

# **Investigating Students' Second Language Writing Anxiety: A Case Study**

by

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## **Abstract**

Anxiety is one of the essential factors in second language learning. It plays an important role in determining students' performance in the target language, be it positive or negative. Feeling nervous, uncertain or worry while engaging in a target language may cause students to perform poorly in class, and this normally results in getting poor grades in their examination; and this is what students normally experience in writing class. In relation to this, the paper aims to investigate the relationship between students' anxiety in writing essay tasks in English and their choice to do the writing tasks, and also, the effects of this anxiety to their choice to do writing tasks in English. A group of students doing Level 3 Reading and Writing in English in Universiti Malaysia Sabah were asked to answer Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) that elicited their second language writing anxiety and its relation to students' choice.

*Keywords: second language writing, anxiety, effects*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Anxiety is one of the factors causing the process of learning a second or foreign language difficult for many language learners. Although its effects may vary from one individual to another, still, it does play a role in determining language learners' performance in the target language. Anxiety is defined as "a state of uneasiness and apprehension or fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening" (Chastain, 1988, cited in Riasati, 2011, p.908). It is always associated with nervousness, apprehension, disappointment, self-doubt and fear (Scovels, 1978). Also, it can influence attention, and this may result in poor language performance (Field, 2004). According to Worde (1998), most second or foreign language learners experience anxiety. This anxious feeling causes problems for language learners to perform in the target language (Kondo & Ling, 2004; Marwan, 2007; Hussein, 2010). They feel less enjoy learning the target language and this will definitely affects their performance in the language negatively (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2005, Andrade & Williams, 2009; Tuncay & Uzunboyulu, 2010).

Writing is one of the important language skills that a language learner must become proficient in order to succeed both in academic and working world. It is, according to Erkan and Saban (2011), "a complex activity that requires a certain level of linguistics knowledge, writing

conventions, vocabulary and grammar". Due to its complexity, learners become anxious whenever they are asked to produce essay writing---feeling lack of confidence in their ability to write in the target language due to many factors, e.g. grammar and vocabulary, has resulted in discouragement to write in the target language, which in this case, the English Language. The term writing anxiety was first introduced by Daly and Miller (1975). It has been researched greatly for the past few decades. Studies show that writing anxiety has debilitating as well as facilitative effects on students' writing performance. It can either lower the quality of the writing (Daly, 1978), or improve the quality of the writing (Hassan, 2001, cited in Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). In addition, writing anxiety can also influence learners' choice of doing writing task. Cheng (2002) discovered that students with *high* writing anxiety tend to avoid taking writing courses as they involve writing tasks a lot. Instead, they prefer to take courses that involve less writing tasks. She also conceptualized three types of anxiety, i.e. Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety and Avoidance Anxiety (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014), and introduced a self-report second language writing anxiety measure, namely the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). The report specifies the physiological, cognitive and effects of writing anxiety on writing processes and behaviors. For this study, the researchers adapted SLWAI and used the categories of anxiety proposed by Cheng.

#### **THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Many language learners find writing as the most difficult language skills to master (Latiff, 2007; Kurt & Atay, 2007). From the researcher's observation and the low grades obtained by some students who had taken Reading and Writing in English (RWE) at the Centre of the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) in previous semesters, it can be concluded that students are still not able to write in the English Language well although they have been exposed and taught to writing paragraphs and essays since primary school to tertiary level. According to Erkan and Saban (2011), students who find it difficult to learn writing, share the same problems in writing, i.e. afraid to make writing errors because of their poor command of the language. They see writing as a subject or skill they 'have to make it through' in order to pass the exam (Yavuz & Genc, 1998, cited in Erkan and Saban, 2011). Thus, it can be said that students' attitude towards writing, e.g. lack of confidence and self-efficacy in writing, prompted the researchers to investigate students' level of anxiety in writing and causes contributing to this anxiety.

The study attempts to answer these questions:

- a. To what extent do the levels of writing anxieties of these students affect their choice to do English writing task?
- b. To what extent do these effects influence their choice to do English writing task?

Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between students' level of anxiety in writing and writing task in English. It also intends to see the influence of these effects on students' choice to do writing task in English. It is hoped that at the end of this study, a suitable approach in teaching and learning writing skill or writing course design can be developed to help students to overcome this anxiety and write essays in the English Language effectively.

## THE SETTING

The study was conducted in the Centre of the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). A class of 30 students, who were at that time taking Level 3 of a foundation course, i.e. Reading and Writing in English, participated in this study. In UMS, students with MUET Bands 1 and 2 will have to undergo four English proficiency foundation courses, namely Level 1 Grammar in Context, Level 2 Oral Communication in English, Level 3 Reading and Writing in English and Level 4 English for Occupational Purposes. Based on convenience sampling, this group was selected because they were the only available group at the time of study. Thus, the findings of this study can only be used to explain this group of students, and it cannot be generalized to other groups.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Instrument

In order to answer the research questions of this study, the researchers adapted Cheng's Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) (Cheng, 2004). The questionnaire was developed by Cheng (2004), and it is used to measure students' writing anxiety level. Its validity and reliability were proven by means of correlation and factor analysis (Cheng, 2004; Zhang, 2011), and it has been used in many second language writing studies. The questionnaire was divided into two parts, i.e. Part A: to gather students' background information, and Part B: to determine the level of anxiety of these students. This study involves both qualitative and quantitative data--it has a combination of closed-ended questions, open-ended questions and multiple-choice items in the questionnaire. It was prepared in Malay in order to maximize students' understanding of the text of the questionnaire (see Appendix 1). There are 28 items in the questionnaire, namely six items in Part A (Questions 1 to 6), and 22 items in Part B (Question 7 to 28). In Part B, a five-point Likert Scale was employed, where students were asked to state their agreement of disagreement with the statements by choosing *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree* and *strongly agree* as variants for their responses for items 7 to 28. The 22 items of the SLWAI (Part B) can be divided into three types of anxiety, namely *Cognitive Anxiety* (CA) (items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, 21), *Somatic Anxiety* (SA) (items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 19) and *Avoidance Anxiety* (AA) (items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, 22). CA refers to "the cognitive aspect of anxiety experience, including negative expectations, preoccupation with performance and concern about others' perception (Cheng, 2004, cited in Zhang, 2011, p.9). SA refers to "one's perception of the psychological effects of the anxiety experience, as reflected in increase in state of unpleasant

feelings, such as nervousness and tension (Cheng, 2004, cited in Zhang, 2011, p. 9). AA refers to “the behavioral aspect of the anxiety experience, avoidance of writing (Cheng, 2004, cited in Zhang, 2011, p.9). To gather qualitative data, students were asked to provide reasons for their choices for items 7 to 28 in the provided spaces in Part B.

### Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the researcher adapted Abd Rahim’s method in measuring students’ English Language use and exposure to the language in UMS (Abd Rahim, 2010). In her study, she assigned a numerical score to the variables’ studied, e.g. occupation and income. The numerical index score carried certain points, and these points later were added up to determine students’ social class. The same method of analysis was also used by Trudgil (1974) in his study on language and social class in Norwich.

For this study, students’ level of writing anxiety was identified by a five-point scale. Each point of this Likert Scale was given a score, i.e. a score of 1 for *strongly disagree*, 2 for *disagree*, 3 for *neutral*, 4 for *agree*, and 5 for *strongly agree*. The score for each item in Part B were added up to determine each student’s level of writing anxiety. The scores were then divided into two categories, namely *high* and *low*, in order to indicate the students’ writing anxiety level. For data collected in Part A, the frequency count of each item was converted into a percentage for each student.

To determine the level of *Cognitive Anxiety* (CA) of the students, the total cumulative score, which was based on eight items (items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, 21), ranges from 8 (the minimum cumulative score, 1 X 8) to 40 (the maximum cumulative score, 5 X 8). To get the range of score for each score, the minimum cumulative score of each scale was subtracted from the maximum cumulative score of each scale, i.e. 40 - 8. Thus, the score range for each scale is 32 (40 - 8). This range of 32 was then divided into two categories, i.e. *high* and *low*, and the range of score for these categories is 16---the range of score for the scale (32) was divided by the two categories, i.e.  $32 \div 2$ . Based on this range of score for each category, it is determined that the level of CA of the students is *low* if they score 8.0 to 23.0, and *high* if they score 24.0 to 40.0 (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Range of Scores for Cognitive Anxiety

Category	Score
<i>High</i>	24.0 – 40.0
<i>Low</i>	8.0 – 23.0

The same analysis was also used to determine the level of *Somatic Anxiety* (SA) (items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 19) and *Avoidance Anxiety* (AA) (items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, 22) of the students. There are seven items describing SA and AA respectively. The scores appointed for each variant in items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 19 and items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, 22 of the questionnaire were

accumulated to determine the level of SA and AA respectively. The total cumulative score (based on items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 19) ranges from 7 (the minimum cumulative score,  $1 \times 7$ ) to 35 (the maximum cumulative score,  $5 \times 7$ ). To get the range of score for each score, the minimum cumulative score of each scale was subtracted from the maximum cumulative score of each scale, i.e.  $35 - 7$ . Thus, the score range for each scale is 28 ( $35 - 7$ ). This range of 28 was then divided into two categories, i.e. *high* and *low*, and the range of score for these categories is 14---the range of score for the scale (28) was divided by the two categories, i.e.  $28 \div 2$ . Based on this range of score for each category, it is determined that the students' SA and AA is *low* if they score 7.0 to 21.0, and *high* if they score 22.0 to 35.0 (see Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 2:** Range of Scores for Somatic Anxiety (SA)

Category	Score
<i>High</i>	22.0 – 35.0
<i>Low</i>	7.0 – 21.0

**Table 3:** Range of Scores for Avoidance Anxiety (AA)

Category	Score
<i>High</i>	22.0 – 35.0
<i>Low</i>	7.0 – 21.0

Next, the qualitative data collected in Part B were used to explain the writing anxiety level of the students.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Part A of the questionnaire

Table 4 shows the ethnicity of the students.

**Table 4:** Students' Ethnicity

Ethnicity	No of Students (N=30)
Kadazandusun	1
Rungus	2
Malay	16
Bajau	3
Bisaya	1
Banjar	1
Iban	2
Lundayeh	1
Murut	2
Others (i.e. Malay & Bajau)	1

The table shows that more than 50 percent of the students were Malays from Peninsular Malaysia, whereas 11 were local Sabahans, i.e. Kadazandusun, Rungus, Bajau, Bisaya, Banjar and Murut, and three from Sarawak, i.e. Lundayeh and Iban. Only one student had mixed parentage. This explains why almost 99.9 percent of the students used Malay at home---Malay was also used by the local Sabahans---as the language is mainly spoken by them. Only six of the students used English with their friends. In terms of exposure to English, more than half of the students were exposed to the language via reading material. However, these students only read their English textbooks and references. The other 40 percent of the students do not read English reading materials. More than 90 percent of the students watched English Language programs, and only seven percent of the students did not watch English Language programs. All these show that these students have enough exposure to the English Language (via reading material and TV programs) although they do not use English at home and with their friends.

### **Part B of the questionnaire**

Tables 5, 6 and 7 illustrate the findings.

#### **Cognitive Anxiety (CA)**

Based on the analysis, about 87 percent (26) of the students had *high CA*. Only 13 percent (4) of the students had *low CA*. Table 5 shows the findings.

**Table 5:** Level of Cognitive Anxiety

Category	No of Students and % (N=30)	Range of Scores
<i>High</i>	26 (87)	23 - 26
<i>Low</i>	4 (13)	20 - 22

#### **Somatic Anxiety (SA)**

More than 50 percent (12) of the students had *high SA*. About 40 percent (12) of the students had *low SA*. Table 6 shows the results.

**Table 6:** Level of Somatic Anxiety

Category	No of Students and % (N=30)	Range of Scores
<i>High</i>	18 (60)	11 - 22
<i>Low</i>	12 (40)	23 - 33

#### **Avoidance Anxiety (AA)**

The findings show that nearly 60 percent (17) of the students had low AA, whereas the other 43 percent (13) of the students had high AA. Table 7 illustrates the findings.



**Table 7: Level of Avoidance Anxiety**

Category	No of Students and % (N=30)	Range of Scores
<i>High</i>	13 (43)	23 – 32
<i>Low</i>	17 (57)	13 - 22

The above findings show that almost 90 percent of the students has *high* CA (out of 30, 26 of them had *high* CA) (see Table 5). As defined by Cheng in earlier paragraph, CA is associated with external factors such as the peers or classmates or teachers' evaluation on the students' writings. The students feel nervous and worry that their writings will be laughed at by those who read them, and from the qualitative responses gathered, these students considered the grades they obtained for their essays would show the lecturers teaching them about their efforts to write the essays---if they get poor grades, such as C or C-, it shows that they put less efforts to write the essay; if they get good grades, such as B+ or A, this shows that they put more efforts to write the essay---and this will definitely influence the lecturers' perceptions of them, i.e. it could be negative or positive. For these students, the lecturers might think that they were lazy to put more effort to produce a piece of good writing, and this, for them, will affect the grades they are supposed to get for the writings. In addition, these students felt that other than their lecturers, their peers' perceptions of them are also essential. Their peers' negative perception of them, especially of their writings, will significantly affect their confidence level. For them, their peers' comments, be it verbally or non-verbally, will embarrass them and this will lower their self-esteem. Not only they feel anxious or panic about the comments they assume they will get from their peers on their writings, these students also feel afraid to voice out or to share their opinions verbally with their peers. For these students, the perceptions and comments from the lecturers and peers play a significant role in determining their level of writing anxiety, which in this case, the Cognitive Anxiety (CA), i.e. their CA level accelerates when they receive negative perception or comments from their lecturers or peers. However, for the other four students (see Table 5), their CA is low. According to the reasons given by these students, the feedback that they get from lecturers and peers will help them to improve their writings. For this group of students, their lecturers or peers' perceptions of them will neither affect the quality of their writings nor it will influence the grades they are going to get. They believe that the grades they obtained are solely based on the work (writing) they produce; it has nothing to do with the effort they put to produce the work (writing).

Next, the findings also illustrate that about 60 percent of the students has *high* Somatic Anxiety (SA) (see Table 6). SA focuses more on students' physiological conditions (Cheng, 2004, cited in Zhang, 2011, p. 9). When student' SA is high, they will sweat, tremble, have palpitation, experience deadlock mind, feel disoriented, panic, and experience muscle spasms. All these are due to poor command of the language. Based on the qualitative data gathered, whenever the students experience difficulty in finding the vocabulary or building a sentence or sentences, or applying the correct tenses for the writings, they will become panic and disoriented; some can even tremble and experience muscle spasms and palpitation; and this normally results in

deadlock mind. They do not know what to write because they do not have ideas in English that they can use to write. Unlike the remaining 40 percent of the students (see Table 6), they do not panic or tremble, or sweat or feel disoriented although they have difficulty to write essays in English. For them, the difficulty to write in English is 'normal'. They have accepted the fact that they are not fluent in the language; they just cannot express themselves through writing in English, and they also cannot express themselves verbally in English. It is a condition that they have accepted and familiar with. But this does not stop their determination to master the language. Despite their weaknesses in the language, they do not show any physiological conditions that result from the difficulty in writing essays in English.

Lastly, although the findings show that the students have both high level of Cognitive and Somatic Anxieties, they do not avoid the task, i.e. the essay writing. Based on the findings, more than 50 percent of the students have *low* Avoidance Anxiety (AA) (see Table 7). Regardless of their weaknesses in the language, they are not going to avoid writing because for these students, trying is better than quitting. "*Practice makes perfect*" is what they believe in. If they keep on practicing writing the essays in English, they will eventually have no difficulty to write the essays in English. However, according to them, guidance and feedbacks from lecturers are the key factors that will help them to learn their mistakes, and to improve their writing. These students are still determined to improve their writing skill although they have high Cognitive and Somatic Anxieties. Even so, the remaining 43 percent of the students has *high* AA. Based on the reasons given by these students, their problems in grammar, vocabulary and sentence structures have inhibited their interest to write in English. They will try to avoid writing as much as possible because for them, after years of learning the language, they are still unable to write essays in English, and this frustrates them. Furthermore, they stated that speaking is much more important than writing---their speaking or communication skill will be evaluated more during interviews. Ability to speak in English, for these students, is an assurance for them to get a job later, and not writing. For these reasons, their AA is high.

To sum, the findings seem to suggest that anxiety can be facilitating and debilitating. In this study, Cognitive, Somatic and Avoidance Anxieties can function as facilitative and debilitating anxieties---they can impede students from expressing themselves in both writing and speaking in English (debilitative anxiety), and they can also encourage students to express themselves in English both in writing and speaking (facilitative anxiety). As stated by Scovel (1978, cited in Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012), facilitative and debilitating anxieties can operate well together. For example, in this study, students with *high* Cognitive Anxiety (CA), who consider their lecturers and peers as determinant for their success in getting good grades in writings, and students with *high* Somatic Anxiety (SA), i.e. who will experience physiological conditions such as trembling, sweating and panic, will not avoid writing tasks. They can feel nervous, worry, sweating or panic, but that does not influence their belief that the more they write the better they will become. The study also shows that anxiety can also be debilitating. This is shown when students



with *high* Avoidance Anxiety (see Table 7) avoid writing tasks because in their opinion, it is the speaking skill that will guarantee them a job later and not writing skill. For them writing is not important because at the end of the day, it is their speaking skill that will be evaluated, and not their writing skill. All these findings support Scovel's statement which claims that "in spite of the debilitating effect of anxiety, it can be facilitative too" (Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012), and for this study, the facilitative effect of anxiety can also be debilitating.

## CONCLUSION

The findings illustrate that student's writing anxieties (which in this case, Cognitive, Somatic and Avoidance Anxieties) do affect their choice of doing writing task in English. The effects of these anxieties also influence their choice to do the task. Students with *high* Cognitive and Somatic Anxieties chose not to do the writing task in English due to the lecturers and peers' perceptions of their work (writing), and the physiological effects such as sweating, trembling and disorientation, stop them from doing the writing task in English. Also, students with *high* Avoidance Anxiety chose not to do the writing task in English because they do not think writing skill is as important as speaking skill. For these students, the ability to speak in English is more essential than writing because it will help them in securing a job. On the contrary, students with low Cognitive, Somatic and Avoidance Anxieties find that more practices in writing can help to improve their writing skill in the English Language. All these findings show that writing anxieties can either facilitate or debilitate students' choice to do writing tasks in the English Language.

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