

Causes and Alleviation Strategies of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety

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Abstract. With the advent of globalization in recent years, the status of foreign languages in international exchanges and cooperation has become increasingly prominent. To meet the development needs, China's education has also been undergoing reforms accordingly, and the status of English writing in English teaching has been gradually rising. Therefore, conducting relevant research on foreign language writing anxiety (FLWA) is significance for foreign language writing teaching. The research theme of this paper is the causes of FLWA and the strategies to alleviate writing anxiety. This study combines a range of research techniques to gather information on the reasons behind students' writing anxiety and investigate potential solutions. The research finds that multiple factors affect writing anxiety and multiple methods can relieve anxiety. Meanwhile, it also points out the limitations of the research and future directions. This paper points out that the causes of writing anxiety mainly include the cognitive and emotional factors of the writers, such as metacognition, writing self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-esteem, learning outcomes.

Keywords: Foreign language writing anxiety, English teaching, cognition, emotion.

1. Introduction

One emotional component of studying a foreign language that cannot be disregarded is foreign language writing anxiety (FLWA). It significantly affects students' writing performance (WP), motivation to learn, and the entire process of learning a foreign language. High levels of writing anxiety may lead learners to avoid writing tasks and reduce their writing confidence, which in turn affects the improvement of their writing abilities.

Various scholars have examined the causes of FLWA through various perspectives in current research. For instance, according to Zhou and Tang's research, writing performance (WP) and anxiety are negatively connected and positively correlated with the amount of mother tongue usage, and those with high anxiety are more likely to be interfered by mother tongue thinking [1]. Ruan studied the influence of metacognition on it, and Li and Liu focused on factors such as writing self-efficacy (WSE) [2, 3]. Meanwhile, quite a number of scholars have also explored strategies to alleviate FLWA. For instance, Yang and Guo found through the "lengthy writing approach" that it had a significant effect on alleviating anxiety and improving writing levels [4, 5]. Wu and Gu and others proved the positive role of the "cooperative approach" [6]. There are also various ways such as using online platforms, peer scaffolding, the combination of reading and writing [7-9], continued writing after reading and the CLIL model that play a role in alleviating writing anxiety [10, 11]. However, there are still some limitations in existing research. For example, the sample sizes of some studies are limited (for instance, the research by Zhou and Tang in 2010 only involved 30 students [1]; the research by Li and Liu in 2013 only involved 294 students from the same university [3]), and the research methods are relatively single (for example, some studies only adopted questionnaires or only conducted experimental research).

This research further delves into FLWA, which helps to enrich the theories related to emotional factors in foreign language learning. Particularly with regard to how writing anxiety interacts with other elements (such WSE and mother tongue usage), it can shed more light on the internal mechanism of FLWA and establish a more solid foundation for the theory of foreign language writing instruction. This research focuses on FLWA and mainly discusses its causes and alleviation strategies. In terms of causes, it deeply analyzes the impact of cognitive and emotional factors on FLWA. In

terms of alleviation strategies, it comprehensively examines the effects and action mechanisms of various teaching methods and means (such as the lengthy writing approach, the cooperative approach, the application of online platforms, the combination of reading and writing, continued writing after reading, the CLIL model.) on reducing FLWA. The research by Zhou and Tang used empirical research to analyze and explore the relationship between second language writing anxiety [1], WP and the amount of mother tongue usage. Li and Liu used questionnaires to analyze the situation of FLWA and WSE as well as their predictive power on WP [3]. This paper deeply explores the causes of FLWA, clarifies the specific action mechanisms of cognitive and emotional factors (such as metacognition, WSE, self-confidence, self-esteem, learning outcomes.) in it and the interrelationships among these factors. It comprehensively evaluates the effectiveness of various strategies to alleviate FLWA (such as the lengthy writing approach, the cooperative approach, the application of the Revision Network, peer scaffolding, the combination of reading and writing, continued writing after reading, the CLIL model.), analyzes the specific effects and applicable scopes of different strategies on alleviating the writing anxiety of learners at different levels (Examples of individuals include English majors, non-English majors, high school students, and college students), and provides more targeted and practical teaching suggestions for foreign language writing teaching.

2. Empirical Research on FLWA

2.1. Causes of FLWA

Current scholars believe that the cognitive and emotional factors of writers, including metacognition, WSE, self-confidence, self-esteem, learning outcomes, etc., can have an impact on FLWA [2, 3, 12, 13, 14]. Among them, the research jointly conducted by Zhou and Tang aimed to examine the impact of writing anxiety in a second language on Chinese students' English writing process, especially the relationship between this anxiety and WP as well as the amount of mother tongue usage [1]. 30 Chinese students were included in the research subjects, who were split into two groups of 15 students each: a high-anxiety group and a low-anxiety group. These students had different second language (English) writing levels, to ensure the research results were universal and representative, all of them were chosen to participate in the experiment. Prior to conducting the experiment, out of 480 students, the 15 with the highest scores and the 15 with the lowest scores were chosen and subsequently categorized into high-anxiety and low-anxiety groups, respectively. Such grouping helped researchers analyze the specific impact of anxiety on the writing process more precisely. This research adopted the methods of "think-aloud" and retrospective interviews. The think-aloud method is a commonly used psychological research method, which requires subjects to speak out their thinking processes aloud while completing tasks. This method can record the dynamic thinking processes of subjects in real time and provide valuable real-time data for researchers.

To participate in the experiment, all subjects had to write an English picture composition that contained at least 120 words in a quiet room within half an hour. During the writing process, they needed to keep speaking out the mental activities in their minds and could switch freely between Chinese and English. Researchers recorded the entire think-aloud process and immediately played back the recording after it ended to communicate with the subjects and further understand their writing attitudes, habits and anxiety situations. After the composition was completed, three experienced teachers who graded CET-4 and CET-6 compositions independently scored the compositions according to unified standards and procedures. The scoring rules covered three aspects: content, structure and language to ensure the objectivity and accuracy of the scoring.

Furthermore, the researchers carried out a thorough analysis of the compositions' length, their respective scores, and the incorporation of the mother tongue during the think-aloud process. The relationship between second language writing anxiety, WP, and mother tongue usage was investigated through data analysis. The findings of the research indicated that there was an inverse relationship between second language writing anxiety and second language writing proficiency (WP), as well as a direct correlation between anxiety and the frequency of mother tongue usage during the

think-aloud process. Specifically, the subjects in the high-anxiety group showed lower WP and shorter composition lengths during the writing process, and they also used a larger amount of the mother tongue in the think-aloud process. To some degree, this conclusion illuminated the influence of the emotional factor of anxiety on Chinese students' second language writing, as well as how this influence relates to the interference of the mother tongue in the execution of their writing tasks. Each language has its own unique rhetorical habits and characteristics, and these traditional rhetorical devices may have a negative impact on second language writing [15, 16]. Consequently, establishing a distinct manner of speaking that is distinct from both the native language and the target language. Cumming believed that the errors in second language writings [17], such as avoiding or overusing certain language forms of the target language, all originated from the interference of the writer's mother tongue. Subjects with high anxiety were more likely to be interfered by mother tongue thinking when writing, which might be because they felt more difficult and uneasy when facing second language writing tasks and thus were more inclined to rely on the fully mastered mother tongue knowledge to assist in completing the tasks. The conclusions of previous researchers in the field of second language writing anxiety were essentially the same as the results of this research. The negative correlation between second-language writing anxiety, writing level, writing ability, and WP has already been found in early studies [18]. This research not only validated this perspective but also delved deeper into the connection between anxiety and the extent of mother tongue usage, offering a more profound insight into the phenomenon of anxiety in the context of second language writing. The role of mother tongue in second language writing is also supported by this research's theoretical views. It is believed by researchers like Cummins and Grabe & Kaplan that the interference of the writer's native language is a frequent cause of errors in second language writing [15, 17]. This research found that subjects with high anxiety used the mother tongue more frequently during the writing process, which further validates the crucial role of the native language in second language writing and highlights how anxiety can exacerbate this usage pattern.

While this paper provided detailed insight into how second language writing anxiety affects the writing process, there were some limitations that needed to be addressed. The research was limited to 30 subjects, who were split into a high-anxiety and a low-anxiety group, each with 15 participants. Although such a sample size could conduct statistical analysis, it might not be sufficient to fully represent the anxiety situation of all Chinese students in second language writing. A larger sample size might reveal more details and differences. The research was conducted in a quiet room, which might be different from the state of subjects when writing in a natural environment. The experimental environment might increase the nervousness of subjects and thus affect their WP, etc.

The research jointly conducted by Li and Liu took 294 first-year non-English major college students from Beijing Normal University as the research objects [3], covering different majors and genders. These students began to receive a full-English, systematic foreign language writing teaching when they entered the university, which was a new challenge for them. The researchers chose these freshmen as the research objects to explore the situation of their FLWA and WSE when they first entered the university and how these two factors affected their WP. This research design facilitated an understanding of the psychological state of freshmen as they confront new learning environments and requirements, and how this state influences their learning outcomes. The research adopted the method of questionnaire survey. The measurement tools used referred to Jones' "WSE Scale" and Chen and Lu's "Junior High School Students' WSE Scale" [19, 20], and the self-compiled "College Students' Foreign Language WSE Scale" was used to evaluate students' FLWA and WSE. The questionnaire was crafted with scientific precision and logical coherence, thereby guaranteeing the dependability and accuracy of the gathered data. The researchers collected data in an ecological foreign language writing teaching context to reflect the psychological state of students in a real learning environment. In addition, the researchers also analyzed the students' final WP to test the predictive power of FLWA and WSE on WP.

In specific implementation, the researchers first distributed questionnaires to students and asked them to fill them out according to their actual situations. The content of the questionnaire covered all

aspects of FLWA, such as avoidance behavior, self-confidence concerns, etc., as well as all dimensions of WSE, such as overall WSE, task self-efficacy and skill self-efficacy. Meanwhile, the researchers also recorded the students' final WP for subsequent data analysis. The research found that the FLWA of first-year non-English major students was generally at a medium level, but the levels of avoidance behavior and self-confidence concerns were relatively high. Meanwhile, the students' overall WSE and task and skill self-efficacy were relatively low. This indicated that freshmen generally felt unconfident when facing foreign language writing tasks and had relatively high anxiety.

Additional analysis revealed notable variations in overall writing anxiety and self-efficacy regarding writing skills among students possessing differing levels of writing proficiency. Specifically, students with lower writing levels had stronger classroom anxiety and planning anxiety, while students with higher writing levels had higher writing skill self-efficacy. FLWA and writing skill self-efficacy had a significant negative correlation, as demonstrated by this result. Furthermore, the study discovered that FLWA had a markedly negative relationship with WP, whereas WSE had a markedly positive relationship with WP. This meant that anxiety would negatively affect students' WP, while higher self-efficacy would help improve students' WP. The results of this research were consistent to some extent with the research conclusions of predecessors. Researchers generally concurred that FLWA was a pivotal factor influencing students' writing performance, and observed a negative correlation between anxiety and WP. This research further verified these views through empirical research and deeply explored the relationship between FLWA and WSE and its predictive power on WP.

However, this research also had certain limitations. For example, the number of research objects was limited, only involving 294 students from the same university, which might lead to limitations on the universality and applicability of the research results. In addition, the research only adopted the method of questionnaire survey and lacked the observation and analysis of students' actual writing processes, which might limit the in-depth understanding of the relationship between students' psychological states and writing strategies. Future research can further expand the sample size and adopt a combination of multiple research methods to deeply explore the relationship between FLWA and WSE and its impact on WP.

2.2. Strategies for Alleviating FLWA

Regarding the research on strategies for alleviating English writing anxiety, Chinese scholars such as Yang, Guo, Zhou, Zhou, etc [4, 5, 21, 22]. After studying the impact of the "lengthy writing approach" on students' English writing anxiety, it was concluded that this method had a substantial effect in reducing anxiety and enhancing writing proficiency. The "lengthy writing approach" is based on Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis [23, 24]. Through productive language use, such as writing and speaking, learners test their utilization of syntactic structures and vocabulary in the target language, fostering the automation of language use and ultimately achieving the goal of language acquisition effectively [25]. Wu, Gu, and Guo, etc. proved through research that the "cooperative approach" was quite effective in alleviating students' writing anxiety [6, 26]. Yang, and Dai took advantage of network technology and used the "Revision Network" on the computer network platform to investigate students' English writing anxiety [7]. The results showed that the autonomous writing teaching paradigm of the Revision Network was helpful for completing English writing, thus partially supplementing the deficiencies of traditional teaching, effectively improving students' English writing levels and stimulating students' enthusiasm for English writing. The Revision Network was able to be a virtual motivator, instructor, coordinator, and other tasks due to the treasure box, corpus dictionary, instant feedback information, and comments it provided, enhancing students' confidence in their writing abilities and self-efficacy, while significantly mitigating their anxiety towards writing. Ao (2019) found through research that peer scaffolding was helpful for alleviating high school students' English writing anxiety. Zhang concluded after researching 97 junior high school students that the combination of reading and writing could reduce students' English writing anxiety [8]. Zhang, Qin concluded through exploring the impact of continued writing after reading on students' writing

anxiety and writing levels that continued writing after reading was beneficial for alleviating students' writing anxiety [10], cultivating students' positive emotions towards writing and improving students' writing abilities. Zhong, Fan found after researching English major college students that applying the CLIL model was effective in alleviating anxiety [11], especially for students with medium and low levels.

Among them, Zhang and Qin's research highlighted that FLWA represents the specific anxiety-related psychology and behavior exhibited by learners during the writing process [10], which would decrease learners' motivation to learn, impede the smooth progression of the writing process, and result in writing difficulties. To verify whether continued writing after reading could reduce learners' writing anxiety, the researchers conducted a teaching experiment lasting 18 weeks, taking 64 English major students as the research objects and adopting a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data such as FLWA questionnaires, English writing ability test scores and students' reflective logs.

The experimental results indicated that engaging in continuous writing following reading was beneficial in alleviating learners' writing anxiety, particularly in significantly reducing their avoidance behaviors and planning-related anxiety. This was because continued writing after reading closely combined language understanding and production, provided students with contexts, models for language imitation and bases for content innovation, enabling students to have something to say and something to write during the continuation process, thus reducing writing pressure and anxiety. In addition, continued writing after reading also inspired the internal driving force for students' writing, making them conceive writing more actively, straighten out their writing ideas and give play to their imagination and creativity. This research has empirically demonstrated that writing after reading can effectively alleviate writing anxiety among English major students. It could not only help students build writing confidence, reduce writing pressure, but also inspire students' writing enthusiasm and improve their writing abilities. Therefore, continued writing after reading could be regarded as a foreign language writing teaching method worthy of promotion.

Wu and Gu's research gathered a significant amount of data on English writing anxiety among college students who are not English majors through questionnaire surveys [6]. It uncovered the phenomenon that this group typically experienced a high degree of anxiety. Based on this, the research devised a teaching experiment by incorporating the cooperative learning approach into English writing instruction and examined its role in alleviating writing anxiety through a comparative analysis of pre- and post-experiment results.

The study revealed that cooperative learning had a notable impact on reducing students' overall English writing anxiety, somatic anxiety, and evaluation anxiety. However, its effect on mitigating avoidance behaviors and self-confidence anxiety was not as pronounced. The research believed that cooperative learning was helpful for reducing students' writing anxiety by creating a relaxed learning atmosphere, providing more opportunities for language interaction and promoting emotional communication. Meanwhile, in the process of cooperative learning, students could obtain more help in terms of language expression and ideological content, thus improving their English writing levels and self-confidence.

In addition, the research also further understood students' experiences and attitudes towards cooperative learning through interviews and found that most students held a positive and affirmative attitude towards cooperative learning, believing that it was helpful for reducing writing anxiety and improving writing levels. They believed that by reading other classmates' compositions, giving and receiving feedback from other classmates, they could more clearly realize the problems in their own compositions and that group discussions could promote mutual learning and mutual complementarity among everyone. In conclusion, this paper comprehensively demonstrated the beneficial effects of cooperative learning in reducing English writing anxiety among non-English major university students through empirical research techniques.

3. Conclusion

This research focuses on FLWA and delves deeply into its causes and alleviation strategies, aiming to comprehensively analyze the factors that influence FLWA and seek effective intervention measures to improve the quality of foreign language writing teaching and learners' writing experiences. Through research, scholars have found that the cognitive and emotional factors of writers, such as metacognition, WSE, self-confidence, self-esteem, and learning outcomes, have an impact on FLWA.

This research has enriched the theories related to emotional factors in foreign language learning. In particular, it has provided more empirical evidence regarding the causes of writing anxiety and its relationship with other factors, which helps to improve the theoretical system of foreign language writing teaching. It facilitates researchers in gaining a deeper and more thorough insight into the phenomenon of writing anxiety, offers teaching guidance to foreign language educators, assists teachers in recognizing students' anxiety issues and adopting effective intervention strategies, thereby enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of instruction. Meanwhile, this research also provides learners with reference methods for dealing with writing anxiety, enhances their writing confidence, promotes the improvement of their foreign language writing abilities, and then drives the overall improvement of the quality of foreign language teaching, strengthening cross-cultural exchanges and cooperation, and thus has important educational practical value.

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