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Investigating the Levels, Types and Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety among Indian Freshmen

J. Mary Jennifer

National Institute of Technology, India

Dr. R. Joseph Ponniah

National Institute of Technology, India

Introduction

Writing is a cognitive-linguistic activity which requires higher-order thinking skills to organize ideas in order to make composing more comprehensible and to have logic in the thoughts expressed. Similarly, to communicate a thought, language knowledge is indispensable as writers encode their ideas using the properties of language such as vocabulary, spelling, syntax, and grammar. If a writer does not have the underlying language knowledge, anxiety will hinder the writing performance. When a writer is deficient of cognition, coupled with language, the mind feels the state of unpleasantness and discomfort, a kind of uneasiness which is otherwise labelled as writing anxiety. Since language and cognition reciprocate, deficiency in any one of these would impair the composing process by deepening the anxiety level.

Writing anxiety represents negative anxious feelings that disrupts some part of the writing process (Rankin-Brown, 2006). Topuzkanamis (2015) defined writing anxiety as “the worry a person feels toward a task of qualified writing.” In the learning environment, second language, learners’ attitude, and behaviour are taken into consideration while discussing the writing anxiety and its types. According to Cheng (2002), writing anxiety can be categorised as cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behaviour. Somatic anxiety refers to the physiological effects of anxiety including tension and nervousness. Cognitive anxiety is associated with the thought process, also the consequence of fear about evaluation and other negative concerns. When the learners experience high anxiety, they tend to disappear from the situations, which is known as avoidance behaviour. It is also known as “flight anxiety” which makes the anxious person ‘fly’ away from frustrating situations.

Studies have found that the amount of exposure has a significant relationship with writing apprehensions (Pajares & Johnson, 1994; Parina & Leon, 2013). When students’ exposure is limited in the target language, they acquire inadequate subject knowledge and language knowledge. And this inadequacy of content and language will lead the students to be apprehensive and further impede the writing process. In effect, their written constructs appear to be poor as the ideas are unorganized and communicated with inappropriate use of vocabulary and with numerous spelling errors (Qashoa, 2014). Thus, they tend to receive lower grades. It has also been noted that students who have increased exposure to the target language perform well on written tests and become less anxious while composing. In

addition, they communicate ideas and thoughts in an organized manner using appropriate vocabulary and grammar (Cocuk, Yanpar Yelken, & Ozer, 2016; Liu & Ni, 2015). Further, Harmer (1998, as cited in Guerrero, 2012) claims that “if students get enough exposure to language and opportunities for its use, then language learning will take care of itself” (p. 13).

Learners with more writing experiences will have less writing apprehension (Parina & Leon, 2013). The more the positive experiences, the more they are encouraged to participate in writing activities (Hamman, 2005). Also, it is evident from the research that students having regular writing habits will feel comfortable in different writing situations (Karakaya & Ulper, 2011; Zorbaz, 2015). Similarly, students with negative experiences of writing tended to be highly apprehensive. This is especially true when they get a negative comment from the teachers and peers, and it will demotivate them from writing by negatively affecting the composition process (Boice, 1993; Rankin-Brown, 2006). In addition, this kind of student tends to write from memory as they find it difficult to compose written products on their own. While writing, they become anxious, if they cannot retrieve information from memory (Ireland, 2015) and this in turn, distracts them from effective composing process. This will make students more anxious and as a result, they avoid participating in writing activities.

Studies have confirmed that students who possess low self-efficacy beliefs feel anxious in writing situations (Pajares & Johnson, 1994; Singh & Rajalingam, 2012). In the same way, confident writers successfully accomplish the writing tasks and get better grades (Dacwag, 2014). In fact, successful writing helps students to have positive self-concept and to develop writing competency over a long period. For instance, both seventh and tenth grade students had higher self-efficacy beliefs compared to the fourth graders in undertaking writing tasks (Shell et al, 1995). Also, writers with little confidence have a pessimistic attitude towards writing and receiving comments from the teachers and peers (Popovich & Mark, 2003). Learners with self-perception had a positive outlook of getting correction and improving their writing in the future (Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996).

Anxiety in test-taking situations is a commonly experienced phenomenon as the test-takers experience three stages of anxiety while taking tests: i) pre-composing, ii) during composing and iii) post-composing. In the phase of pre-composing, unfamiliar topics, unprepared content, and ineffective schemata increase the levels of anxiety. Then while composing, students generally depend more on grammar rules, and an overdependence on explicit grammar rules not only increases the level of anxiety but also prevents concentrating on meaning which in fact is a hurdle in generating ideas. In addition, consciously learned grammar can help with editing only after composing the communicated idea. Finally, the worry of grades and evaluation triggers post-composing anxiety.

Aim of the Study

The study attempts to explore the causes of different types of writing anxiety among students that prohibits them from acquiring English as a second language. The study also investigates the levels of anxiety experienced by the students and identifies the prevailing type of anxiety which widely affects the written performances of the students.

Methods

Participants

A total of 18 students participated as the subjects of this study. The participants were freshmen, majoring in English literature. Their age ranged from 16 to 19. These students have only a limited amount of exposure to the English language. As such, they possess lower language proficiency levels.

Instrumentation`

For collecting data, a number of instruments were used. To measure the anxiety level and type of anxiety when experiencing writing, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) containing a 22-item questionnaire was used. It consists of three subscales of writing anxiety such as cognitive anxiety (as reflected in negative expectations, preoccupation with performance), Somatic anxiety (as reflected in negative feelings such as tension, nervousness), and Avoidance behaviour (as reflected in avoidance in writing). The reason for selecting this inventory as a measure of writing anxiety was that it has been proven to be highly reliable and valid by means of correlation and factor analysis (Cheng, 2004). The SLWAI is scored on a five-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The subcategory items are distributed as follows: Somatic anxiety (2,6,8,11,13,15,19), Cognitive anxiety (1,3,7,9,14,17,20,21), and Avoidance behaviour (4,5,10,12,16,18,22). Five of the items (1, 4, 17, 18, & 22) are negatively worded and require reverse scoring before being summed up to yield scores. A higher score obtained indicates a higher level of ESL writing anxiety. A total score above 65 points indicates a high level of writing anxiety, a total score below 50 points indicates a low level of writing anxiety, and a total score in-between indicates a moderate level of writing anxiety.

A written test was administered to find out the level of anxiety experienced by the student-writers in the writing situation. Students were asked to produce four expository essays of approximately 200 words each in 50 minutes. Students were informed that their responses would not influence grades, and their answer scripts would not be available for their class teachers. Students were then asked to respond to the open-ended research questions which encompassed the contexts that the participants feel anxious to write, the level of anxiety that they possess and the type of anxiety highly experienced, and finally the difficulties they experience while writing in English.

Results

TABLE 1
Anxiety Level Score of the Subjects

	No. of subjects	% of total strength	Minimum anxiety level score	Maximum anxiety level score	Mean anxiety level score of the subjects
High	8	44.4%	69	102	85.5
Moderate	7	39%	52	62	57.0
Low	3	16.6%	32	49	40.5
Total	18	100%	32	102	66.4

The participants' scores in this study ranged from 32 to 102. The mean score was 66.4. The scores above 65 points were treated as the high level anxiety group; the scores below 50 points were the low level anxiety group and the scores in-between were treated as the moderate level anxiety group. In addition, the maximum number of students were found to have high levels of anxiety, which indicates that the novice writers have high levels of anxiety.

TABLE 2
Anxiety Score Type on All Students

Types	N	Mean	SD	Percentage
Cognitive	18	27.06	7.2	40.72
Somatic	18	19.44	5.5	29.25
Avoidance behaviour	18	19.94	7.4	30.01

The data given in the table show that cognitive anxiety ($M = 27.06$) is higher than the somatic anxiety

(M = 19.44) and avoidance behaviour. (M=19.94). The analysis of variance showed that cognitive anxiety is statistically significant at the 5% level (p=0.052).

Table 3 represents the number of students who experienced similar causes of anxiety in writing situations. HA in the table refers to the high anxiety group, MA refers to the moderate anxiety group, and LA is the low anxiety group.

TABLE 3
Number of Students Experiencing Anxiety

	HA	MA	LA
Linguistic difficulties (spelling, grammar, vocabulary)	7	4	1
Test Anxiety (especially fear of unfamiliar content)	7	3	2
Low self-confidence in writing	6	5	1
Fear of teachers' negative comments	7	4	2
Lack of writing practices	6	4	1

Table 4 contains the responses of subjects to the research question: Why do the participants feel anxious while writing? (To make the students understand the question, the researcher explained using the mother tongue)

TABLE 4
Students' Responses to the Research Question

High anxiety performers	Moderate anxiety performers	Low anxiety performers
Student 1: <i>While English writing I make me fear I think</i>	Student 1: (i) <i>I am anxious when my teacher ask me to write in front of any other persons</i> (ii) <i>I think in Tamil and take time to translate to English and then I write and it will take time to complete, at that time I get anxiety</i>	Student 1: (i) <i>When I am not prepared for exam, I got fear and tension but otherwise I feel comfortable writing</i> (ii) <i>Though I am fed up with anxiety sometimes I get confidence from the mistakes I make. And it makes me continue to write in English</i>
Student 2: <i>When write English correct words are not coming in my mind.</i>	Student 2: (i) <i>Because of spelling mistake I avoid to write</i> (ii) <i>Others laughing me about my handwriting so I omit things to write</i>	Student 2: (i) <i>I worry about my marks while writing answers in a test</i> (ii) <i>I get fear about my spelling mistakes and grammar mistakes</i>
Student 3: <i>I anxious I meet do not know question</i>	Student 3: <i>I get anxious when I forced to finish exam within the time</i>	Student 3: <i>I feel that I am unable to express my thoughts in writing in English whereas I find easy to put down my thoughts in my mother tongue. I feel happy to write in my mother tongue. So whenever I feel to write, I write in my mother tongue. Writing on a known topic in English makes me comfortable.</i>
Student 4: <i>I don't know how writing paragraph</i>	Student 4: <i>I get fear because my teacher scold me I get low marks</i>	
Student 5: <i>I forgot of materials in my mind</i>	Student 5: <i>When i forget the answers for the questions I feel anxiety</i>	
Student 6: <i>My fear teacher correct my paper</i>	Student 6: <i>My mind is blank when I have to fill the pages in the given time</i>	
Student 7: <i>do not know grammar I worry</i>	Student 7: (i) <i>I used to write by memorising my subject while writing test. When I forget I am anxious and I will not complete the test.</i> (ii) <i>I am anxious when I write in my own words. Because I have to translate in English from Tamil in my mind.</i>	
Student 8: <i>I don't like writing English</i>		

Discussion

It is apparent from the results of this study that cognitive anxiety (41.2%) is the most common type of writing anxiety found in the writing situation among student-writers. Somatic anxiety (36.5%) and avoidance behaviour (23.3%) were the next most common types of anxiety that inhibited writing. These results are consistent with Zhang's (2011) research which found that cognitive anxiety was the most common type of second language writing anxiety among freshmen student-writers. In addition, the data confirmed that anxiety levels of students hindered the composing process. High apprehensive students performed poorly in comparison with the students who experienced moderate and low anxiety levels.

From the responses to the research question, it was clear that everyone was frightened about evaluation, worried of getting poor grades, and feared spelling and grammar errors which Cheng (2004) termed as cognitive anxiety. These negative psychological constructs interrupted the composing process and made the writing environment more anxious and less comfortable. In addition, the high apprehensive student-writers have a more pronounced fear of committing errors which not only inhibits their writing, but also demotivated them from participating in the language learning environment. On the other hand, students with moderate and lower writing apprehensions were more active in writing situations.

Writing apprehensions were characteristics of high performers with high anxiety and they were deprived of content and information about the topic provided. In addition, they were unable to communicate their thoughts due to a deficiency in language skills. Moreover, the anxiety affected their mental ability to process a thought itself. As anxiety impaired the thinking process, they were not able to demonstrate the learned knowledge, and as such the information from memory could not be retrieved in high instances of anxiety. Thus, they constructed paragraphs with irrelevant information to accomplish the writing tasks.

Students were more apprehensive when they used literal translation as a composing strategy. The translation process benefitted the low anxiety students as they had required language to communicate their intended thoughts. Also, they took significantly less time to transfer the thoughts from their mother tongue into the English language despite their psychological stress. On the other hand, students with moderate and higher levels of apprehensions felt literal translation was a hindrance in communicating their ideas as they possess lower proficiency in the language. Further, the students with higher language exposure experienced lower writing apprehensions than the students who had limited language exposure. It is consistent with Parina and Leon (2013) that increasing the amount of language exposure helps the learners to improve the confidence level in writing situations which in turn lowers the stress during the composing process and results in better writing performance. Moreover, translating their thoughts from their mother tongue to the target language evoked the level of anxiety in all the students as their exposure to the English language is limited. Especially, literal translation in a stipulated time resulted in physical discomforts including shivering, sweaty hands, and pounding hearts.

Students who experienced anxiety at a moderate level suffered slight tension, fear and nervousness. In addition, their composing process was slightly better and clearer than their higher-level counterparts as some of them had developed the habit of writing in the mother tongue which in fact made the writing easier. As they encountered only a minimum amount of input in English, it was difficult for them to communicate the intended thoughts using appropriate vocabulary. A few students from this group performed better when they felt comfortable with the topic.

In a nutshell, the results obtained from the data indicated that the anxiety experienced by the moderate and high level performers were facilitative as their performances were not poorly affected, and their self-efficacy beliefs stayed unaffected. Contrastingly, the students with higher levels of anxiety performed poorly, and their anxiety tended to be debilitating which interrupted their composing process. It was also highly influential in lowering the self-efficacy beliefs. The results revealed that an anxiety-filled environment not only impedes learning but also deconstructs the positive self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes in negative ways.

Conclusion

Anxiety is a negative influential factor that must be handled with care as it influences the learning process. Not only has it weakened the learning process and the performances of students, but it has also affected their self-esteem and self-confidence which in turn will affect academic, personal, and professional success in the future. To alleviate anxiety, positive and pleasant learning environment are essential for students to acquire second language skills and to develop positive self-efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, more attempts are required to create a comfortable learning environment where every student feels less stressed, more comfortable and confident. Research (Arnold, 2000; Ni, 2012) has also claimed that focusing on the reduction of affective aspects can lead to more language learning and also contribute to the personal growth and development which is beyond language teaching and even beyond what has traditionally been considered the academic realm. Thus, the learners might be able to receive larger amounts of “language input” which in turn can result in better learner output.

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