

Writing Anxiety in Chinese Non-English Major EFL Undergraduates: Causes and Consequences

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Abstract: This research paper studies the writing anxiety in Chinese non-English major EFL (English as a Foreign Language) undergraduates in terms of causes and consequences. 200 non-English major learners at different universities with age ranging from 18 to 24 finished the questionnaires including Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Scale (FLWAS) with 26 items and 50 of the participants in Sichuan International Studies University were chosen randomly to accept the interviews and took a test that measured writing in English. The results presented that: 1) FLWAS had 4 leading factors—FLWAS1 Dislike of Writing English, FLWAS2 Low Confidence in English Writing, FLWAS3 Writing Evaluation Apprehension and FLWAS4 Fear of Negative Comments; 2) a great number of factors led to English writing anxiety; 3) among the samples the general profile of English Writing Anxiety was revealed; 4) Writing anxiety had both beneficial and detrimental effects on how students learned to write in English; 5) English writing anxiety demonstrated negative correlation with English writing performance.

Keywords: writing anxiety, causes, consequences, English writing performance

1. Introduction

In terms of second language acquisition, learners at a specific condition such as at the same age or school, taught by the same teachers or taking up the same courses will have disparate English academic performance, which to certain degree is relevant to individuals' non-language factors (age difference, aptitude, motivation, affect and learning strategies). Anxiety, as one respect of affect, has attracted increasingly huge attention of research these years, although there has been no clear description about whether it is an individual character, a mental responding to a certain surroundings or an integration of them [1].

Horwitz and MacIntyre mentioned that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or ESL (English as a Second Language) learners experience distinct anxiety that differs from the rest of anxiety [2-4]. According to the studies of Horwitz et al., test anxiety, concern during conversation, and dread of receiving a poor grade made up foreign language anxiety [5]. It is a common phenomenon that Chinese contemporary college students experience anxious feeling when learning English at specific environment in which English is taught as FL. In the previous literature, the emergence of frustrating emotion referring to learning a FL can be observed when learners are reluctant to use the target language or avoid speaking this language in class, when they engage in learning activities with

apparent unconcern or in lack of confidence, and when they fail to memorize, analyze or apply the prior language knowledge in any assessment task [2,5,6].

Since writing is a crucial component of SL/FL learning, it is essential to investigate English writing anxiety so as to help learners do effectively on writing tasks or assessments in SL/FL. The current study often investigates the origins and effects of EFL writing anxiety in circumstances with Chinese non-English speaking EFL learners. The following study questions were developed to investigate the causes of English writing anxiety among Chinese non-English major students and what consequences it has:

- 1) What main factors cause English writing anxiety?
- 2) What are the consequences of writing anxiety on English writing learning?
- 3) How does the learners' writing performance correlate with their writing anxiety?

2. Literature Review

FL anxiety has been concerned increasingly and numerous researchers claimed that learner would experience anxiety in all aspects of SL/FL learning [7]. Due to the lack of writing practice, writing skill is generally regarded as less important skill than listening, speaking and reading, thus so the resulting anxiety is likely to be ignored [8]. The anxiety value of learners is related to the significance of the writing task. Generally speaking, the more important the writing assessment is, the more serious the learners' anxiety will be [9].

For those students learning English as a FL in college, the courses they attend especially emphasize the overall output including oral and writing skills, and improving the capacity to express feelings and communicate thoughts in written form is the common aspirations of educators and learners. At the higher education level, good writing skill is considered as an essential prerequisite for academic success [10-11]. Nevertheless, a great deal of researchers claimed that having a good command of writing skill has been regarded as a more difficult goal than that of listening, speaking and reading skills [11]. Writing anxiety that was a reasonable assumption was first mentioned by Daly and Miller, based on their previous researches concerning communication apprehension [10]. Initially, Daly and Miller proposed Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) with the aim at evaluating first language writing anxiety of the subjects [10]. Then based on WAT, the Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Scale including 26 items (FLWAS) was put forward to measure the second or foreign language writing anxiety popularly [12-14]. According to them, numerous individuals experience writing anxiety caused from low level achievement in writing in the situation where writing is a foundational and necessary competence. Poor performance in English writing courses or training will lead to writing anxiety, and then influence the development of learners' writing ability constantly. Learning environment, pressure, self-confidence, attitude, learner' English foundation etc. may all cause English writing anxiety. With the aim to improve the quality of English teaching and promote the level of learning, in recent years, more and more researchers in China have paid attention to the causes of FL writing anxiety and how it affects learners' writing competence.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

200 Chinese non-English major undergraduates (56 males and 144 females) at different university with age ranging from 18 to 24 finished the questionnaire including 26 items FLWAS [14]. 50 of them in Sichuan International Studies University were invited to be interviewed and then participated in an English writing test which was from the 2017 exam paper of College English Test bands 4 (CET-4) at the appointed time. All participants began to practice English writing for CET-4 (nation-wide English proficiency tests for undergraduates) at the time they studied at university.

3.2. Methodology

The data of this paper were collected through mixed method, including 200 questionnaires, 50 interviews and 50 answer sheets of the English writing test, described as follow.

3.2.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire included two parts: the first part was profile questionnaire regarding to the personal information (e. g., school, age, gender, and discipline) and the second part was FLWAS. With the reliability score of .805 seen in Table 1, FLWAS was adopted from Young and consisted of 26 items whose answers would be measured by utilizing Likert scale with five points, from strongly agree to strongly disagree [14]. To situate the present study, each item in FLWAS was translated into Chinese and foreign language was modified as English.

Table 1: Cronbach's coefficient α of FLWAS.

Cronbach		
Item	N	Cronbach α
26	200	0.805

3.2.2. Interview

In order to explore the reasons causing learner's English writing anxiety, 50 participants were invited for the interview, of which the questions included the feeling of writing, the duration of anxiety, the causes leading to writing anxiety and the consequences of it on English writing learning in combination of the learners' personal actual situations. The interviews were conducted through Tencent Conference and the transcript was analyzed through thematic analysis.

3.2.3. English Writing Test

50 participants took an English writing test which was from the 2017 exam paper of College English Test bands 4 at the appointed time. They were required to complete an argumentative writing on a topic "How to best handle the relationship between teachers and students" in 30 minutes with the requirement of 120 to 180 words. All the essays would be marked by a teacher of comprehensive English courses at Sichuan International Studies University with reference to the marking standards of CET-4. According to the writing scores and the anxiety values, correlation analysis was made to detect the relationship between students' English writing anxiety and writing performance.

4. Results

4.1. The Factors of FLWAS

FLWAS with the 26-item was adapted from that in Young and the words "foreign language" in each item were rewritten as "English" [14]. The questionnaire used Likert scale on a value of one to five, options from SA (strongly agree) to SD (strongly disagree), with the reverse score being that the more anxious the higher the score.

The fundamental causes of FLWAS were found using rotated major factor analysis. The frequency and the percentage of the FLWAS were used in statistical analysis to gauge the respondents' level of anxiety when writing in English. As shown in Table 2, a rotated factor analysis (varimax) on the FLWAS generated four factors: Dislike of Writing English (FLWAS1, 24.181% variance) which included 11 items, Low Confidence in English Writing (FLWAS2, 21.581% variance) which had 7

items, Writing Evaluation Apprehension (FLWAS3, 14.187% variance) which involved 7 items, Fear of negative comments (FLWAS5, 5.430% variance) which only occupied 1 item.

Table 2: Factors of FLWAS of this study.

Items	FLWAS1	FLWAS2	FLWAS3	FLWAS4
No.3	0.678			
No.9	0.561			
No.10	0.855			
No.11	0.774			
No.12	0.788			
No.14	0.720			
No.15	0.845			
No.17	0.669			
No.19	0.828			
No.20	0.736			
No.23	0.533			
No.7		0.736		
No.13		0.754		
No.18		0.771		
No.21		0.804		
No.22		0.798		
No.24		0.746		
No.26		0.766		
No.1			0.584	
No.4			0.649	
No.5			0.651	
No.6			0.685	
No.8			0.675	
No.16			0.540	
No.25			0.517	
No.2				0.844
% of variable	24.181%	21.581%	14.187%	5.430%

4.2. The General Profile of English Writing Anxiety

As illustrated in Table 3, mostly learners select N (Neither Agree nor Disagree) in items 3(35%), 9(27%), 10(41%), 11(39.5%), 14(43%), 15(42%), 17(42.5%), 19(39%), 20(39%) and 23(40.5%) except item 12(33.5%) in FLWAS1 containing 11 reverse questions. It showed that a majority of students had on obvious affection or dislike for English writing.

The percentage of items in FLWAS2 indicated learners had confidence in their English writing generally. 26% of students agreed they felt frustrated and nervous about English writing (item 13). 27% of the participants interpreted they had a terribly difficulty in organizing their ideas in an English composition class (item 21). 28% and 30.5% of them select A (Agree) in item 24 (They do not think they can write in English as well as most other people) and item 26 (They are no good at writing in English) respectively.

In FLWAS3, there were 32% participants agreeing item 4 (They are afraid of writing essays in English when they know the essays will be evaluated) and 22.5% of them agreed item 25 (They do not like their English compositions to be evaluated). The data implied that a large number of participants had no fear in English writing evaluation.

Interestingly, there was only one item in FLWAS4, with 29% students who disagreed item 2 (They have no fear of their English writing being evaluated) and 6% students who disagreed strongly it. It indicated that more than half of them were not psychologically stressed by evaluation results, even negative feedback.

Table 3: The number and percentage of 26 item in FLWAS (N=200).

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
No.1	15/7.5%	31/15.5%	71/35.5%	53/26.5%	30/15%
No.2	12/6%	58/29%	57/28.5%	46/23%	27/13.5%
No.3	19/9.5%	51/25.5%	70/35%	43/21.5%	17/8.5%
No.4	13/6.5%	39/19.5%	56/28%	64/32%	28/14%
No.5	29/14.5%	47/23.5%	55/27.5%	41/20.5%	28/14%
No.6	30/15%	46/23%	58/29%	37/18.5%	29/14.5%
No.7	20/10%	43/21.5%	70/35%	38/19%	29/14.5%
No.8	45/22.5%	70/35%	64/32%	11/5.5%	10/5%
No.9	31/15.5%	45/22.5%	54/27%	46/23%	24/12%
No.10	21/10.5%	56/28%	82/41%	28/14%	13/6.5%
No.11	24/12%	57/28.5%	79/39.5%	31/15.5%	9/4.5%
No.12	32/16%	71/35.5%	67/33.5%	21/10.5%	9/4.5%
No.13	14/7%	39/19.5%	69/34.5%	52/26%	26/13%
No.14	38/19%	59/29.5%	86/43%	13/6.5%	4/2%
No.15	24/12%	63/31.5%	84/42%	19/9.5%	10/5%
No.16	27/13.5%	58/29%	68/34%	32/16%	15/7.5%
No.17	16/8%	35/17.5%	85/42.5%	48/24%	16/8%
No.18	27/13.5%	52/26%	62/31%	41/20.5%	18/9%
No.19	20/10%	67/33.5%	78/39%	26/13%	9/4.5%
No.20	17/8.5%	54/27%	78/39%	38/19%	13/6.5%
No.21	14/7%	39/19.5%	70/35%	54/27%	23/11.5%
No.22	25/12.5%	48/24%	67/33.5%	43/21.5%	17/8.5%
No.23	20/10%	76/38%	81/40.5%	17/8.5%	6/3%
No.24	16/8%	40/20%	69/34.5%	56/28%	19/9.5%
No.25	18/9%	42/21%	79/39.5%	45/22.5%	16/8%
No.26	6/3%	28/14%	76/38%	61/30.5%	29/14.5%

Notes: A = Agree, D = Disagree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, SD = Strongly disagree, and SA = Strongly agree.

4.3. The Causes Contribute to English Writing Anxiety

Regarding to the causes of English Writing Anxiety, Table 4 provided details on the potential reasons that 50 participants reported in the interviews. Overall, poor foundation of vocabulary and grammar was the chief factor contributing to their English writing anxiety. Time limitation, inadequate writing practice, short English learning period and peer pressure triggered EWA accounting for 28%, 26%, 24% and 22% respectively. Other distinct factors leading to learners' writing anxiety are high expectation in writing scores (16%), taking a large proportion in exam (16%) and negative transfer of native Language (10%). Interestingly, fear of making mistakes and without the assistance of electronic equipment sharing the same proportion of 16% were not prominent factors resulting in writing anxiety for the whole samples in the interviews.

Table 4: The frequency of the causes of writing anxiety in English.

Causes	Option	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Cumulative Percentages(%)
Poor Foundation of Vocabulary and Grammar	0.0	13	26.00	26.00
	1.0	37	74.00	100.00
Time Limitation	0.0	36	72.00	72.00
	1.0	14	28.00	100.00
Peer Pressure	0.0	39	78.00	78.00
	1.0	11	22.00	100.00
Fear of making mistakes	0.0	46	92.00	92.00
	1.0	4	8.00	100.00
High Expectation in Writing Scores	0.0	42	84.00	84.00
	1.0	8	16.00	100.00
Inadequate Writing Practice	0.0	37	74.00	74.00
	1.0	13	26.00	100.00
Negative Transfer of Native Language	0.0	45	90.00	90.00
	1.0	5	10.00	100.00
Short English learning Period	0.0	38	76.00	76.00
	1.0	12	24.00	100.00
Taking a large proportion in exam	0.0	42	84.00	84.00
	1.0	8	16.00	100.00
Without the Assistance of Electronic Equipment	0.0	46	92.00	92.00
	1.0	4	8.00	100.00
Total		50	100.0	100.0

4.4. The Consequences of Writing Anxiety on English Writing Learning

Aiming to categorize similar consequences of writing anxiety on the learning of English writing into the same themes and divide different categories, the information that interviewees provided was analyzed through a thematic analysis. After thematic analysis, only 2 (out of 50) students mentioned that they did not experience writing anxiety, 96% of respondents claimed that they suffered from writing anxiety and it had influenced their English writing learning. There were 8 participants insisted that the effect on writing learning was two-sided. 11 students believed that writing anxiety would turn into motivation, increase their internal drive, and had a positive impact on writing learning. However, the largest number, up to 31 people, held a negative attitude towards writing anxiety, believing that it hindered the learning of English writing.

4.4.1. Positive Effects

Enhance learners' autonomous motivations. In terms of the positive effects on English writing learning, students responded that the huge pressure along with the anxiety could enhance their autonomous motivation. When they felt anxious on writing task, they might make inputs or take initiation with respect to their own learning activities, simultaneously they felt more ownership, and that ownership translated into greater internalization. "Result from realizing my own weakness during the writing task, I will keep positive thinking, regulate my study methods, and improve writing ability

by expanding vocabulary, learning grammar, and increasing writing practice,” Student A reported. Another participant, Student B mentioned that it was writing anxiety that kept him nervous and forced him to study after class when he considering the likely effects on the failure of the task.

4.4.2. Negative Effects

12 interviewees confirmed that they had deferred an action to start their writing tasks to a later time or had slowed a consequence by not getting around to it. “The act of procrastinating makes me feel guilty,” Student C responded, “but something always keeps me from facing the task.” She interpreted that she had great difficulty in English writing due to lack of interest.

11 students noted that they felt significantly anxious and distressed when they were writing or told to have a writing assignment. Then they became disgusted and might resist the task. A first-year education major, Student D said she was reluctant to do any English writing assignments since it took a long time and a great deal of energy and she seldom had the confidence to perform well. “I was fed up with English writing. Every time I saw my teacher’s notes full of my grammar and vocabulary errors and negative comments, I felt extremely hopeless and desperate.” Student F reported.

Learners are worried about not being able to complete the writing tasks, resulting in uncomfortable, nervous and flustered. Anxiety levels can affect learning motivation and academic performance. However, a large number of studies have shown that a moderate level of anxiety is beneficial to learning, while too low or too high a level of anxiety will have adverse effects on learners [1]. If the anxiety is too low, there is no pressure. Hence, it is bound to lack of learning motivation; If the anxiety level is too high, it will contribute to excessive nervous tension, disturbance of circadian rhythm, insomnia, and even fear and other harmful behaviors, which will bring negative influence to learning. A sophomore journalism major said she was so nervous every time taking a writing test with her palms shaking and her heart racing, making her unable to complete the task calmly. Interestingly, there were 11 participants confessed that they also had experienced this physical reaction, leaving them with blank minds and unable to concentrate on writing.

Notably, six students reported that their anxiety when faced with a writing assignment forced them to eagerly use their electronic devices to complete the task. A law student described that using electronic devices to look up vocabulary, grammar knowledge or sentence structure could reduce his writing anxiety. As consequences, he realized that he was too reliant on electronic devices to think independently. Another student said, “It’s like a vicious cycle. Relying on electronic devices to complete writing assignments after class indeed reduces personal stress and burden, however not being able to use these devices during writing exams leads to increased anxiety, which results in obstruction of improvement in writing and poor performance.”

4.5. The Relation Between English Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance

The correlation between college students’ writing performance and their English writing anxiety was studied by correlation analysis, as shown in Table 5, and the Pearson correlation coefficient was utilized to determine how strong the correlation was. A further analysis revealed a -0.347 link between writing performance and English writing anxiety, demonstrating a statistically significant negative relation between the two variables ($p < 0.05$).

Table 5: Pearson correlation and significance.

		Writing Performance
Anxiety	Pearson correlation	-0.347*
	<i>p</i>	0.014

Notes: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

5. Discussion

5.1. Factor Analysis of FLWAS

Factor analyses indicated that FLWAS contained 4 dominant factors: Dislike of Writing English (FLWAS1), Low Self-Confidence in Writing English (FLWAS2), and English Writing Evaluation Apprehension (FLWAS3), Fear of Negative Comments (FLWAS4). Except from FLWAS4, three of them were in accordance with the finding of the prior research in Cheng et al [12]. Hence, FLWAS1, FLWAS2 and FLWAS3 were named after those factors in Cheng et al [12]. As for FLWAS4, it was named based on the situational context and the data according to the interviews. Nevertheless, the validity of each factor needs to be further analyzed and verified in future research, which requires a large number of samples in different languages.

5.2. Learners' English Writing Anxiety in General

According to the analysis statistics, more than half of the respondents would not hate English writing (FLWAS1), had confidence in English writing (FLWAS2), were not afraid of English writing evaluation (FLWAS3), and had no fear of negative evaluation (FLWAS4), indicating that their degrees of anxiety about English writing was not strong. Despite this, a quarter of the respondents said that there were differences in anxiety about English writing at different times. In particular, writing anxiety was more obvious than the anxiety caused by other aspects (listening, speaking and reading) during the preparation or participation of CET-4 or CET-6. It is crucial that both teachers and students need to face up to English writing anxiety, conduct self-reflection in the process of teaching or learning, and think about strategies to alleviate writing anxiety to promote teaching and learning.

5.3. The Causes and Consequences for English Writing Anxiety

Correlational analyses revealed that learners' English writing anxiety was substantially related to their English writing performance negatively. In addition to the four main factors, this present study also found that the reasons leading to students' English writing anxiety include poor foundation of vocabulary and grammar, time limitation, inadequate writing practice, short English learning period, peer pressure, high expectation in writing scores, taking a large proportion in exam, negative transfer of native language, without the assistance of electronic equipment and so on. As for the consequences on learning and writing, this study revealed both positive effects (enhance learners' autonomous motivations) and negative effects (procrastination, antipathy proclivity, adverse physical reactions and over-reliance on electronic devices). Researches on FL writing anxiety are very limited, therefore future researches can investigate how FL writing anxiety in diverse language contexts affects learners' writing performance through the relationships with other variables.

6. Conclusions

This research used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Each methodological tool had its advantages and limitations. The limitations of the present studies naturally included sample

quantity, gender gap and lack of interview experience. First, the sample size was small: only 200 students from different universities, with a male-to-female ratio of 28 to 72. Secondly, this study mainly used the research method of interview surveys, which is not convincing enough. There is discrepancy in the degree of anxiety in different grades. If the correlation between English writing anxiety and learners' writing performance is studied by grade groups, the differences may provide empirical evidence for improvement of English writing teaching in college and the promotion of students' English writing ability.

As result of the current paper shows, English writing anxiety has negative correlation with English writing performance. However, the higher intensity is not better. On the contrary, the lower level of writing anxiety can promote the development of English writing ability.

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