

Exploring Writing Test Anxiety Among EFL University Students in the Saudi Context

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was threefold: (1) to investigate the levels of EFL writing anxiety, (2) identify the types of EFL writing anxiety, and (3) to find out the main causes of EFL writing anxiety. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed. The participants consisted of 200 students enrolled in different disciplines at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Both Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) were used to collect data. The findings revealed that the majority of students (60%) experienced a high level of writing anxiety, whereas 8% of students exhibited a low level of it. In addition, cognitive anxiety was found to be the most dominant type of anxiety, while avoidance behavior was at the other end of the bar. Furthermore, causes of EFL writing anxiety among Saudi university students were in the following order: linguistic difficulties, time pressure, insufficient writing technique, insufficient writing practice, fear of teacher's negative comments, fear of writing tests, and low self-confidence in writing.

Keywords: EFL writing anxiety, cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, avoidance behavior, cognitive strategies

1. Introduction

Writing in English has become an essential part of life for all students of English, from the simplest content to the most complex parts of writing. University students are required to compose different types of writing tasks, such as essays, research papers, and other types of creative assignments. Writing is also a skill that students will need for the future, and that is why it is really important to develop it to an appropriate level. Learners, when writing should reflect on their writing and feel it as well. That is why they may find it uneasy (Cheng, 2002). Moreover, writing requires them to express themselves, develop their confidence, and enjoy writing using their L2 (Kurt & Atay, 2007).

Unfortunately, the majority of students fail to enhance their writing skills even after completing high school education. That is due to a combination of reasons, such as limited vocabulary, insufficient writing practices, poor skills of effectively structuring ideas, and poor grammar skills (Aljafen, 2013; Alnufaie & Grenfell, 2013; AlShboul & Huwari, 2015). These reasons could eventually lead to writing anxiety.

Writing anxiety is seen as a kind of anxiety that makes a student avoids all written tasks assigned to him/her, which are supposed to be graded by the teacher (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). According to Hassan (2001) writing anxiety is defined as “a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing” (p. 4). Therefore, the operational definition adopted in this research study is that writing anxiety refers to student stress, nervousness, and a variety of other negative emotions when given a writing assignment in certain situations.

As a consequence, a number of researchers tried to identify the causes of anxiety among language writers (e.g., Cheng, 2002; Hasni et al., 2021; Jebreil et al., 2015; Zhang, 2019). Rabadi and Rabadi (2020) summarized some main causes. The first main reason is found to be the lack of time required for planning, writing and reviewing. The second factor is the lack of good writing skills that include learning and practicing writing, generating ideas through brainstorming, organizing these ideas, and writing techniques such as calligraphy, punctuation and vocabulary. An additional cause is the negative comments from the teacher or students.

Despite the fact that many researchers around the world are studying language anxiety as it influences L2 learning, the importance of the current study stems from the fact that this area of research is under-investigated in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where this study takes place. Hence, the present research contributes to the existing literature by addressing this gap. This is achieved in three ways: First, by investigating the levels of EFL writing anxiety among university students; second, identifying the types of EFL writing anxiety among university students; and finally (3) finding out the main causes of EFL writing anxiety for university students. By so doing, the current study attempts to answer the following research questions:

Q1. What are the levels of EFL writing anxiety among Saudi university students?

Q2. What are the types of EFL writing anxiety among Saudi university students?

Q3. What are the main causes of EFL writing anxiety for Saudi university students?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Levels of Writing Anxiety

Writing anxiety levels can be divided into three categories: high, moderate, and low. In Turkey, Aslim Yetis (2017) investigated the level of writing anxiety among 22 Turkish students who studied French. Findings revealed that the overwhelming majority of students suffered from high level of anxiety when they needed to write in French.

In a different context, Masriani, Mukhaiyar, and Wahyuni (2018) investigated the L2 levels of writing anxiety among third year English department students of an Indonesian university. They employed SLWAI to collect data. Data analysis showed that all participants had moderate levels of L2 writing anxiety.

In the Saudi context, Aljafen (2013) investigated writing anxiety among Saudi male learners and instructors. He used the English Writing Apprehension/Attitude Test (EWAT) Scale. The findings revealed that all the participants experienced nearly identical moderate levels of writing anxiety.

In the same vein, Aloairdh (2019) examined writing anxiety among 105 female Saudi students enrolled in English language departments in various Saudi universities. Results indicated that the participants experienced moderate levels of writing anxiety.

2.2 Types of Writing Anxiety

Cheng (2004) outlines three types of writing anxiety: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior. Cognitive anxiety is considered the main type of language anxiety. Cognitive anxiety has to do with student mental abilities which get affected due to their negative or low expectations, being overconcerned with their performance, and worries about others' evaluations. In other words, a student may experience cognitive anxiety when he/she fears of negative evaluation of his/her written work by teachers, colleagues, or others. Kusumaningputri et al. (2018) explain that cognitive anxiety interferes with the process of writing. Additionally, anxious individuals are more concerned with the fear of their performance, and these thoughts interfere with the ability to pay attention, and prevent the student from using the cognitive processes that facilitate performance during the exam. Anxious students are unable to remember or use the information in hand. Thus, students who suffer from this type of anxiety are well advised to try to reduce it as much as they can by having positive thoughts about writing.

Second, somatic anxiety refers to the physiological effects of anxiety on students, such as feeling tense and nervous when they are assigned certain writing tasks. In their seminal work on the Affective Filter Hypothesis, Krashen and Terrell (1983) argue that student fear could affect learning efficiency negatively, may interfere with learning tasks, may eventually reduce learner motivation to learn, and may be an obstacle for student writers to master their writing

skill. On the other hand, positive emotions enhance learning outcomes.

Finally, avoidance behavior refers to the behavioral reaction when students are anxious. Students who suffer from the avoidance behavior type of anxiety would tend to avoid taking any kind of language writing course or tend to avoid writing behavior altogether (El-Shimi, 2017).

2.3 Causes of Writing Anxiety

Researchers have been scrutinizing the causes of writing anxiety over the past few decades, and they have outlined a number of main causes. The first cause is found to be student low self-confidence (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Another cause of writing anxiety is linguistic difficulties (Wahyuni et al., 2019). An additional source of writing anxiety is time pressure, which Rahim et al. (2016) believe that it is the primary cause of writing anxiety.

Zhang (2011) concludes that the main causes of writing anxiety among Chinese students of English as a Second Language (ESL) are emerging from lack of topical knowledge, linguistic difficulties, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence. Similarly, Aslim Yetis (2017) outlines a number of factors that lead to writing anxiety upon examining 22 Turkish students who attended French Writing Activities. Such factors included proficiency levels, attitudes towards writing, the composing-process, classmates, time pressures on writing activities, and teacher's attitudes toward students.

Rezaei and Jafari (2014) add that students experience writing anxiety when they fear of teachers' negative feedback. Overcrowded classrooms is another source of writing anxiety among students (Monks & Schmidt, 2010). Hidayatim (2018) posits that English competence, native language interference, motivation, and reading habits are additional factors that cause student writing anxiety. Meek (2020) shows that bad study habits, poor past test performance, and unrealistic expectations contribute to student writing anxiety.

In Palestine, Jabali (2018) shows that students in the English Department at Alnajah University are negatively affected in their written production due to a low level of language and writing abilities in both L1 and L2. Similarly, Hammad (2016) argues that student lack of linguistic knowledge, cohesion errors, poor academic style, and using word-for-word translation tools when writing are the main problems.

In the Saudi educational setting, the feeling of writing anxiety is often present in EFL classes due to fearing negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and negative attitudes toward the English class (Alrabai, 2014; Alrabai, 2015; Al-Saraj, 2014; Alshahrani & Alandal, 2015). Asif (2017) explains that Saudi EFL students tend to be afraid of making errors. This leads them to give up attempts in order to avoid making errors in front of their peers. It is also concluded that lack of English vocabulary and a discouraging classroom environment are major causes of anxiety among students. Moreover, Tanveer (2007) identifies specific factors that contribute to language anxiety in the Saudi EFL context. They include, but not limited to, a threatening classroom atmosphere, the lack of learners' involvement in class discussion and decision making, a competitive learning atmosphere where learners work against each other instead of cooperating, and overcrowded EFL classes.

Likewise, Aloairdh (2019) examined the sources of writing anxiety among 105 female Saudi students enrolled in English language departments in various Saudi universities. Aloairdh confirms that evaluation, generating ideas, grammar, time pressure, and lack of confidence are the main sources of writing anxiety. In addition, recent evidence suggests that other factors affecting students are teaching approach, textbooks, learning materials, class sizes, motivation, poor linguistic skills, attitudes, unqualified teachers, writing difficulties, insufficient practice inside and outside classrooms, and assessment tools.

2.4 Consequences of Writing Anxiety

Anxiety, in general, is “one of the factors that affect the process of learning” (Kara, 2013, p. 104). Writing anxiety, in particular, leads to weakness and lack of concentration on the part of the recipient learner as well as a deterioration in the initial input level of the linguistic components to be acquired. It plays a crucial role at the different stages of learning, especially if the task in hand is ability-dependent and challenging (Ganschow & Sparks, 1996).

The affective filter hypothesis establishes the relationship between affective factors and the process of second language (L2) acquisition by hypothesizing that learners vary in the hardness or level of their affective filters. On one hand, those whose feelings about the L2 are inappropriate for their acquisition will tend to seek less input, and they will also have a higher or harder affective filter. Also, even when they understand the linguistic content of the input, it will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition or the language acquisition system. In other words, weak motivation and low self-confidence make this device narrows or closes, so the student does not accept linguistic input, and if he/she accepts something from it, he/she does not understand it fully, nor will he/she acquire it

On the other hand, those with emotions more conducive to L2 acquisition will seek more linguistic input, and they will also have a lower or weaker filter than their counterparts. They will be more open to linguistic input, and it will reach deeper depths. Put it another way, in the state of psychological comfort, strong motivation, and high self-confidence, the filter expands upon the learner. Then he/she accepts and understands the linguistic input, and then acquires it (Al-Osaili, 2006; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Consequently, writing anxiety can act as a disabling factor that could make the previously acquired information get stuck and become useless to the learner. Thus, it is an analytical sequence, indicating that writing anxiety can affect, in one way or another, language learning situations, whether during initial learning practices (inputting information and absorbing the new target language) or during using this information in the form of language production (extracting information). This inevitably increases students’ fear that would make them unable to achieve their educational objectives (Horwitz et al., 1986).

2.5 Teacher Role in Writing Anxiety

Teachers play a crucial role in student writing anxiety. Their teaching practices can help decrease or increase the level of writing anxiety among their learners. Therefore, understanding student behaviors and sources of motivation is critical for student success (Fan & Williams, 2018). However, teachers sometimes feel that they do not have the ability to be creative enough

in a way that accommodates different types and needs of learners (Alhazmi, 2010).

In addition, research provides evidence that teachers sometimes contribute to student writing anxiety in several ways. One example is when teachers religiously adhere to the given curriculum (Alhazmi, 2010). An additional reason happens when teachers have to deal with overcrowded classrooms. This negatively affects teachers who strive to develop students in English proficiency due to the fact that not all students will be able to participate in the classroom activities (Monks & Schmidt, 2010).

Likewise, Mupa and Chinooneka (2015) found that lack of using various teaching methods, inability to make good use of media in teaching and learning, dependence exclusively on textbooks and syllabi were the major traits that trigger writing anxiety among learners. Moreover, other researchers, for instance, Rezaei and Jafari (2014) and Alfiansyah et al. (2017) warned that teachers' negative comments on students' writing can hinder students' progress because learning cannot really take place in such harsh and uncondusive teaching and learning environments.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants of the current study consisted of 200 freshmen students enrolled in different disciplines at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, e.g., College of Arts and Humanities, College of Science, College of Engineering, College of Medicine, Community College, College of Communication and Mass Communication, and College of Computing and Information Technology. They have to pass four levels of the English language, and after the first year, each student specializes in the field he/she desires. In most disciplines, they are taught in English, and the exams are also in English.

3.2 Instruments

This study employed two instruments to collect data. First, Cheng's (2004) the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was used to measure the participants' types and levels of writing anxiety. This scale was selected because it has been found highly valid and reliable. Its Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was really high 0.91 (Cheng, 2004). The questionnaire is a self-reported measure which includes 22 items scored on a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), uncertain (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). There were seven items in the scale that were worded negatively and needed contrary scoring before being summarized to gain the whole scores for three types and levels of writing anxiety.

Second, the study also deployed Rezaei and Jafari's (2014) Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWA) to examine the participants' causes of writing anxiety. This instrument was selected because it is widely accepted in the field. It is a 10-item five-point Likert questionnaire, ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), uncertain (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5).

3.3 Data Analysis

This research is descriptive in nature. The quantitative and qualitative data collected through both SLWAI and CWAI were numerically coded and then analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software for Windows 20.0. ANOVA and t-test analyses were carried out to answer the posed three research questions. Descriptive statistics such as numbers, percentages, means, and standard deviations were presented and interpreted.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Levels of Writing Anxiety

To answer to the first question, SLWAI was used. As seen in Table 1 below, the levels of writing anxiety are divided into three levels: high, moderate and low. It was found that 60% of the students (120) experienced high level of writing anxiety, while 32% of them (64) experienced moderate level of writing anxiety. However, only 8% of the students (16) experienced low level of writing anxiety. Therefore, it can be concluded that most of the students experience high level of writing anxiety.

Table 1. Levels of Students' Writing Anxiety Based on the Total Score of SLWAI

	Number of Students	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Percentage (%)
TOTAL	200	45	79	100%
High Anxiety	120	69	81	60%
Moderate Anxiety	64	52	63	32%
Low Anxiety	16	40	47	8%

The results of the present research support that of previous studies where most of the participants experienced a high level of EFL writing anxiety (e.g., Aslim Yetis, 2017; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Syarifudin, 2020). However, this finding contradicts some other studies such as Aljafen (2013), Aloairdh (2019), and Masriani, Mukhaiyar, and Wahyuni (2018), which indicated moderate writing anxiety levels.

The high level of writing anxiety among university students in Saudi Arabia can be attributed to the given context of EFL in Saudi Arabia, in which university students perceive of evaluation situations as a threat. As a result, their mental functions get affected: their concentration tends to be distracted, and their memories seem to weaken. All these factors negatively impact their performance during writing assignments.

The high level of EFL writing anxiety in Saudi Arabia is due to several factors. The most important one is that the English language is taught from the fourth grade. Despite studying English from a young age, learners remain incapable of communicating effectively using the

language. Moreover, students may only gain basic writing and reading skills (Alrabi, 2011). Alosaimi (2007) also mentions that poor command of English among Saudi EFL students persists regardless of the government's efforts to improve the learning of English. The influence of Saudi students' mother tongue may be a major obstacle to learning English. In addition, insufficient exposure to English in day-to-day life, and the absence of learning English from the beginning of primary school tend to prevent students from being effective communicators, whether in spoken or written English (Al-Nasser, 2015). Having said that, it is important to note that despite the fact that there are some students who may have difficulty with learning a foreign language, others are more professional or experienced who can manage to reduce their natural anxiety and convert it into a motivating power. Unfortunately, those with exaggerated anxiety may give up.

4.2 Types of Writing Anxiety

To answer the second question, the mean of each type of writing anxiety was measured based on SLWAI. As shown in Table 2 below, the mean of cognitive anxiety was found to be 25.3; somatic anxiety was 23.7, and avoidance behavior was 21.8. Thus, cognitive anxiety had the highest mean; somatic anxiety came second, while avoidance behavior had the lowest mean. This means that cognitive anxiety is the dominant type of writing anxiety among Saudi university students.

Table 2. The Mean of Each Type of Writing Anxiety

Types of Writing Anxiety	Number of Students	Total Score	Mean
Cognitive Anxiety	200	5060	25.3
Somatic Anxiety	200	4740	23.7
Avoidance Behavior	200	4360	21.8

This finding is in accordance with the results documented in other studies, such as (El Shimi, 2017; Jebril et al., 2015; Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017; Masriani et al., 2018; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Wahyuni & Umam, 2017; Zhang, 2011). In these studies, cognitive anxiety came first, followed by somatic anxiety, while avoidance behavior had the lowest mean. However, the dominant type of writing anxiety was different in a number of other studies (e.g., Alfiansyah et al., 2017; Ekmekçi, 2018; Min & Rahmat, 2014). These three studies revealed that somatic anxiety was the most common type of writing anxiety.

Thus, cognitive anxiety seems to be the most prevailing type of anxiety among Saudi university students. That could be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, Saudi EFL learners tend to have negative expectations. Secondly, they seem to pay a lot of attention to some external factors, for instance, their peers' and teachers' feedback and evaluation on their writing performance. Thirdly, they are worried about tests and evaluation in English writing thanks to

the high-stakes tests they have to sit.

4.3 Causes of Writing Anxiety

CWAI was employed to answer the third question. Table 3 below indicates item 6 marked the highest percentage (13.3%). Therefore, it can be claimed that the primary source of writing anxiety is linguistic difficulties, followed by time pressure (12.6%). Insufficient writing technique came third (12.2%), followed by insufficient writing practice (12.0%). Fear of teacher's negative comments had a percentage of (11.9%), followed by fear of writing tests (10.8%). The item with the lowest percentage was low self-confidence in writing (5.5%).

Table 3. The Score and Percentage of Each Item of CWAI

Item No.	Item	Item Score	Item Percent
1	Fear of negative evaluation	597	11.9%
2	Fear of writing tests	586	10.8%
3	Insufficient writing practice	600	12.0%
4	Insufficient writing technique	602	12.2%
5	Lack of topical knowledge	519	8.1%
6	Language difficulties	610	13.3%
7	Pressure for perfect work	427	6.9%
8	High frequency of writing	422	6.7%
9	Time pressure	605	12.6%
10	Low self-confidence	420	5.5%
TOTAL		5388	100%

Thus, linguistic difficulties appear to be the main cause of writing anxiety in this study. It is not surprising that linguistic difficulties are the dominant cause since it requires extra efforts and time. It can be inferred that EFL university students in Saudi Arabia may face anxiety in writing for various reasons, such as they lack experience in writing, have limited vocabulary range, make fatal grammatical errors, and confuse sentence structures and spellings.

In addition, time pressure seems to play a major role in writing anxiety. It can be concluded that the time allotted for writing assignments at universities in Saudi Arabia is not enough for students to complete the writing task. This eventually raises the chances for committing more writing mistakes, which may result in poor writing performance (Alfiansyah et al., 2017).

It is widely accepted that the Saudi educational system is measurement-driven, where assessment and grades are a big part of it. Consequently, such context may place more burdens on the student and make them feel more anxious about failure and getting low grades. This, in turn, negatively affects their academic performance as a whole and their writing performance in particular. They may also have major problems focusing on the task in their hands, and they

may leave it altogether.

The finding of this study is in line with Liu and Ni (2015) who found that writing anxiety consists of three main factors, namely self-confidence in writing in English, dislike of writing in English, and anxiety about evaluation after writing. The study also indicates that writing anxiety negatively affects students' performance in the English writing test.

Similarly, this outcome supports that of Alico (2016) who found that the causes of writing anxiety are negative feedback and non-constructive criticism whether it is provided by the teacher or peers. Other causes were also reported. They include the students' lack of confidence in their knowledge of grammatical rules, the constant feeling of uncertainty about writing grammatically correct sentences, and their lack of knowledge of the subject, especially when the subject is unfamiliar. This all seems to lead to the learners' inability to generate ideas on the subject. Finally, the fear of negative comments and evaluation is also documented as one of the main causes of writing anxiety: it would force the learner to resort to aimless writing (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014).

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the levels, types, and causes of EFL writing anxiety among university students in Saudi Arabia. It deployed both SLWAI and CWAI for data collection. Results indicated that Saudi university students experience a high level of EFL writing anxiety. It was also found that the most dominant type of writing anxiety at the Saudi universities is cognitive anxiety. Finally, linguistic difficulties were found to be the first cause of EFL writing anxiety.

To conclude, causes of EFL writing anxiety and students who suffer from high levels of it have to be dealt with judiciously. However, it is important to note that the right level of writing anxiety could be deemed a natural phenomenon. Some call it "normal anxiety" and consider it as positive and beneficial because it helps in situations that require additional preparation.

Anxiety can be a driving force to help prepare a student, who is preparing for a test, physically and psychologically to exert more effort, push themselves to increase study hours, make good use of time, gather their energy, and increase their state of alertness, attention and concentration. All of which help students to accomplish what is required of them (Al-Sherbiny, 2007).

6. Recommendations

Research provides ample evidence that students do feel nervous inside the classroom. Hence, to overcome this problem, teachers have to create warm welcoming classroom environment in which students feel secure and safe from every aspect. Students can get anxious because everything seems new and strange for them, like the building, culture, classroom, schools, teachers, and so on.

As documented earlier, teachers' ill practices could impact students' writing anxiety, especially

in the EFL setting. Therefore, EFL pre-service teachers in Saudi Arabia have to be trained and equipped in a way that help promote student progress. That is because research in the Saudi context suggests that the level of training EFL student teachers receive appears inadequate. Most of their knowledge of teaching, testing, and assessment is gained through the on-the-job experience rather than through teacher preparation programs at the university level. In addition, teacher-made tests do not meet test development standards. Furthermore, analysis of the level of assessment knowledge and skills among Saudi preparatory school EFL teachers showed that they need significant development to meet national and international standards (Alsamaani, 2014).

Finally, results of this study are hoped to be a stepping stone in the realm of research in the Saudi educational context. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate foreign language classroom anxiety, specifically focusing on the relationship between language anxiety and some other variables, such as language aptitude, ability, skills, and teaching methodology. Findings of this future research would give more insights and explain the complex interplay between these different variables.

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