

Exploring English Writing Anxiety in Chinese High School Students

Zhuoran Chen^{1,a,*}, Jiaqi Guo², and Le Kuai³

¹*School of Foreign Languages, East China Normal University, China*

²*Faculty of Arts, The University of Hong Kong, China*

³*School of European and Latin America Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, China
a. 10184500230@stu.ecnu.edu.cn*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper explores the English writing anxiety among Chinese high school students' about causes and suggestions. Data were collected from 134 Chinese high school students who answered the Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Scale (FLWAS) questionnaire. The FLWAS adopted a 5-point Likert response format. After statistical analysis, main findings were: (1) FLWAS has three main factors including low self-confidence in English writing (FLWAS1), aversion to English writing (FLWAS2) and English writing evaluation anxiety (FLWAS3). (2) Participants in this study were mostly unconfident in English writing and had no preference nor aversion to writing in English and were concerned about the quality of their compositions; (3) No significantly difference was shown between male and female students. This research fills a gap for English writing anxiety in Chinese high schools and can lay a foundation for further studies in this field.

Keywords: Foreign language, English writing anxiety, Chinese high school students

1. Introduction

Foreign language (FL) anxiety was firstly proposed in the late 1900s and has now become a heated topic in the recent decades. More and more researchers have developed interest in it [1][2][3]. Previous literature has focused on the causes and consequences of FL writing anxiety in universities [4]. However, few studies addressed the situation among high school students [5]. This study employs a quantitative approach and adopting the questionnaire designed by Liu [1]. The research will embark on a journey to explore the scale of English writing anxiety in Chinese high schools, calculate the profile of students' FL writing anxiety, and analyze the gender difference for FL writing anxiety among Chinese high school students. Therefore, this study will provide suggestions for future improvement in the field of managing FL writing anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

As FL writing anxiety gradually appeals to more research, when investigating its scale, Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) is believed to be the most widely-used measuring instrument [6].

Although the Daly-Miller WAT proved reliability and validity, there was still improvement room [7]. Cheng noted that WAT might make it challenging to distinguish between conceptual or causal relationships between anxiety and self-confidence [8]. Later, the 26-item FLWAS, or Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Scale, was created to quantify writing anxiety in S/FLs. [1]. A comprehensive Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), developed by Cheng based on FLWAS, includes somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behavior [7]. The components of generic FL anxiety and FL writing anxiety were distinguished using FLCAS and SLWAT, demonstrating that FL writing anxiety represented language-skill-specific anxiety.

As more researchers have studied FL writing anxiety, more experiments among FL learning students have been carried out [8][1][9]. In a Chinese-to-English translation class in Hong Kong with 50 students majoring in translation, Yan and Wang looked into the effects of FL writing anxiety [9]. They discovered that students' stress levels were increased by their dread of evaluation and their reluctance to write in English [1]. Guo and Fan conducted a questionnaire study of college students majoring in English at the basic, intermediate, and advanced requirements using the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) [10]. They found that foreign language writing anxiety existed among college students at three levels to a medium degree and Avoidance Behavior achieved near the high frequency. Yan and Wang's study and Guo and Fan's study both focus on FL writing anxiety, with one exploring the impacts of writing anxiety and the other one investigating into student's requirement in writing anxiety. However, neither of them pays attention to the factors which influence students' writing anxiety.

2.2. Related Experiments

Quantitative studies have revealed that factors (e.g., age, grade, preference toward the language used in writing, gender and self-efficacy) would influence one's level of writing anxiety [11][7][1]. In the case of age, the findings of Cheng show that English writing anxiety increases as students proceed with their studies at college [11]. Regarding preference towards a language, research was conducted among 707 Turkish students from 6 public secondary schools of diverse socioeconomic status [12]. It indicated that students' positive attitude toward the Turkish language would influence their writing in it. From the perspective of gender, female students averagely perform better than male students in composing but suffer from higher levels of writing anxiety [7][12]. Additionally, writing anxiety is found to be adversely connected with participants' writing self-efficacy in Martinez et al.'s study, which examined these two variables' relationships. Mascle [13] suggested using classroom exercises to improve students' writing self-efficacy and to alter their perspectives on writing.

Although some studies concentrate on writing anxiety in students learning foreign languages, few studies have looked at English writing anxiety in Chinese high school students [4][1]. In order to answer the following research questions, the current study will use FLWAS to examine the specifics of English writing anxiety among Chinese high school students:

- (1) What are FLWAS's main causes?
- (2) What does the kids' FL writing anxiety look like?
- (3) How does gender affect students' FL writing anxiety in Chinese high schools?

3. The Present Study

This study measured the English writing anxiety among 134 (Male = 47, Female = 87) Chinese high school students from 15 institutions in total. Among the participants, 36 are from Grade 10, 30 from Grade 11, and 68 from Grade 12.

The purpose of the background questionnaire was to obtain details on the students' backgrounds, including their age, gender, high school, and year of study. Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Scale

(FLWAS), with a KMO value of 0.947, the reliability of the questionnaire is high and dependable. The 26-item FLWAS was modified from Liu's [1] version. The scale was translated into a Chinese version that was reviewed by three writers in order to better reflect the current study, and "foreign language" was changed to "English" in every item. All the items were placed in a 5-point Likert response format (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree).

The questionnaire, with a total of 30 questions was released via WeChat (a Chinese instant messaging application) to students who played the role of participants in this study. There was no time limit in finishing all the questions, but participants were asked to complete the task individually so as to avoid outside influences.

4. Results

4.1. Factor Analysis

A confirmatory three-factor analysis with varimax rotation for FLWAS was carried out to identify the FLWAS components in order to investigate the underlying causes of writing anxiety. Low Self-Confidence in English Writing (FLWAS1), which includes questions 1, 11, 12, 14, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, and 26, Aversion to English Writing (FLWAS2), which includes questions 3, 5, 6, 8, 13, 16, and 21, and English Writing Evaluation Anxiety (FLWAS3), which includes questions 2, 9, and 25, are the three factors, according to Table 1. A total of 10 items on the FLWAS1 measure low self-confidence in English writing, 8 on the FLWAS2 measure hate of English writing, and 4 on the FLWAS3 measure fear or negative attitudes regarding English writing evaluation.

Table 1 provides a way to categorize the items as follows: items 4, 14, 15, 17, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 29 are placed under FLWAS 1, items 6, 8, 9, 11, 16, 19, 20, 24 under FLWAS 2, and items 5, 12, 25, 28 FLWAS 3.

The loadings ranged from .200 to .808 for FLWASS1, .230 to .859 for FLWASS2, and .216-.756 for FLWASS3, demonstrating that all the elements within a subcomponent are substantially connected to that subcomponent.

The three FLWAS components have strong positive correlations with one another and FLWAS, as seen in Table 2. Between the three subcomponents, the coefficient ranges from .770 to .896 (p.001).

Table1: Factor analysis of FLWAS (N=134).

	1	2	3
Q1	-.560	.530	-.095
Q2	.008	-.163	.756
Q3	.716	-.230	.263
Q4	-.302	.668	-.269
Q5	-.298	.807	.015
Q6	-.236	.859	-.049
Q7	-.222	.746	-.195
Q8	-.595	.510	.292
Q9	.619	-.253	.232
Q10	.809	-.220	.129
Q11	.548	-.453	.417
Q12	.710	-.191	.197
Q13	-.340	.762	-.208
Q14	.734	-.122	.152
Q15	.829	-.327	.111
Q16	-.638	.412	-.150
Q17	.732	-.399	.188
Q18	-.293	.683	-.300
Q19	.808	-.234	.010
Q20	.759	-.394	-.026
Q21	-.277	.522	-.471
Q22	-.351	.606	-.464
Q23	.353	-.356	.655
Q24	-.200	.703	-.294
Q25	-.263	.675	-.216
Q26	-.462	.622	-.394

Table2: Correlational analysis

	FLWAS1	FLWAS2	FLWAS3	FLWAS
FLWAS1	1	.896**	.770**	.887**
FLWAS2		1	.773**	.851**
FLWAS3			1	.781**
FLWAS				1

Notes: *p<.05 **p<.01

4.2. The General Profiles of FL Writing Anxiety

Table3: Descriptive analysis (N=134)

Variables	Whole sample (N = 134)		Male (N=46)		Female (N=88)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
FLWAS1	3.26	0.85	3.29	0.87	3.25	0.83
FLWAS2	2.72	0.92	2.71	0.93	2.73	0.92
FLWAS3	3.20	0.85	3.15	0.85	3.22	0.85
FLWAS	3.11	0.88	3.05	0.96	3.13	0.84

Notes: FLWAS1=Low Self-Confidence in English Writing; FLWAS2=Aversion to English Writing; FLWAS3=English Writing Evaluation Anxiety; FLWAS=English Writing Anxiety

Table 3 shows that male students scored slightly higher on most FLWAS scales than their female counterparts, except FLWAS2. No statistically significant differences were observed between them in all the FLWAS scales. The findings indicate that there is no discernible gender difference in English writing anxiety. English writing anxiety is present in both male and female high school pupils at comparable levels.

5. Discussion

5.1. Factor Analysis

Rotated factor analysis indicates that FLWAS includes 3 significant factors, which are Low Self-Confidence in English Writing (FLWAS1), Aversion to English Writing (FLWAS2), and English Writing Evaluation Anxiety (FLWAS3). These three factors are consistent with the findings in Liu and Ni's study [1]. The FLWAS in the present study is adopted from Liu and Ni's study, so the name of the factors is in line with their research. However, the present research focuses on Chinese high school students, which is an extension of age group compared with previous studies [10][9].

According to the findings of this study, there are some differences between Chinese high school students' English writing anxiety and those of Liu and Ni's research regarding how differently men and women learn to write in English. Therefore, future investigation of similar studies in Chinese high schools is needed to further testify the validity of this study. Furthermore, future studies could have an investigation into the relationships between English writing anxiety and other variables related to English language learning among high school students, for instance, students' self-confidence and academic output.

5.2. Profiles of the Participants' FL Writing Anxiety

Data analysis in the present study shows that the number of students revealing their confidence in English writing is larger than those who are confident in English writing (FLWAS1), which is not consistent with the results shown in Liu and Ni's research. The fact that the participants in the current study are high school students who are occupied with numerous required courses that are important for the university entrance examination may be the cause. Under great pressure, they would be more sensitive and more anxious about their English study. Moreover, English proficiency of high school

students is lower compared with that of university students, which might be another reason for high school students' lower confidence in English writing.

About 40% of the students in the present study dislike English writing (FLWAS2), which indicates that the aversion to writing in English does exist among high school students, and the percentage of students showing this feeling is not low. However, it is interesting to find out that more than 50% of students do not show their aversion to English class. Therefore, it might be concluded that students might dislike English writing rather than the English language. The causes of English writing aversion and how to stimulate students' English writing interests might be interesting topics in future research. Descriptive analysis also shows that more than half of the students express their anxiety about English writing evaluation (FLWAS3). As for high school students, test scores, to some extent, indicate their success in study and are of great importance. The grades might be related to their overall performance in the university entrance examination, which is regarded as the most important test in one's life in China. Moreover, parents pay high attention to their children's academic performance at school, which causes students under psychological pressure. These all might explain high school students' high anxiety in English writing evaluation. Therefore, it might be necessary for teachers and parents to lower their expectations for children's English study and give more encouragement to children in their language learning process.

5.3. Gender Difference in Students' Writing Anxiety

Previous researchers have found that genders impose significant influences on writing anxiety [1]. Nevertheless, this study indicates an irrelevance between gender and FL writing anxiety since the statistics of neither males nor females, according to Table 4, display signs of correlation with FLWAS1, FLWAS2, FLWAS3 or FLWAS.

The underlying cause of this phenomenon is that this study investigates writing anxiety among high school students, who receive almost the same amount and level of English language education despite their gender difference, due to the quality monitoring of education supervised by China's Ministry of Education for students under the age of 18. However, this situation changes completely in universities because it is possible that non-English major students hardly get any input on the English language while English major students enjoy abundant education resources. Moreover, different universities have their autonomous right to decide whether or not English writing courses should be opened and to formulate their policies regarding what should be taught in such courses. There is room to determine the specific causes of why there is no correlation between gender and the components of FLWAS in Chinese high school students.

6. Conclusion

This study researches on the scale of FL (English) writing anxiety in Chinese high schools, calculates the profile of participants' FL writing anxiety, and analyzes the gender difference for FL writing anxiety among Chinese high school students. Currently, the following three findings are concluded: (1) Factor Analysis reveals that there are 3 components in FLWAS, and they are: Low Self-Confidence in English Writing (FLWAS1), Aversion to English Writing (FLWAS2), and English Writing Evaluation Anxiety (FLWAS3); (2) More than 30% of the high school students investigated have low self-confidence in English writing (FLWAS1), about 40% do not prefer writing in English (FLWAS2), and more than 50% express anxiety towards the idea of evaluation (FLWAS3). However, over 50% of the participants do not avert English writing courses (FLWAS2); (3) Regarding gender, according to statistical results, it can be concluded that neither of the two sexes is of significant importance to determining the scale of FLWAS1, FLWAS2, FLWAS3 or FLWAS. As a result, this

study complements quantitative research on Chinese high school students' worry over writing in English and paves the way for future, more focused studies.

References

- [1] Liu, M., & Ni, H. (2015). *Chinese University EFL Learners' Foreign Language Writing Anxiety: Pattern, Effect and Causes*. *English Language Teaching*, 8(3), 46-58.
- [2] Wern, T. C., & Rahmat, N. H. (2021). *An Investigative Study on the Types and Causes of ESL Writing Anxiety: A Case Study of Learners from a Chinese Independent Middle School*. *European Journal of English Language Teaching*, 6(3).
- [3] Yao, Q. (2019). *Direct and Indirect Feedback: How do They Impact on Secondary School Learners' Writing Anxiety and How do Learners Perceive Them?*. In *The Asian Conference on Language Learning 2019, Official Conference Proceedings* (pp. 1-12).
- [4] Jennifer, J. M., & Ponniah, R. J. (2017). *Investigating the levels, types and causes of second language writing anxiety among Indian freshmen*. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 14(3), 557.
- [5] Tsai, P. C., & Cheng, Y. S. (2009). *The effects of rhetorical task type, English proficiency, and writing anxiety on senior high school students' English writing performance*. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 33(3), 95-131.
- [6] Lee, S. Y. (2001). *The relationship of writing apprehension to the revision process and topic preference: A student perspective*. In *Selected papers from the tenth international symposium on English teaching* (pp. 504-516). Crane Taipei, Taiwan.
- [7] Cheng, Y. S. (2004). *A measure of second language writing anxiety: Scale development and preliminary validation*. *Journal of second language writing*, 13(4), 313-335.
- [8] Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. A. (1986). *Foreign language classroom anxiety*. *Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125-132.
- [9] Yan, J. X., & Wang, H. (2012). *Second language writing anxiety and translation*. *The Interpreter and Translator*.
- [10] Guo, Y., & Fan, W. (2009). *An Empirical Study on Writing Anxiety in the Context of Hierarchical Teaching of Learning English*. *Journal of Beijing International Studies University* (10), 85-90.
- [11] Cheng, Y. S. (2002). *Factors associated with foreign language writing anxiety*. *Foreign language annals*, 35(6), 647-656.
- [12] Cocuk, H. E., Yanpar-Yelken, T., & Ozer, O. (2016). *The relationship between writing anxiety and writing disposition among secondary school students*. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 63, 335-352, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2016.63.19>.
- [13] Mascle, D. D. (2013). *Writing Self-Efficacy and Written Communication Skills*. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 76(2), 216-225. doi:10.1177/1080569913480234.