

## **An Exploration into Foreign Language Writing Anxiety from Taiwanese University Students' Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

Many reports has been revealing that anxiety and negative emotion could appear and become an obstacle during language learners' language learning (e.g. Atay & Kurt, 2006; Cheng, 2001, 2004; Horwitz, 2001; Kurt & Atay, 2007; Leki, 1999). This qualitative study has been conducted to explore the anxiety the relevant reasons why university students in Taiwan feel anxious during their learning. Sixteen students in southern Taiwan had cooperated with the researcher to investigate their learning experience and major factors of anxiety in writing subject. The findings conceptualized from students' qualitative statements revealed five major issues that were directly regarded as significant reasons why university students in Taiwan might undergo the anxious period during their writing course at school.

### **大綱**

在 TEFL(以英語為外語)及 TESL(以英語作為第二語言) 研究領域內，有諸多重要研究(e.g. Atay & Kurt, 2006; Cheng, 2001, 2004; Horwitz, 2001; Kurt & Atay, 2007; Leki, 1999) 顯示焦慮和負面情緒可能會對學生在外語學習上造成阻礙。因此，本質性研

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究旨在探討台灣的大學生，在學習英文寫作的過程中感到焦慮之原因有哪些。本研究之受試者為就讀於國立中山大學主修外文的大學生，共計十六位，其中四位為男性、十二位為女性。研究者為能深入探討以前從未探討過之議題，故此研究採質性方法進行。

所有的受試者目前都正修習學校的必修課程英文寫作級數三。該英文寫作課以托福 (TOEFL) 考試之寫作題目做為培養學生寫作能力之練習教材。除此之外，該英文寫作課程也涵蓋教授英文自由詩、廣告文章等寫作方式。而該課程之主要授課重點在於論文寫作形式以及寫作技巧。

在英語寫作(EFL) (以英語為外語)課程進行二個月之後，學生經過散文、詩集和論文寫作等訓練之後，研究者和這 16 位受試者進行面對面的訪談，和每位受試者的訪談時間約各 20 分鐘，訪談問題採用開放式問題，而該訪談內容包括在寫作時造成焦慮感之潛在因素為何。訪談過程中，全程以錄音筆錄音，並分析其訪談逐字稿以分類為不同構念。本研究發現有五項議題似乎會直接造成台灣大學生在修習寫作課時的焦慮感。該議題包括 1. 時間限制、2. 教師評分、3. 同儕競爭、4. 對寫作題目是否有趣、以及 5. 單一寫作形式。

大部份的學生表示寫作過程中的焦慮感對他們的確會有所影響，甚至有些受試者表示會有身體及心理不適等狀況。而在全球化的時代，英語構通能力顯得越來越重要。身為世界公民，我們需要學會克服焦慮感。然而，教師和學校政策的制定者應該努力調整課程以及學校政策，以幫助學生降低負面情緒因素。這正為語言教師及學生共同的期望。同時，此研究也預期能提供此研究領域及校方一些解決問題之道。本研究也顯示設計 ESL(以英語作為第二語言) 和 EFL(以英語為外語)課程有考量情緒因素的必要性。

### Introduction

Numerous researches had managed to explore the effects of anxiety on language learners taking a writing course and effective solutions to this issue (e.g., Worde, 2003; Rollinson, 2005; Topping, 2000). Based on the potential negative effects on English writing activities, scholars in this field are finding ways to avoid students' emotional block in writing English essays. This study also sets a purpose of study to investigate students' problematic and anxiety-provoking factors in English writing courses of universities in Taiwan. It is anticipated that from students' perspectives, the restriction and limitation that impede students' learning can be found and then solved or avoided.

In the era of globalization, communication through English interactions, such as writing, has become a trend and unavoidable approach. As a global citizen, providing a training course of writing under a worrying-free environment has become many curriculum designers and policy makers' responsibilities. Hence, this study aims to examine potential factors of students' anxiety during writing that had not been reported. Moreover, it purposes to conjecture and discover possible solutions that would improve students learning environment in English writing courses.

In Taiwan, the writing competence in foreign language learning has been regarded as one of the most important abilities for a long time. In recent decades, it has been included the joint-university entrance examination in Taiwan and also in curriculum design in university courses, especially English major's syllabus. Generally speaking, students in Taiwan more or less have to go through a series of writing learning, practicing, and testing during their foreign language learning as a senior high school or undergraduate student. That is to say, students' score and success of learning English writing would somehow have an effect on their final grade of overall academic performance. From the perspective of researcher of this study, the stress from the above reason would naturally cause students' anxiety in the writing course, especially when students are learning English within a short-term purpose of examination preparation.

### **Literature Review**

In the field of writing anxiety research, several themes had been considered the most important issues of research. First of all, developing applicable instruments for measuring the learner's level or factors of anxiety is one of the major research issues. Investigating into this specific field of writing anxiety, many original and recent instruments can be found. For example, English Classroom Anxiety Scale has been adapted by Gardner (1985). Moreover, Cheng (2004) has developed an instrument evaluating learner's level of anxiety based possible factors, which was named Second language Writing Anxiety Inventory.

Secondly, a great deal of research has centered on the learner's difficulties and probable factors of anxiety for writing, and provides their effective solutions that might reduce students' fear appearing during student's writing activity. For example, Lee (2001) has suggested that finding an appropriate relationship of writing apprehension to the revision process and topic preference would be a positive factor for students' learning writing. Moreover, Rollinson (2005) has offered a solution to releasing students' writing anxiety through peer feedback in second language writing class.

Besides, designing criteria of assessing students reasons of anxiety and level of anxiety based on each possible reason, and providing solutions, such as peer correction, to reduce students' emotional block, several researchers (e.g., Worde, 2003) focused on the subjects' physical manifestations of writing anxiety, such as blushing and perspiring and provide their reports to argue the significance of research of this field. Bishop, Holm, Borowiak, and Wilson (2001) revealed that somatic anxiety was the only significant predictor of pain tolerance among participants with tension headache. From this perspective of physiology, impact of anxiety on L2 writing can be an urgent issue that should cause much serious attention from English teachers and school administrators.

For discharging students' negative emotion and unnecessary anxiety in order to enhance students' learning effectiveness and physical health, this study was conducted in a university in southern Taiwan. It is expected that through subjects assumed to have been suffered by writing anxiety, more invisible apprehension -provoking factors can be found and solved.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study. Students in an advanced writing course had cooperated with the researcher as well as their teacher to complete this study. The data of students' thick descriptions had been collected through a face-to-face interview of 20 minutes after two months of students' writing course. It is assumed that through a qualitative study, the students' perceptions of writing anxiety would not be misled by the ready-revealed survey instruments, which can not provide in-depth details about students' possible factors of negative emotion. Through an open-ended question: "Why do you sometimes feel anxious during writing activity or writing class?" Students were given freedom to response their teacher why their academic performance might be psychologically influenced.

### **Significant of Study**

In the field of writing anxiety, most of the studies are conducted through qualitative methodologies. We rarely found a qualitative study that neutrally elicits students' reasons of anxious psychological status through an open-ended question from students' own aspects. Most of the studies provide a list of reasons created from researchers' views but not the subjects' views. It is argued that this study would provide findings that are closer to students' real feelings since the results could not be manipulated, and the subjects could not be misled through a single open-ended question.

## Research Setting

This study was conducted in a college in southern Taiwan. In the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, all English majors have to take 3 hours of writing course in each semester for three years. After taking Basic and Intermediate Writing courses, 16 subjects of junior university students had participated in doing this study when studying Advanced Writing, the highest level of English writing course. The students were from different areas of Taiwan, including students from Taipei, Taichung, Hualine, Tainan, Kaohsiung...etc.

In the first two months of writing course, the students were trained to write essays through topics in Testing of English as Other Language (TOEFL). Also, they were also taught to write free verse, sentences of advertisement for commercial products, and mostly strategies of writing thesis papers.

## Data Collection

The students' statements were collected through a digital pen recorder. After two months of writing course, students were invited to talk about their possible anxiety factors in a face-to-face interview of 20 minutes for each sample. The students were supposed to feel free and talk about anything they perceived that might cause their nervousness during their writing activity in class and out of class.

## Research Question

Through out of this study, we ask the participant a question: What are nervousness-provoking factors of writing activities inside and outside of English writing classrooms? With this open-ended question, the subjects provide their feelings and perceptions through their own views.

## Data Analysis

The methodology of constant comparison was applied to analyze students' perceptions. The researchers consistently find out the similar statements under different themes and categories existing in students' descriptions and then conceptualized them into several major concepts as the outlines of findings. This type of constant comparison analysis has been emphasized as one of the most significant methodologies of qualitative data analyzing (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). It is anticipated that the English teacher and policy makers of school would be able to assess updated issue themed from data constant-comparing mode.

### Assumptions

1. It is assumed that most of the students' statements of possible factor of writing anxiety will be similar as the reports of previous studies.
2. It is assumed that this study will explore into updated issues of anxiety-provoking factors due to the change and trend of updated society.

### Limitation

The limitation of this study is that the subjects from a university in southern Taiwan belong to higher-level proficiency group. Therefore, the result can not represent the whole population of English learners of Taiwan.

### Responses through Qualitative Descriptions

After teaching methodologies of writing free verse, research paper, and essays for TOEFL test for eight weeks from September, 2008 to November, 2008, the following statements were students' responses describing what factors would stimulate their writing anxiety physically and cognitively. For raising the confidentiality of this study, pseudonyms were applied to represent the real subjects' names. Through a random sequence of concluded five themes of time limitation, teachers' evaluation, peer competition, uninterested subjects, uniformed writing formats, the students' perceptions are revealed in the following paragraphs.

### Issue of Time Restriction

This issue had been mentioned by John, Mary and Edward. They perceived that they might start to feel nervous when thinking of the time limitation for their writing during testing or class practicing.

#### 1. John

The feeling of writing anxiety often occurs to me when the time of writing is limited, especially in exams. I can not present one hundred percent of my ability in the special circumstance, such as an exam. Two years ago, when I was taking my college entrance test, a strong feeling of anxiety struck me while I was writing my English composition. I sat on the chair, grabbed the pen tightly, and looked at my paper with my mind blanked. I have absolutely no idea what to write. Finally, I decided to calm down, and started to try some new tactics, such as brainstorming, drafting, and reading other articles. It's really a slow and difficult process, but it really works, twenty minutes later, I got my composition done properly.

## 2. Mary

I would be very nervous and pay much more attention to the pass of time rather than the achieved percentage of schedule progress. Thus, my writing anxiety would appear and I could not finish the writing in time. Writing anxiety plays an important role here and the train of the thought in writing is forced to stop. The more nervous you are about the limitation, the more your brain gets blank. Thus, you will fail in finishing the writing.

## 3. Edward

I feel that a type of my writing anxiety lies in writing assignments. The strongest element of anxiety is that writing assignments are always with time limits. If students can not finish the assignments in time, they may not get the grade. Also the ordained number of words may cause anxiety, too. Sometimes the expected number may be too much that I have to worry about not being able to fulfill the expected number of words.

### Issue of Teacher's Evaluation

Oscar, Rose, Carol, Daisy, and Jessica mentioned that their anxiety might be generated because that they care about teacher's evaluations and negative comments on their works.

#### 1. Oscar

There were several reasons, and the major one was that I really care about the comments from my teachers. I feared they dislike my work and that they regarded my papers as trash. I was afraid of failure, so I became very cautious of grammar, structure and word choice.

#### 2. Rose

Writing for a reader that who has been really critical or demanding in the past also gave me a lot of pressure while I was writing. I still remember I have a really picky English teacher in my high school years, and he often criticized my English writing, no matter how well I did my writing. Every time I got my paper back, he always gave me poor evaluation. I was really disappointed because every piece of writing that I have done seemed to have problem. As a result, I started to find my confidence from others. I continually showed my writing to my family members, my friends, and other teachers in my school, then asked them what they thought about my writing. After a long period of hard working, I finally conquered my anxiety, and I no longer feel disappointed even when my teacher criticizes my writing.

#### 3. Carol

It is common that students care about teacher's evaluation on their writing and I am no exception. Whenever I get the composition after my teacher writes the remark on it, I would expect to get his or her identification and the good evaluations. I find that the more time I get

the good evaluations from my teacher, the better I do on my writing. Teachers' good evaluation does let you keep confident of writing. On the other hand, if I usually had the bad evaluation from my teacher, I would lose confidence and doubt my writing ability. And the bad evaluation would become an invisible writing anxiety that makes you have negative thoughts and lack motivation of writing.

#### 4. Daisy

Every time I am writing. I always think of what the professors had corrected me then I feel nervous and anxious. I am afraid of hearing professors telling me that I have the same mistakes as before. I want to do a better job and keep improving, and I do not let my department feel shameful about having a student who can not write like a native speaker even when she had studied here for more than two years.

#### 5. Jessica

The second pressure, definitely, stems from teachers' evaluation. I believe they are the people who give me acknowledgements and confidence; that's to say, how many scores of writing the teachers give me directly reflect whether my writing is bad or good. Even though I had tried hard to do well on former writings, it's likely for me to be confined to teachers' high expectation so I will be prohibiting from writing better in that I shoulder too many pressures from teachers in the end.

#### 6. Stella

In the writing class, some professors might point out my shortages in my creation. Therefore, when I am creating, sometimes I will worry about the criticism. Literature is very subjective. I don't know what kind of suggestion I should take because some people might like what I write but some people might not.

As a consequence, although I am afraid of being criticized, I realized that it's impossible for everyone to enjoy my composition and free verse after experiencing so many comments from teachers. When writing, I am always under a lot of stress because I want to make it perfect, and the criticism, stress, and suggestions from the trainers will sometimes be the anxiety of writing, but I believe that I can learn more and train my anti-pressure ability through experiencing it.

### Issue of Peer Competition

Adrian, Betty, Violet and Barbara emphasized that peer's comments and attitudes of competition could be the most important reason why they feel anxious in writing course.

#### 1. Adrian



Personal pressure for improvement—occupies the biggest proportion in the factors of writing apprehension because writing well means not only good score but also self-esteem and self-acknowledgement. It turns out that writing apprehension is inversely related to self-esteem, marginally related to personality measures. In my mind, the third factor comprises the previously two pressures of writing: no wonder personal pressure is the most suffering. There is no denying that writing well will make me the best practice for peers and make me reputable. When something involves with self-esteem or dignity, it will be very serious.

## 2. Betty

In my Opinion, I think my writing anxiety mainly comes from self-request. In the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, I always feel stressful when I need to write or speak in English because there are so many classmates they really do a terrific job in English, either stayed in an English-speaking country for a long time or studied abroad. Because of them, they set a good mode there and heighten the quality of students in our department and leave me a lot of pressure.

## 3. Violet

I am afraid that my writing will make others feel amazed that this kind of writing should not come from a student who studies in foreign language and literature. I hope my writings have the quality that everybody from our department should have. Sometimes it is stressful to study in a top-level university.

## 4. Barbara

I care about my peers' view to look at my level of writing for a great deal. Therefore, I feel the least type of writing anxiety lies in a diary, especially a diary which was originally meant not to be seen by others. When you want your words to be private, word choice can be rather causal. Sometimes there are even personal terminologies. There is almost no anxiety for me when I am writing a diary. On the other hand, writing an essay as homework would be stressful since my score gained might have to be compared with my peers.

### Issue of Writing Subjects

#### 1. Emmanuelle

My apprehension of writing usually was caused by the fact that I am not interested in the subjects assigned. When I really know very little about the topics assigned to me, I feel very nervous and stressful. I am a person who needs real experience in daily life and then I am able to write well.

## 2. Stephanie

I was a very gifted writer when I was a little child. I was able to creatively and freely write down my thinking without being taught and assigned subjects. However, when I grew up, I often was assigned some writing topics that I am not very interested in, so I feel a little bit coerced. My writing ability is not as good as the ability in my childhood due to the assigned topics I do not like.

### Issue of Required Writing Format

#### 1. Helen

Last but not the least, dealing with a new form of writing really makes me anxious. Because of being not familiar with the new form, I often felt helpless while I am writing them. To solve this problem, I choose to get the work started early and write something every day. This method made me become more and more familiar with these new forms of writing. In this case, I can figure out where I am having trouble and discovering where my strength is.

### **Results**

Through constantly analyzing the qualitative data collected from face-to-face interviews, 16 participants had provided their perceptions of somatic anxiety and cognitive anxiety. Most of the themes concluded from students' descriptions were mentioned by previous research, including factors of grading (Chang, 2004), other students (Chang, 2004), time constraint (Chang, 2004), and difficulties caused by uninterested subjects (Lee, 2001) etc. One significant updated factor was found in this study, subject of this study pointed out that being requested to write with uniformed writing formats could cause anxiety since their freedom and creativity of writing might be taken away.

### **Discussion and Recommendation of Further Study**

From the data collected and the themes conceptualized with constant comparison method, this study revealed that the students' anxiety might be aggravated due to face problems, which could be caused by teacher's evaluation and peer competition. Six participants had pointed out that they feel fearful when thinking of teacher's negative comments or low score graded for them. Four students pointed out that peer competition sometimes becomes a factor of apprehension, especially for students in top-ranked universities.

Based on the aforementioned two issues found in this study, the researcher recommends that further studies should be done. Firstly, a further study should be conducted to investigate how to transfer the negative peer competition into the positive one. Based on previous studies on

peer correction and peer assistance in writing class (e.g., Atay & Kurt, 2007), more solutions to transferring the negative peer competition into the positive one might be found by the further study. Secondly, another study should be completed, which the researcher should collect the pedagogies and theoretical foundations concerning affective factors in order to resolve the problem of teachers' unconstructive influence. For example, a paper emphasizing Krashen's (1983) hypothesis of language acquisition based on significance of emotional factors should be provided and discussed.

### Conclusion

Students writing abilities would be very important in that it influences their future career in this globalized world, where English communication through email, fax, theses and private letters are applied as common tools. It is teacher's responsibility to guide the students write well under environments where anxiety is free from aspects of cognitive and psychological statuses. This qualitative research focusing on inspecting the major reasons of the students' writing anxiety disclosed that the factors regarding to peers and teachers are the most significant key elements, which the scholars of this field should pay attention to. Particularly, this study surprisingly exposes that Taiwanese English teachers might not have sufficient concepts about great influence of the affective factors on their students' English acquisition. In summary, this study argues that the embarrassment and uneasiness caused by teachers and peers need to be released in order to improve students' writing performance through more appropriate teacher training and curriculum design.

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