



Investigating Writing Strategies, Writing Anxiety and Their Effects on Writing Achievement: A Mixed Method Design

Mariam Gibriel

October University for Modern Science and Arts (MSA), Egypt

Introduction

The structure of any language relies profoundly on writing; writing is a productive skill that is usually left intact till the other skills are introduced. The reason behind this is that writing is a complex skill that needs special techniques and abilities. This process becomes even more challenging when it comes to writing in another language. Foreign/Second language writing requires thinking strategies in addition to a sufficient level of linguistic competence. Hence, producing a well-structured written task for EFL/ESL students is considered to be a notable achievement (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Accordingly, anxiety levels might increase when students are requested to do a writing task (Erkan & Saban, 2011).

Psychologists classified anxiety into three types; 1) trait anxiety as a personality characteristic, 2) state anxiety as a response to a particular anxiety, such as important tests, and 3) situation-specific anxiety as anxiety aroused in particular situations (Horwitz, 2001). Language anxiety can be bound to the third type of anxiety “situation-specific anxiety” (Rezaeia & Jafarib, 2014). Hassan (2001) defines writing anxiety as a procedure which an individual tends to avoid because it requires writing followed by an evaluation process. Abdel Latif (2007) provided a similar definition “Writing anxiety can refer to the feeling of uneasiness writers experience while performing the task” (p. 58). He further added that writing anxiety is an individual’s general tendency which affects the student’s writing performance.

Researchers have been investigating writing anxiety and its effect on the quality of writing. Some researchers have found that high anxious students produced better essays than low anxious students (Bloom, 1980; Powers, Cook, & Meyers, 1979). Another study by Fowler and Kroll (1980) reported no significant differences between writing anxiety and writing performance whereas, the majority of studies revealed that writing anxiety correlates negatively with students’ writing performance (Abdel Latif, 2007; Al Asmari, 2013; Daly, 1978; Erkan & Saban, 2011; Gibriel, 2017; Hassan, 2001). One of the early studies was carried out by Book (1976) who examined students’ apprehension and its effect on writing performance. Results showed that low apprehensive students wrote three times more words than their high apprehensive counterparts. Moreover, their quality of writing excelled over that of the high apprehensive students. Daly (1978) reported that students with high anxiety rates tended to produce lower quality compositions with shorter and simpler structures. Hassan (2001) researched writing anxiety and its effect on writing competence and self-esteem; the findings show that low anxious students produced better writing compositions and had higher self-esteem rates. Cheng (2002) concluded that students with high anxiety rates had a tendency towards skipping courses that entailed writing tasks; Abdel Latif (2007)

observed a negative correlation between anxiety and linguistic knowledge; anxious students achieved low scores in the Oxford Placement Test. Moreover, their productive and receptive vocabulary sizes witnessed a decline. In the same study, Abdel Latif conducted interviews with 16 anxious students and reported that 13 students expressed their dissatisfaction with the English writing instructions they received in class; students didn't know how to proceed with the writing process; they needed further practical techniques instead of the theoretical instructions they received. Al Asmari (2013) investigated writing anxiety and its effect on students' writing strategy use; he found that anxious students use fewer writing strategies and attained lower scores in their writing achievement test.

Mastering writing is not an easy task as it requires years of practicing and developing the skill (Al Asmari, 2013; Sommer, 2006). Cohen (1998) has suggested a three-phase process for writing; pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing. Each phase involves different methods. Petic and Czarl (2003) explained how the three phases are carried out. First, in the pre-writing phase, students are urged to brainstorm for ideas, then in the while-writing phase, they start writing their first draft. Finally, in the post-writing phase, students revise and edit their essays.

Hayes and Flower (1986) examined the writing of new and expert writers. They reported that expert writers are better at planning their writing. Therefore, they give the pre-writing phase great importance. Good writers revise and redraft their ideas before they reach the final task (Zamel, 1982). Bai et al. (2014) studied the writing strategies of Singaporean students and found that successful students use planning, monitoring, evaluating, text-generating and revising strategies better than less successful students

Baker and Boonkit (2004) investigated writing strategies for a group of Thai students. Findings indicate that strategies like, reading feedback from previous writing, using background knowledge in writing and using a dictionary were the most frequently used strategies. Baker and Boonkit further examined the difference between successful and less successful students in their strategy use. Less successful students rely mainly on Thai than the target language (English), conversely, successful students make their outline and plan their writing in English. Strategies like "I like to edit my work when I have finished writing a draft; I edit for grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation; I edit my organization; I like to change or make my ideas clearer" are all strategies for typical successful students. In a similar study, Al Asmari (2013) studied writing strategies of Saudi EFL students and the relationship between writing strategies and writing apprehension. Al Asmari found that students with low writing apprehension were better users of writing strategies, whereas students with high writing apprehension used fewer writing strategies.

The Problem of the Study

The researcher noticed that students studying in the English department had low scores on the writing achievement test. Out of 51 students only 4 obtained a very good grade on their essays. Thus, this study intended to investigate some of the causes that might have had an impact on the students' writing performance. Based on the researcher's observations, some students felt uncomfortable when given a writing task, some expressed their unwillingness to perform the task. The difficulty students face might be attributed to writing anxiety. Another cause that might be linked to their writing performance is writing strategy use. The researcher noticed that some students when given a writing task, spent only a few minutes thinking about it before writing the required task and some didn't revise their writing before submission. The researcher attributed this to the lack of knowledge regarding writing strategies.

From these observations, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What type of writing strategies do students use?
2. Is there a relationship between writing strategies and student's writing achievement?
3. Is there a relationship between writing strategies and writing anxiety?
4. Is there a relationship between writing anxiety and students' writing achievement?

Instruments of the Study

1. Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)

The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was developed by Cheng (2004). It measures students' writing anxiety based on three subscales: Somatic anxiety, Cognitive Anxiety and Avoidance Anxiety. The inventory consists of 22 items that are answered on a five-point Likert scale; Strongly agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree and Strongly disagree. The SLWAI has an internal consistency of 0.91 (Cheng, 2004). The SLWAI was examined by three PhD holders in the field of English language to check the suitability of the wording. Accordingly, some words were replaced with simpler ones to make sure students would understand the task.

2. Writing Strategies Inventory

The Writing Strategies Inventory was developed by Petric and Czarl, (2003). It consists of 38 items grouped into three sections: before writing (8 items), when writing (14 items) and when revising (16 items). The items of the questionnaire are answered using a five-point Likert Scale ranging from Never true to Always true.

3. Writing achievement test

In this test, the students were requested to write an essay on a selected topic. The test duration is 2 hours.

4. Semi-structured interview

The purpose of the interview is to get in- depth data on how anxiety and writing strategy use can affect writing. The students were grouped into two groups (successful and less successful students) based on their scores on the writing test.

The following questions were addressed in the interview:

- 1) Do you panic while writing? Why?
- 2) How do you plan your essay?
- 3) Where does essay writing stand among your preferred subjects?

Participants

Participants of the study are fourth year EFL students, studying at the Faculty of Arts English Department in Egypt. The number of students who participated in the SLWAI and the Writing Strategies Inventory was 53; 51 students out of 53 took the essay writing test. The researcher selected 6 students to participate in the interview; students were classified into two groups based on their achievement on the writing test (3 successful and 3 less successful).

Results and Discussion

Use of Writing Strategies

In order to answer the question (i.e., what type of writing strategies do students use?), means of all the writing strategies were compared. Strategies were classified based on the Writing Strategies Inventory into three phases; before writing, when writing and when revising.

In the Before Writing phase, it can be seen that *revising the requirements* is the most used strategy (Mean = 3.981, *SD* = 1.180). Before students start writing, they read the prompt first and the requirements it entails. This is in agreement with results obtained in the interview. The least used strategy is *Starting to write without having a written or mental plan* (Mean = 1.793, *SD* = 1.026). This strategy was the least used; students spend time thinking and planning before they start the writing process. The time they spend in this process in addition to the plan they develop varies. In the interview, the researcher asked questions to understand the nature of the planning process. The details of this process are answered in the interview section.

In the When Writing phase, *writing the introduction* is the most used strategy (Mean = 4.793, *SD* = .495). This is the first step students do in the writing process. The least used strategy is *seeking assistance from someone while writing* (Mean = 2.226, *SD* = 1.154). Students don't usually seek assistance from someone else because they write most of their essays in class; essay writing is an individual task, where each student is requested to write his own draft in class then submit it to the teacher to receive feedback.

In the When Revising phase, *checking mistakes after getting feedback* is the most used strategy (Mean = 4.396, *SD* = .884); this strategy contradicts the information obtained in the interview for the less successful students, where students complained that they received very little feedback and in some cases they only know the grade without receiving any feedback. The least used strategy is *submitting the paper without revising* (Mean = 1.400, *SD* = .728). Based on the interviews with the students, students who manage their time in class will have time to revise. Some students don't manage their time well and they end up submitting their essays without revising.

Writing Strategies and Writing Achievement

In order to answer the question (i.e., is there a relationship between writing strategies and student's writing achievement?), multiple regression stepwise analysis was used. Results show that 3 writing strategies had significant correlations with writing achievement ($p < .05$). One strategy had a positive correlation "*I check my mistakes after I get back the paper with the feedback from the teacher and try to learn from them*" ($\beta = .468$, $t = 3.597$, $p = .001$). This strategy is linked to the successful students; feedback for successful students is fundamental; they are keen to know and learn from their mistakes. Two strategies indicated negative correlation with writing achievement "*I look at a model written by a native speaker or more proficient writer*" ($\beta = -.286$, $t = -2.307$, $p = .030$). This strategy is mainly associated with less successful students, who use samples written by experts to improve their writing. However, this strategy does not help them acquire high grades on their essays. This may be due to the lack of application to the techniques used in the samples. The third significant strategy is "*I write bits of the text in my native language and then translate them into English*" ($\beta = -.599$, $t = -3.812$, $p = .001$). Thus, less successful students rely more on writing in Arabic then translating Arabic into English. This process is time consuming, besides, each language has its unique structure which might cause confusion to students while writing. This finding is in line with Baker and Boonkit's (2004) research which reported that less successful students rely mainly on the target language.

Writing Strategies and Writing Anxiety

In order to answer the question (i.e., is there a relationship between writing strategies and writing anxiety?), multiple regression stepwise analysis was used to answer this question. Only four strategies out of 38 showed correlation and significant contribution ($p < .05$). Two strategies showed positive correlations with Writing anxiety, whereas, two strategies showed negative correlations with writing anxiety.

The most correlated writing strategy with writing anxiety is “*I stop after a few sentences or a whole paragraph covering one idea*” which is a While Writing strategy ($\beta = .470, t = 2.818, p = .009$); The second most correlated writing strategy is “*I compare my paper with the essays written by my friends on the same topic*” which is a When Revising strategy ($\beta = .318, t = 2.242, p = .034$). The two fore mentioned strategies show positive correlations with writing anxiety, meaning, anxious students rely mainly on these two strategies in the writing process.

The least two correlated writing strategies are “*I start with the introduction*” ($\beta = -.294, t = -2.167, p = .040$), and “*I use a monolingual dictionary*” ($\beta = -.453, t = -2.878, p = .008$). The two strategies indicate negative correlations with writing anxiety, so students who use these strategies frequently have low writing anxiety rates.

From the results above, it can be seen that anxious students tend to pause frequently and check what they have written and these frequent pauses can lead to distraction. Another predominant strategy among high anxious students is comparing their essays with essays written by their peers. High anxious students tend to evaluate their writing based on the writings of their peers. “*I start with the introduction*” and “*using a monolingual dictionary*” are the two prevailing strategies among low anxious students. Students feel comfortable when they use these two strategies while writing their essays.

In order to answer the third question (i.e., is there a relationship between writing anxiety and students’ writing achievement?), Pearson correlation was performed. The anxiety rate was compared to the mark students received in their essay test. Results indicate that there is a significant negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing achievement at $p < .01$. Students who got high marks on their essays had low anxiety rates and vice versa. This result is aligned with various studies (Abdel Latif, 2007; Al Asmari, 2013; Daly, 1978; Erkan & Saban, 2011; Hassan, 2001). It also emphasizes how anxiety can negatively affect writing.

To get a clearer picture on the types of anxieties that are correlated with writing achievement, multiple regression stepwise analysis was used. The data indicate that two anxieties had significant negative correlations with writing achievement. *I forget everything when I start to work on an English essay* ($\beta = -.472, t = -3.304, p = .002$) is highly significant and is associated with the less successful students; mainly most of the students who received low marks on their essay test experienced this type of anxiety. The second anxiety is *If my English essay is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade* ($\beta = -.303, t = -2.214, p = .033$), this type of anxiety is dominant among the less successful students.

From the results, it can be concluded that writing anxiety is one of the causes of low writing achievement. Writing achievement decreases for students who exhibit high anxiety rates. Less successful students panic twice, at the beginning of the writing task and if the essay is to be evaluated. It can be noticed from the results that the writing process itself carries too much tension for the less successful students. Evaluation is also another key to anxiety; the fear of getting a poor grade or of being criticized for their low performance might lead to awkward writing. This result is in line with Abdel Latif (2007), Leki (1999) and Daly (1978) who reported that students with high writing anxiety fear criticism. Accordingly, they don’t show their essays to anyone unless they are required to do so.

Results of the Semi-Structured Interview

Below are the questions raised in the interview and the students' responses; the researcher classified the students based on their writing achievement (successful and less successful students).

1. Do you panic while writing? Why?

1a. Successful students

Successful students didn't have any fears regarding writing. They attributed this to practicing writing frequently, they even practice writing outside class. Successful students take essay writing seriously, since it is the core of all other subjects.

Student A: *"... if you are a good writer then you will be able to achieve high marks in other subjects, since all the questions in other subjects are essay questions and require an elaborate answer"*

Successful students follow the essay structure even in answering questions in other subjects.

Student B: *"... in other subjects like Drama or criticism, I first write an introductory paragraph with a thesis statement in the end. From the thesis statement I develop the other paragraphs"*

Student C: *"... Following the essay structure in all subjects helps me organize my answer"*

1b. Less successful students

Unlike successful students, less successful students experience anxiety while writing. They are afraid that their writing will not be appreciated, and that the teacher will criticize their writing. Lack of confidence in their writing and in their English in general was common among the less successful students.

2. How do you plan your essay?

2a. Successful students

Successful students are very keen about planning their essays, they believe that the first step is crucial. If the first step goes badly the whole essay will be affected. Students give the Pre-writing stage ample time from 20 to 45 minutes in a two-hour writing session. Some students spend a lot of time thinking (pre-writing stage) to the degree that they don't find time to revise their writing. In the pre-writing stage, some students brainstorm ideas by using mind maps.

2b. Less successful students

Unsuccessful students don't follow meticulous plans while writing; some write points on the topic before they start writing, then write the first draft. Some write the introduction in Arabic then translate it into English. One of the students mentioned that the ideas she writes about are sometimes scattered and not well connected to the task. When they were asked about the time they give each process, their answers were that they give the pre-writing stage 2 to 10 minutes brainstorming ideas, then they start writing the essay. They are unconscious about the time limit; therefore, they might end the task without revising their writing due to lack of time.

3. Where does essay writing stand among your preferred subjects?

3a. Successful students

For successful students, essay is at the top of their list of preferred subjects.

3b. Less successful students

For less successful students, essay is the least preferred subject. They further added that they don't like writing.

Conclusion

The current study investigated writing strategy use, writing anxiety and their impact on writing achievement. The researcher administered the Writing Strategies Inventory by Petric and Czarl (2003) and the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) by Cheng (2004). Data collected from the writing strategies inventory were compared to those of the (SLWAI), results revealed that two writing strategies had positive correlations with writing anxiety *"I stop after a few sentences or a whole paragraph covering one idea"* and *"I compare my paper with the essays written by my friends on the same topic"* whereas two writing strategies had negative correlations with writing anxiety *"I start with the introduction"* and *"I use a monolingual dictionary"*. On the other hand, writing achievement proved to correlate negatively with writing anxiety; two types of anxieties showed significance and negative correlations with writing achievement *"I forget everything when I start to work on an English essay"* and *"If my English essay is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade"*. The two mentioned anxieties are common among less successful students, and this might be a cause for their low performance in essay writing. The relationship between writing strategies and writing performance was examined, *"I check my mistakes after I get back the paper with the feedback from the teacher, and try to learn from them"* was a common strategy among successful students, *"I look at a model written by a native speaker or more proficient writer"* and *"I write bits of the text in my native language and then translate them into English"* were common strategies among less successful students. The significance of the study lies in portraying the common writing strategies among successful students. Educators should help in enhancing these strategies since they have shown to have an impact on writing achievement. The study also presented writing strategies that correlated negatively with writing anxiety. Writing strategies that are common among low anxious students can help to ease the writing process and relieve the tension among the high anxious students. The study further examined the common types of anxiety among less successful students, this can help educators understand the level and the form of anxiety that students experience while writing.

The Author

Mariam Gibriel is a PhD holder and lecturer of English at October University for Modern Science and Arts in Egypt. Her areas of interest include teaching English as a foreign language and children's literature.

Faculty of Languages
October University for Modern Science and Arts (MSA)
Cairo, Egypt.
Email: mgibriel@hotmail.com

References

- Abdel Latif, M. (2007). The factors accounting for the Egyptian EFL university students' negative writing affect. *Essex Graduate Student Papers in Language & Linguistics*, 9, 57-82.
- Al Asmari, A. (2013). Investigation of writing strategies, writing apprehension, and writing achievement among Saudi EFL-major students. *International Education Studies*, 6, 130-143.
- Baker, W., & Boonkit, K. (2004). Learning strategies in reading and writing: EAP contexts. *Regional Language Centre Journal*, 35(3), 299-328.
- Bai, B., Hu, G., & Gu, P. (2014). The relationship between writing strategies and English proficiency in Singapore primary schools. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 23, 355-365.
- Bloom, L. Z. (1980). The composing processes of anxious and non-anxious writers: A naturalistic study. *ERIC Conference in College Composition and Communication*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED185559)
- Book, V. (1976). *Some effects of apprehension on writing performance*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Western Speech Communication Association.
- Celce-Murcia, M. (1991). *Language teaching methodology*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Cheng, Y.-S. (2004). A measure of second language writing anxiety: Scale development and preliminary validation. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 313-335.
- Cohen, A. D. (1998). *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. London: Longman.
- Daly, J. (1978). Writing apprehension and writing competency research. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 9, 242-249.
- Erkan, D. Y., & Saban, A. İ. (2011). Writing performance relative to writing apprehension, self-efficacy in writing, and attitudes towards writing: A correlational study in Turkish tertiary-level EFL. *Asian EFL Journal*, 13(1), 164-192.
- Fowler, B., & Kroll, B. M. (1980). Relationship of apprehension about writing to performance as measured by grades in a college course on composition. *Psychological Reports*, 46, 583-586.
- Gibriel, M. (2017). A cross-sectional study of Egyptian EFL student-teachers' vocabulary size. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 14(1), 189-196.
- Hassan, B. A. (2001). The relationship of writing apprehension and self-esteem to the writing quality and quantity of EFL university students. *Mansoura Faculty of Education Journal*. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED459671.pdf>
- Hayes, J. R., & Flower, L. (1986). Writing research and the writer. *American Psychologist*, 41, 1106-1113. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.10.1106>
- Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 112-126.
- Leki, I. (1999). Techniques for reducing second language writing anxiety. In D. J. Young (Ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp. 64-88). Boston: McGraw-Hill College.
- Petric, C. B., & Czár, B. (2003). Validating a writing strategy questionnaire. *System*, 31(2), 187-215.
- Powers, W. G., Cook, J. A., & Meyers, R. (1979). The effect of compulsory writing on writing apprehension. *Research in Teaching of English*, 13, 225-230.
- Rezaeia, M., & Jafarib, M. (2014). Investigating the levels, types, and causes of writing anxiety among Iranian EFL students: A mixed method design. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1545-1554.
- Sommers, N. (2006). Across the drafts. *College Composition and Communication*, 58(2), 248-257.
- Zamel, Z. (1982). Writing: The process of discovering meaning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16(2), 195-209.