

The Foreign Language Writing Anxiety of Japanese University Students

Lidija Elliott, Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore foreign language writing anxiety among non-English major students enrolled in an English academic writing course in Japan. The study used questionnaires to survey 25 second-year university students to evaluate the challenges causing anxiety while writing academic papers. Results revealed that there are six primary causes of students' anxiety over their writing: time pressure for writing tasks, low self-confidence, writing rules, the presence of competitiveness, concerns about accuracy, shame, and emotional isolation. Based on the findings, the author suggests possible solutions for motivating students in the classroom. These activities may help students mitigate feelings of anxiety, which may lead to greater self-confidence, thereby potentially increasing learning results and decreasing the dropout of high-risk students in EFL settings.

Keywords: EFL, Writing Anxiety, Language Classroom, Challenges, Solutions

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Introduction

The majority of educational institutions in Japan require students to take English classes as English language proficiency is a critical skill for academic success. This is due to its application in various academic writing genres, including conference presentations, research proposals, theses/dissertations, or journal articles, (Ho, 2016). Many English language learners often express feelings of stress and anxiety when speaking or writing in English. Students with high anxiety levels end up skipping lessons and would rather not enroll in English writing courses (Cheng, 2002). Therefore Academic writing is considered to be a complex task for many ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) writers because of its intricate nature coupled with the lack of vocabulary in the writers' repertoire and the handicap in their grammatical knowledge of the English language (Sabhi et al., 2019). The study aims to investigate the challenges students face while taking English writing courses, and it further proposes solutions for overcoming the obstacles and improving their writing skills.

Literature Review

English language learners tend to experience writing anxiety, characterized by feeling worried about writing in a language they are still learning. Anxiety, alongside other sentimental variables, has the potential to influence the students' writing in the classroom significantly. In academic literature, writing anxiety is synonymous with writing block, writing apprehension, or composition anxiety (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). A study by Qadir, Bostanci, and Kurt 2021, showed that students at all levels of English proficiency struggle with writing anxiety in English as a foreign language. Prior research was initially focused on speaking anxiety, neglecting other relevant skills, including writing (Hislop, 2021; Horwitz, 2001). However, recent research has concentrated on writing anxiety. Studies have shown the high potential for students with writing anxiety to lack the motivation to write, have a negative disposition towards writing tasks, have poor impressions of their writing, produce subpar papers, and evade situations that involve writing (Cheng, 2002, 2004; Latif, 2007; Sanders-Reio et al., 2014). Studies have also explored various sources of anxiety while writing (Cheng, 2004; Choi, 2013), including idea organization and development during the process of writing (Jawas, 2019), low writing competence (or the perceived lack, including poor academic vocabulary and grammatical knowledge) (Yu, 2020), and the fear of negative feedback from teachers or peers (Hislop & Stracke, 2017) and the inability to get past previous negative experiences. Despite the extensive research, there was no consensus in the literature regarding if there was a change in the student's anxiety following observable academic progress (Qadir et al., 2021).

Research questions

This study aims to address the research questions as follows:

RQ1. What are the challenges students face while writing in English?

RQ2. What are the possible causes of these challenges?

RQ3. What are some recommendations for overcoming these challenges and improving the writing skills of EFL students?

Following the questionnaire, data analysis was performed on the response, which revealed six primary sources of writing anxiety: Low self-confidence, time pressure, competitiveness

(frequently comparing with peers), poor writing ability, shame, emotional isolation, and fear of making mistakes.

Methodology

Participants & Setting

Participants consisted of 25 second-year non-English majors, at a Japanese university. Classes met once a week and lasted 100 minutes. A typical session begins with freewriting, conducted in a ten-minute time interval, followed by group discussions before the teacher introduces the lesson. Workshops were often held during the second part of the instructional period. At the end of each semester, the students wrote two essays.

At the start of the semester, students completed the first questionnaire. The questions included were designed to make general inquiries about the student's views on academic writing and what they expect in the forthcoming semester. Following a review of the responses, it was observed that many students expressed anxiety. Consequently, another questionnaire was distributed at the end of the first semester, focusing on their concerns about English writing during the academic writing class.

Data Collection

A qualitative questionnaire, written in English was developed as the instrument for data collection. To ensure honest feedback, student participation was completely voluntary and anonymous.

Challenges

Writing Anxiety

EFL students who are given academic assignments often struggle with writing anxiety. This can potentially lead to debilitating effects, as reported in a study by Khattak et al. (2011), which hinders students from reaching their goals. In addition, anxiety often manifests as feelings of worry, helplessness, and unease, especially with non-English speakers. Despite the numerous possible anxiety-inducing parameters, the following were commonly reported by EFL students:

Low Self-Confidence

Learning English as a foreign language is often considered challenging, making EFL students feel uncertain about their fluency and ability to express themselves in academic English writing. As one of my student noted "*I am terrible in English writing. I make a lot of mistakes.*" A study by Rose (1984) identified negative self-talk as the root cause of writing blocks. According to Pajares & Johnson, (1994), this low self-confidence directly and negatively influences stress levels, particularly with non-native English students confronted with tasks that require demonstration of their abilities. Hence, students with the necessary writing skills who still struggle to perform are expected to address their writing anxiety. Cheng (2004) proposes a practical approach to enhance student confidence and decrease frustration with the writing process by helping them set real attainable goals, which build self-confidence through repeated successful experiences.

Time Pressure

It was shown that students often run out of deadlines because in the writing process, students need to brainstorm ideas, organize ideas, draft, re-read their writing (Hedge, 1988, as cited in Alfaki, 2015). Insufficient time to finish a writing exercise has been associated with the feeling of excessive worry among EFL students. This often causes an inability to complete assignments or tasks that reflect their true abilities. The instructors tend to give EFL students similar deadlines or timeframes as to native English-speaking students without recognizing the added stress that this action imposes on the student's academic performance. The time limitation and feeling overwhelmed by 'temporal overload' leave students anxious and eager to find shortcuts (Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003).

Competitiveness

University-level students often experience an underlying sense of rivalry that exacerbates anxiety. Comments like these frequently appeared in the reflections: "*My friends are better than me at grammar*", "*Especially, I am lack of vocabulary*" and "*My classmates know more more vocabulary*". This classroom competition could also be detrimental to students' well-being, including their performance in writing. This pressure, whether self-imposed, from classmates, or from family expectations of outperforming others (both perceived or real) could negatively affect their self-efficacy should their results not align with their expectations (Murray, 2019) Failure to meet expectations can hurt their mental well-being, as well as their writing performance. Students were continually comparing their writing abilities and progress with classmates. Surprisingly, this was a belief shared among both higher and lower-level students.

Poor Writing Ability

A majority of students reported frustration and confusion with the transition in writing rules and guidelines between secondary and higher education levels. This includes inflexible writing rules, proofreading prematurely in the writing process, improper planning, having a negative attitude toward writing, or incorrect evaluation. Moreover, some students who gain confidence in academic writing are often confronted by a new set of complex and confounding rules. Some students reported struggling with balancing their perceived abilities with the fast-evolving expectations of academic English writing.

Shame and Emotional Isolation

According to the findings of questionnaires, students often mention experiencing feelings of isolation about their concerns with academic writing, "*My friend is better write*" or "*I don't know writing*" etc. The students did not attempt to discuss these feelings with one another. In addition to the instructors' comments, the shame experienced was increased, when the participants felt alone in their struggle to write in the English language. A study by Hashemi (2011) highlighted that a participant using terms like 'losing face' associated language anxiety with concepts like "face" in certain cultures – particularly in the Asian context. Similarly, a veteran female teacher noted, "*It is not just anxiety about language but differences in cultural practices.*"

The Fear to Make Mistakes

EFL students feel ashamed or embarrassed when discussing their writing with peers and teachers, fearing inaccuracies in their work. The teacher has noticed more anxiety when mistakes are shared with the whole class compared to a private discussion between a student and a teacher. In addition, word selection and vocabulary are as crucial as organization, grammar, and spelling. As reported by Hislop (2021), students studying English as a foreign language are concerned about making grammatical errors, improper word use, and making mistakes in APA citations. Since having a firm grasp on these concepts proves to be challenging for non-English speaking students, submitting written assignments for assessment becomes particularly stressful. The prospect of their abilities being scrutinized adds another layer of anxiety. Students often wrote that they lacked the ability to write in academic English and some students wrote that their main goal was to develop native-level English academic writing skills.

Solutions

The circumstances of overwhelmed EFL students feeling anxious about academic English writing can be improved using the recommended solutions as follows:

Additional Time Allowances (Time Limitation)

Providing EFL students additional time to complete writing tasks, can help reduce the anxiety experienced inside and outside the learning environment. This approach can also be applied to pre-writing assignments like researching, brainstorming, outline creation, and drafting. Breaking down writing assignments into smaller, more manageable segments with extended deadlines can significantly reduce anxiety for EFL students. Additionally, providing advanced notice of timed writing exercises in the classroom allows for better preparation, ultimately increasing their chances of success.

Another strategy is providing students with extended time frames at the start of the term and progressively reducing the allotted time as students get used to writing academic papers under time pressure.

This approach does not mean students should not be accountable for meeting deadlines. Deadlines are expected to reflect appropriate expectations for EFL students. This flexibility aims to encourage students to produce their best work, and not to procrastinate.

Segmented Writing Practices

Many students reported significant levels of anxiety when asked to write single-draft assignments, therefore splitting the process of writing into several classes and steps is potentially useful to increase students' understanding of the intricacies of academic writing. Providing clear, detailed instructions and a chance to get feedback during each step—from brainstorming ideas, creating the outlines, text organization, and writing several drafts to improve the work—can significantly boost student confidence while writing in English.

Peer and Group Writing Exercises

Group exercises and peer projects reduce stress levels for EFL students taking academic writing courses. There has been an upsurge in these forms of student-focused activities following the publication of seminal research by Elbow (1968). This study paved the way for increased interest in investigating students' beliefs about peer review as well as its effectiveness. Kurihara (2016) indicates that peer feedback could improve student writing abilities in EFL classrooms.

Students expressed the significance of collaborating with peers whether during the brainstorming process or while editing. Through this approach, the student's perspective expands, and it heightens an awareness of the fact that other students struggle as well in this regard. Furthermore, the capability to work collaboratively is strengthened, inciting the potential for students to think analytically about writing. Teachers can model giving positive feedback and lastly fostering a supportive environment where classmates are viewed as colleagues rather than critics or competitors also helps students feel less anxious and isolated.

Confidence-Building and Corrections Practices

EFL students often complain about instructors using a red pen to point out their mistakes. This frequently contributes to greater writing anxiety. The method adopted to identify and correct errors also potentially affects the students' anxiety levels, although rectifying mistakes is an anticipated requirement. According to a report by Krashen (1982), error rectification is to be considered “a serious mistake” (p. 74). This is because “the practice of correcting errors has the potential to immediately make students defensive” (p. 75).

A possible strategy to alleviate the fears associated with corrective action is to acknowledge student accomplishments before identifying the areas in need of improvement. Furthermore, pessimism and hopelessness after grading are possibly eliminated by showing students the areas they have made progress. As a form of positive introduction, the instructors are in a position to help students through the process of identifying key areas to develop, serve as a model in defining realistic and attainable goals, and aid in developing an action plan required for skills acquisition, particularly for the skills needed to refine academic writing. In addition, feedback is not designed to deter EFL students, as reported in a study by Al-Bashir, Kabir, and Rahman (2016). Evidently, paying attention to aspects of the coursework that are not as effective is crucial, nonetheless, instructors have to exercise caution when delivering any form of ‘negative feedback.’ The approach of providing feedback constructively makes it possible for teachers to augment the learning environment.

Participating in Activities Aimed at Improving Fluency

The engagement of EFL students in less stressful activities geared towards increasing fluency is another method of reducing writing anxiety instead of reinforcing accuracy via consistent revision of high-stakes projects. Furthermore, practicing with frequent writing exercises independent of scoring systems reduces the overwhelming pressure students face. This further allows space for exploration and improvement in fluency with time through a process devoid of fearful experiences, worry, or concerns about being penalized.

Students and instructors may benefit greatly from engaging in daily or periodical journaling, participating in question-and-answer sessions, and writing exercises based on reading. In

addition, students are encouraged to express themselves better when excused by the pressures of grading and criticism, thus, enabling the instructors to more precisely evaluate their writing ability and identify areas in need of further development.

Emotional Support

A significant reduction in the effect of stress associated with writing may be achieved by providing EFL students with emotional support. This approach facilitates stress management, particularly with mentorship from peers learning English as a foreign language and getting feedback from instructors in an empathetic way. Teacher emotional support could directly influence college students' engagement (e.g., Crawford, 2018; Xu et al., 2020), create a supportive atmosphere, and cultivate students' sense of belonging and affinity to the classroom. When students receive teachers' emotional support that can meet their psychological needs in the learning process, they will have the internal motivation to continue to complete the given learning task (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Students who perceived high levels of emotional support from the teacher reported that the teacher made eye contact and smiled at them in class (Shen et al., 2024).

Study Limitations

The current research presented several shortcomings that need to be addressed. First, the limited study size. Second data was collected at the beginning of the course and again at the end of the semester. Regular questionnaires throughout the writing process may have revealed at what stages students experience higher levels of anxiety. Third, all questions and answers were written by students in English. If they wrote in Japanese it would ensure more effective communication.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on personal teaching experiences and practical English course instruction, researchers are encouraged to develop several methods with the potential to help students of foreign languages improve their writing skills and overcome challenges. In addition, further studies focused on the connections between anxiety, language learning methodologies, self-esteem, and personalities are essential to gaining a deeper knowledge of anxiety experienced by EFL students and improving English writing course quality.

Conclusion

This study showed that students are anxious about writing activities. In addition, students are concerned about time limitations for writing tasks, low self-confidence, writing rules, the presence of students' competitiveness, concerns about accuracy, as well as shame and emotional isolation. One of the significant modifiers of stress levels in EFL students is providing flexible timelines. This allows students to collaborate on writing, editing, and correcting their projects more effectively. In addition, other approaches to alleviate stress include inspiring confidence through corrective practices, integrating exercises that build fluency, and providing sufficient emotional support. Helping students to become self-confident while writing in English, potentially reduces their anxiety level.

Although the classroom environment will never be anxiety-free and students are expected to be accountable for their academic achievement, an awareness of the activities that cause the

most anxiety can help instructors try to mitigate these anxieties and make a better learning environment in the classroom.

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