to deal with it.

2. Literature Review

L2 learning anxiety may affect a learner's performance, for it can cause tiredness, and horror in learning, and can lead to disability in planning. The discussions about its causes and consequences have been raised in former research. However, English writing anxiety is different from the general anxiety in L2 acquisition. It was raised by Cheng et al., who found that L2 writing anxiety is relatively important in the general L2 acquisition process, for a large number of people admit that writing is almost the most challenging and important part of L2 learning [1]. In order to evaluate the levels of L2 writing anxiety specifically, Cheng successfully invented the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) [2]. The SLWAI was widely used all around the world in many following research, for it could evaluate the L2 writing anxiety in 3 dimensions. However, its effectiveness might be different in different contexts, especially among non-native English speakers, for misunderstanding and lacking in specific reason exploration. As for the Chinese context, the SLWAI was further developed into a Chinese version when Tsai did his research [3]. From then on, there were 4 main questions that were included in the SLWAI: (1) anxiety about exams, (2) fear of writing faults, (3) anxiety of receiving pessimistic feedback (4) lack in confidence of writing. This version is very suitable for experiments in the Chinese context, and the questions are clear and representative enough.

Previous research on the causes of L2 writing anxiety has reached common ground to some extent. The first sort of reasons are the difficulties of L2 learning itself. Yang & Wang focused on Chinese university students and found that they felt anxious when writing in English because of the difficulties and slowness in the process of raising their English writing ability [4]. Afdalia et al. mentioned that students in English education programs were anxious about struggling in compiling and arranging words [5]. The second sort of reasons come from outside of the world. As mentioned by Horwitz et al., learners will face various external pressures, such as exams and feedback [6]. Yang & Wang also discussed in their paper that some of the English writing courses were boring to students and they could not gain the knowledge they imagine they should learn [7].

As for research on the consequences of L2 writing anxiety, some researchers as Alfarwan, S. found that anxiety could also affect positively on L2 writing, providing motivation and stimulation [8]. However, most of the researchers agree that anxiety tends to cause negative effects. Zhang Hongbo explained that anxiety distracted students' attention while they were writing and would lower their scores [9]. Afdalia et al. found out the avoidance behaviors in English writing caused by anxiety [10]. Rasuan et al. used a writing anxiety questionnaire among university students. And then, they got students' test scores, applying P-scores and P-tables to measure whether writing anxiety exerts an impact on writing performance [11]. They successfully found out a negative correlation between the students' writing anxiety and their writing performance.

According to past research, there is a well-known SLWAI model in the research method. This paper will apply the Chinese version of SLWAI model to evaluate the level of anxiety. As for the reasons, many researchers focus on general learners or foreign learners. As for the impact part, most people's views tend to lean towards negative impacts. Chinese context is specifically unique, for its exam-oriented system adds more pressure on high school students. There is an urgent need for teachers and students to find specific causes and consequences of Chinese high school students, thus finding out possible solutions. This paper will conduct research in the specific context of English

writing learning in China, exploring the specific reasons for anxiety among Chinese English writing learners and whether anxiety levels are related to writing proficiency, thus providing teaching strategies and suggestions of educational policy making.

3. Method

The research aims at 2 questions: (1) What are the main causes of English writing anxiety in Chinese high school students? (2) Does the level of English writing anxiety exert an impact on English writing performance?

The research is done in a normal high school in Zhejiang province in China a week before 9 school large-scale joint exams.

The Participants are 120 Chinese high school students in grade 12. They come from different classes and have different English writing performances. In this normal high school, students attend English writing classes 3 times a week, with teaching content including English writing vocabulary application teaching, English writing sentence structure application teaching, and English writing content and theme teaching. Students are required to write assignments that are tailored to the given topic, use vocabulary and grammar in an authentic way, and arrange the content and theme reasonably. They submit narrative writing assignments of around 250 words or applied writing assignments of around 100 words twice a week and receive teacher's feedback.

The research uses questionnaire (5-component scale), which is shown in Table 1. It is based on the Chinese version of SLWAI developed by Tsai in 2008 as the instrument. It has 18 questions and 16 of them contain 4 main factors: (1) anxiety about exams, (2) fear of writing faults, (3) anxiety of receiving pessimistic feedback (4) writing difficulty. It can also estimate the total score of anxiety. Participants who choose answers from strongly disagree to strongly agree can receive scores ranging from 0 to 5 points and can choose their answers from: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The 7th question is a reversed question, which is used to assure that the questionnaire is valid.

Table 1: The questionnaire.

Number	The questionnaire
1	Every time I use English to write, my heart thumping and palms sweating.
2	When I am aware that the teacher will correct my English writing work, I worried a lot.
3	If my peers need to review each other's essay, my anxiety level will definitely rise.
4	Considering the difficulty of English writing task, I was extremely uncomfortable.
5	Using my vocabulary improperly in English writing is a significant reason why I feel nervous.
6	I resist my English essay being selected as a model for classroom analysis.
7	I feel relaxed and at ease when writing English essays.
8	I feel anxious about English writing due to the exam.
9	Grammar mistakes really bother me in the process of finishing English essays.
10	If I learn that I will have an English writing test in a few days, I will feel sweaty and my heart will beat faster.
11	If there were no exams, I wouldn't be so anxious when writing English essays.
12	I am worried that I may not be able to express myself authentically in English writing.
13	Writing in English during exams makes me more anxious than usual.
14	I am worried that my classmates will make fun of me if I perform poorly in English writing.

Table 1: (continued)

15	I feel anxious about English writing, because I have no clue.
16	If I know I need to write in English, anxiety floods in on me, because of my poor English proficiency.
17	I am worried that I may deviate from the topic when writing in English.
18	When trying to finish my English essay, I feel anxious because I don't know how to express myself.

The author distributed questionnaires on-site and collected results immediately after the participants finished their questionnaires.

Then, the author got the students' English writing part grades (Applied Writing and Reading Continuation) in the 9 school large-scale joint exams a week later. Applied writing and post-reading continuation account for 15 points and 25 points respectively, with a total writing score of 40 points. They assess students' narrative writing and communicative writing abilities separately. This research uses the writing part grades to evaluate participants' writing performance.

The author's research hypotheses are: The main causes of English writing anxiety may be students' anxiety about exams, students' fear of writing faults and students' anxiety of receiving pessimistic feedback from others. The main consequences of English writing anxiety may negatively affect students' writing performance.

4. Result

The research received 120 questionnaires in total, and finally, 105 of them are valid. The effective rate is 87.5%. Then, the author used SPSS to conduct the data analysis.

To answer the first research question, the author applied efa analysis. The second, third, sixth, and fourteenth questions in the questionnaire belong to the factor of fear of pessimistic feedback. The fourth, fifteenth, sixteenth, and eighteenth questions in the questionnaire belong to the factor of writing difficulty. The fifth, ninth, twelfth, and seventeenth questions in the questionnaire belong to the factor of fear of writing faults. The eighth, tenth, eleventh, and thirteenth questions in the questionnaire belong to the factor of anxiety about exams. We calculated the scores of these four factors for each participant and their respective total anxiety scores for analysis. The results are as follows:

Table 2: Factor Load Factor Table

Factor Load Factor Table							
Factor (latent variable)	measurement item (explicit variable)	non-standard load coefficient (Coef.)	standard error (Std. Error)	z (CR value)	p	standard load coefficient (Std. Estimate)	SMC
Anxiety Score	Negative Feedback	1.000	-	-	-	0.587	0.345
Anxiety Score	Exams	1.270	0.218	5.840	0.000	0.756	0.571
Anxiety Score	Fear of Errors	1.426	0.229	6.219	0.000	0.846	0.715
Anxiety Score	Writing Difficulty	1.681	0.266	6.308	0.000	0.881	0.776

Table 2: (continued)

Note: The horizontal bar '-' indicates that the item is a reference item.

Table 3: Model AVE and CR indicator results

Model AVE and CR indicator results		
Factor	AVE value extracted from mean variance	Combination reliability CR value
Anxiety Score	0.602	0.855

This analysis focuses on one factor, Anxiety Score, and four analysis items for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). From Table 3, the convergent validity of the data being analyzed in the research is good enough. What is obvious is that the AVE values corresponding to the factors are 0.602, which is greater than 0.5. At the same time, the CR value in the data is 0.855, which is higher than 0.7.

Table 2 positively suggests that the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) has a relatively moderate sample size in this research, as it contains 1 factor and 4 analysis items in this study. At the same time, the effective sample size the research collected is 105, and it is 10 times more than the number of analysis items.

In terms of measurement relationships, Exams, Fear of Errors, and Writing difficulties have standardized absolute load coefficients of 0.756, 0.846, and 0.811 for Anxiety Score measurement, all of which are greater than 0.7. This means that these three factors have a significant impact on Anxiety Score. When using Negative Feedback to measure Anxiety Score, the absolute value of the standardized load factor is $0.587 < 0.6$, indicating a weak measurement relationship and minimal impact. Therefore, Exams, Fear of Errors, Writing difficulties may be the main causes of Chinese high school students' writing anxiety.

As for the second question, the author first applied co-relation analysis. The result are as follows:

Table 4: Pearson co-relation

Pearson co-relation		
		Total score for writing
Anxiety Score	correlation coefficient	-0.423**
	p value	0.000
	sample size	105
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$		

Table 4 reveals that the Pearson correlation coefficient between total writing score and anxiety value is -0.423 and shows a significant negative correlation at the 0.01 level, indicating a significant negative correlation between total writing score and anxiety value.

Then, the author conducted the regression analysis. X is the Anxiety score, and Y is the English writing score.

Table 5: Linear regression analysis results (n=105)

Linear regression analysis results (n=105)								
	Non standardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient		t	p	Collinearity diagnosis	
	B	Standard error	Beta				VIF	tolerance
Constant	26.320	1.501	-		17.538	0.000**	-	-
Anxiety Score	-0.169	0.036	-0.423		-4.743	0.000**	1.000	1.000
R 2	0.179							
Adjust R 2	0.171							
F	F (1,103)=22.495,p=0.000							
D-W value	1.135							
Dependent variable: total score of writing								
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01								

In Table 5 the author does the linear regression analysis. Anxiety value is considered as the independent variable. Meanwhile, total writing score as the dependent variable. From table 5, the model formula is: total writing score=26.320-0.169 * anxiety value, and its R-squared value is 0.179. Therefore, anxiety value can explain the 17.9% change in total writing score. At the same time, the author conducted an F-test on the model and found that it passed the F-test (F=22.495, p=0.000<0.05). It is definite that students' total writing score are very likely to be affected by their anxiety values. Therefore, the anxiety values' regression coefficient value is -0.169 (t=-4.743, p=0.000<0.01), which means that students' writing score is negatively affected by their anxiety values.

5. Discussion

According to the research, the main causes of Chinese students' English writing anxiety might be anxiety about exams, fear of writing faults and writing difficulty. However, the anxiety of receiving pessimistic feedback is not an important factor in Chinese students' English writing anxiety. First, Students may have realized the significance of receiving feedback in refining their English writing so that they are not averse to feedback. They may see it as an effective way to improve their writing skills) [12]. Second, Chinese students need to take the university entrance exam and have received exam-oriented education for more than 10 years. The pressure of exams is an important factor of students' anxiety in handling exam content [13]. That is why the exam is one of the main factors of English writing anxiety. Third, writing faults may lead to multiple outcomes such as lower score or more time to fix their writing, and that is why it will cause anxiety. Fourth, writing difficulties may cause the pause of English writing task and students may feel extremely anxious when they cannot deal with it in a short time especially when it is a task.

The higher English writing anxiety Chinese students have, the worse their English writing performance are. It is likely that English writing anxiety affects high cognitive load tasks on Chinese students' English writing process, which makes it difficult for them to use complicated and authentic expressions [14]. Also, anxiety may affect students' state as it can cause fast heartbeat, sweat, and tiredness, thus negatively affecting Chinese students' English writing performance [6].

As for the significance of this research, first, under the Chinese college entrance examination

system, students face diverse sources of English writing pressure. By identifying the most important reasons of English writing anxiety, students can correctly understand their own pressure coming from exams, fear of writing faults and writing difficulty. They can target on improving their English writing skills to avoid mistakes and make English writing seem less difficult. Second, teachers can explore and improve teaching methods according to the causes and consequences of English writing anxiety. By fully understanding why students are anxious about English writing, teachers can prescribe targeted solutions such as giving proper mental guidance and designing classroom activities to release students' stress from exams. After understanding the relationship between anxiety and writing performance, teachers can also have a correct view of students' grades. When students are not performing well in English writing, it is important to check their anxiety level instead of simply accusing them of not working hard, thus improving guiding strategies. Third, the analysis of the causes and consequences of Chinese students' English writing anxiety can also provide some reference for the government's policymaking in an exam-oriented system, paying more attention to students' moods. Nowadays, China's education reform is constantly advancing, and in English writing education, both teaching materials and methods are constantly improving. Understanding students' anxiety and emotions can help formulate more appropriate policies.

6. Conclusion

As for the limitations of this research, Firstly, there is the issue of sample representativeness. In this research, most of our samples were from ordinary high schools in Zhejiang Province, China. Zhejiang Province is a relatively developed province in China's economy, and the level of English education in Zhejiang Province is also relatively high. At the same time, parents attach greater importance to the level of English education than other regions. This may not be representative enough for Chinese students. Because there are still many areas in China where the level of English education is completely inferior to that of Zhejiang Province, such as the western and northern regions, we also need to know the writing anxiety of students there in order to reach more reliable conclusions. Secondly, in the discussion about the results, we focus more on the relationship Chinese students' English writing anxiety and English writing performance and measure it using the scores in the final exam essay section. However, using the final exam essay score may not fully measure a person's writing level, and the impact of English writing anxiety on high school students is not limited to writing performance. In future research, Researchers can conduct more studies on English writing anxiety among Chinese high school students in different regions, which may lead to different conclusions. Researchers can also explore more about the impact of English writing anxiety on high school students, including physical and psychological aspects, rather than just focusing on academic performance.

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