

Investigating the Interplay of Writing Anxiety and Students' Actual Writing Performance

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the relationship between writing anxiety and academic achievement in diploma engineering students of UiTM from Pasir Gudang Campus. Writing anxiety, a prevalent problem among L2 learners, has the potential to have a big impact on their writing abilities. During the third semester of 2022/2023, 172 diploma students from UiTM's Faculty of Engineering were assessed. The Expository Essay Writing Test was utilised to assess writing performance in the study, and Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the degree of link between writing anxiety and writing performance. The findings indicated the somatic anxiety dimension had the strongest correlation with respondents' writing performance, exhibiting a strong negative association ($r = -.944^{**}$). This discovery emphasises the substantial inverse link between somatic distress and writing performance.

Keywords: correlational study, expository essay, writing anxiety, writing performance

I. Introduction

In the field of ESL education, writing plays a significant and transformative role. As individuals strive to become proficient in English, the skill of expressing thoughts and ideas in written form becomes a significant milestone and an essential skill for effective communication. ESL writing serves as more than just an academic exercise; it is a dynamic process that influences the linguistic competence and communicative abilities of language learners. It is a complex process that involves individuals exploring thoughts and ideas to generate meaning (Harmey, 2020). As posited by Flower and Hayes (1980), the act of writing is a complex undertaking that involves the study of one's thoughts, the discovery of ideas, and the purposeful development of significant material. This complexity is further magnified for individuals with a limited background in the English language, particularly ESL learners (Madeng&Palanakulwong, 2019). ESL learners frequently face challenges related to linguistic knowledge and writing skills, leading to writing anxiety and a lack of self-confidence (Cheng, 2004).

Cheng (2004) further specifies that writing anxiety pertains to a particular form of anxiety associated with language skills, distinguishing it from the general anxiety encountered in second language classrooms. As highlighted by Al Sawalha and Chow (2012), it is important to recognize that writing anxiety involves emotional conditions that hinder an individual's advancement across different phases of the writing process. According to Cheng (2004), the concept of writing anxiety is complex and includes three distinct dimensions: Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety, and Avoidance Behavior. Cognitive anxiety refers to the psychological unease individuals experience regarding how their writing skills are perceived by others, which significantly affects their writing performance. This type of anxiety is strongly associated with the fear of evaluations from educators, peers, and coworkers, leading to a feeling of unease regarding meeting these standards. External evaluations can impact the confidence and self-efficacy of individuals involved in writing tasks. In contrast, somatic anxiety refers to the psychological expressions of anxiety, resulting in feelings of pressure and nervousness. Physiological factors contribute to the emotional stress experienced during writing activities. Avoidance behaviour, a component of writing anxiety, involves individuals experiencing reluctance due to anxiety, which leads them to actively avoid or delay participating in writing tasks. Avoidance behaviour is frequently motivated by a desire to avoid potential negative evaluations or the fear of not meeting perceived expectations.

Individuals with anxiety may face various difficulties, including negative self-talk and concerns about their writing skills, which can potentially hinder the organisation and coherence of their written thoughts. In a study by Soleimani et al. (2020), there was a significant and negative correlation between writing anxiety and Global L2 writing performance. This suggests a negative correlation between anxiety levels and writing proficiency, with higher anxiety levels leading to a notable decline in writing skills. Another study by

Saedpanah and Mahmoodi (2020) demonstrated a noteworthy inverse correlation between second language (L2) writing proficiency and L2 writing anxiety. L2 writing anxiety exhibited a greater predictive power in determining L2 writing performance.

II. Problem Statement

The relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance in language learning is a significant area of study. It highlights the complex interaction between psychological factors and actual writing outcomes. Writing anxiety is a prevalent issue in language education, involving self-doubt and fear related to the writing process (Horwitz et al., 1986). Students of different proficiency levels often struggle with the emotional complexities associated with writing. Writing anxiety encompasses a wide range of experiences, including worries about language proficiency and apprehension about receiving unfavourable judgements. When students encounter writing anxiety, their ability to focus on writing becomes compromised, resulting in a significant decline in the quality of their written work (Bai, 2022). The phenomenon of writing anxiety has garnered considerable attention from scholars, educators, and learners alike over an extended period of time. Large body of studies have looked at the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance (Cheng (2002); Jebreil et al. (2015); Sabti et al. (2019); Abolhasani et al. (2022); Zhou et al. (2022); Busse et al. (2023)), however, limited study was found that put their focus on writing anxiety among engineering students (Min and Rahmat (2014); Ho (2015); Macayan et al. (2018)). The diverse manifestations of writing anxiety, such as fear of evaluation and concerns about linguistic proficiency, make it intriguing to investigate its impact on writing outcomes. This study aims to contribute to the fields of language education and applied linguistics by examining the relationship between writing anxiety and its impact on students' actual writing performance.

III. Research Question

This study addresses this research question.

Which type of writing anxiety has significant correlation with students' actual writing performance?

IV. Purpose of the Study

This study's central aim is to reveal that there is a significant correlation between students' writing anxiety and their actual writing performance.

V. Research Methods

1.1 Participants

The study's sample size of 172 diploma engineering students from UiTM's Faculty of Engineering, Pasir Gudang Campus is justified by the restricted number of diploma engineering students available during the third semester of 2022/2023. This semester and year were chosen because they reflect the most recent and relevant data for the investigation.

1.2 Instrument

In this study, the Expository Essay Writing Test (Appendix C) served as an instrument in the quantitative examination of the link between respondents' writing anxiety and writing performance. Diploma engineering students in UiTM enrolling in the ELC 231 course in the third semester took the test in Week 6, which asked them to write an expository essay. The test had a time constraint of two hours and a word count limit of 250 to 300 words. The respondents' test scores were used to predict their writing performance. This test has been standardised across all UiTM branches and campuses in Malaysia. Furthermore, because all lecturers followed the grading rubrics provided by the university, the Expository Essay Test scores were deemed reliable for judging students' writing performance. The students were assessed based on three main criteria: content, language, and organisation. Pearson's r was calculated using the scores to investigate the strength of the relationship between writing anxiety and the respondents' writing performance.

1.3 Data Analysis

The respondents' test scores for ELC 231 Expository Essay will be used as the instrument. Pearson's r will be computed to investigate the degree of connection between writing anxiety and respondents' writing performance. A correlation of -1 implies a perfect linear descending relationship between the variables, a correlation of 0 suggests no linear relationship between writing anxiety and the participants' writing performance, and a correlation of 1 indicates a perfect rising linear relationship. The larger the coefficient value, the stronger the relationship between the variables that are being tested.

VI. Findings

The results of writing test that the participants, who registered in ELC 231 course took in Week 6 was utilised as an indicator for the participants' actual writing performance. Table 1 displays the participants' test scores.

Table 1: Results of Writing Performance

Score Interval	Grade	Category	N	% of Total N
90-100	A+	Excellent	-	
80-89	A	Very Good	-	
75-79	A-	Good	-	
70-74	B+	Satisfactory	10	5.81%
65-69	B	Satisfactory	21	12.21%
60-64	B-	Satisfactory	37	21.51%
55-59	C+	Pass	36	20.93%
50-54	C	Pass	25	14.53%
47-49	C-	Fail	15	8.72%
44-46	D+	Fail	28	16.28%
40-43	D	Fail	-	
30-39	E	Fail	-	
0-29	F	Fail	-	
TOTAL			172	100%

The table above shows that 43 out of 172 participants (25%) had failed in English writing test. Meanwhile, 61 participants (35.47%) were on low predicate in writing achievement and 68 (39.52%) participants were on satisfactory predicate in writing achievement. This reflects the English language proficiency of the respondents.

Correlation between Writing Anxiety and the Participants' Writing Performance

The correlation between the participants' writing anxiety and their writing performance refers to the degree to which these two variables are related. In other words, it explores whether there is a statistical relationship between how anxious students feel about writing and how well they actually perform in writing tasks. This correlation can help researchers and educators understand how writing anxiety impacts the participants' ability to effectively convey their ideas in written form. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for both writing anxiety and participants' writing performance. Additionally, Table 17 showcases the outcomes of the correlations between these two variables, calculated using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient formula.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Writing Anxiety and Students' Performance

Variables	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
MARKS	172	1	14	6.85	4.114
ANXIETY	172	19	148	88.81	42.179
Cognitive	172	10	60	32.92	12.558
Somatic	172	4	95	45.17	26.241
Avoidance Behaviour	-172	1	33	10.76	6.564

According to the data in Table 2, the overall mean score of the three dimensions of writing anxiety and the participants' writing performance is (M=88.81). Among these dimensions, the highest mean score is (M=45.17) for the somatic anxiety dimension, followed by the cognitive anxiety dimension with (M=32.92), and finally the avoidance-behaviour dimension with (M=10.76). The results of Pearson correlation coefficient test showed for the variables of writing anxiety and the participants' test scores can be seen in Table 17 below.

Table 3: The correlation between students' writing anxiety and their writing performance

Variables	r (Pearson Correlation)	P (sig 2.tailed) P<0.05)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing Anxiety • Writing Performance 	-.951**	<.001

The result of Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient test showed that the correlation coefficient was -.951 and p-value was .001. This indicates a strong negative correlation between the two variables; writing anxiety and writing performance. The correlation coefficient of -0.951 indicates a very strong negative linear relationship between the two variables being studied. As one variable increases, the other tends to decrease in a predictable pattern. The value of -0.951 suggests a close and strong inverse relationship. Whilst the p-value of 0.001 is a measure of the statistical significance of the correlation.

VII. Conclusion

The results of this study revealed a striking correlation: a sharp negative association between writing anxiety and performance. It is clear that students dealing with high levels of anxiety exhibit a significant drop in their writing abilities. Indeed, this fear manifests as a severe barrier, destroying their ability to compose efficiently. Writing, which is intrinsically nuanced and cognitively demanding, takes a toll on the delicate balance of working memory, as Hayes and Flower (1986) express so beautifully. As a result, the anxieties associated with writing act as a stifling factor, reducing the potential for brilliance in communication. Recognising the complexities of this process, a detailed examination of anxiety's impact on students' writing abilities emerges as an important pursuit. By going deeper into this relationship, valuable insights emerge, allowing for a more nuanced knowledge of the complexities involved in the development of writing skills. As a result, this study serves as a critical foundation, encouraging additional investigation into the underlying reasons of writing anxiety and the development of effective techniques to overcome this daunting hindrance.

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