

L2 Writing and L2 Writing Anxiety: A Case Study of Iranian EAP Students

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Abstract

This mixed methods study examined the relationship between Second language writing proficiency and second-language writing anxiety among Iranian EAP students. In addition, it explored the sources of second language writing anxiety. Forty-five Iranian EAP students majoring in medicine at a university in the south of Iran took part in the study. In the quantitative phase of the study, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory questionnaire (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) was used to assess students' second language writing anxiety. The SLWAI consists of three subscales: Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety, and Behavior Anxiety. The writing section of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was administered to measure students' writing ability. In the qualitative phase of the study, based on their responses to the SLWI, 6 highly anxious students were selected for semi-structured interviews to explore the students' perceptions of the major causes of second language writing anxiety. The quantitative findings revealed that Iranian EAP students experienced a high level of writing anxiety. Also, cognitive anxiety was found as the main type of anxiety followed by somatic anxiety and avoidance behavior. In addition, the correlational analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between second-language writing anxiety and second-language writing proficiency. As such, second language writing anxiety interfered with students' second language writing performance. The qualitative results demonstrated that fear of teachers' negative feedback, low self-confidence in writing, and poor linguistic knowledge were the main sources of second language writing anxiety. Finally, based on the findings, implications for students, writing teachers, and second language writing researchers were discussed.

Keywords: second language writing anxiety; causes of second language writing anxiety; level of anxiety; Iranian EAP students

Introduction

Having a good command of writing is more crucial today than it ever was (Hyland, 2008). It is vital to develop this skill for students to succeed in their academic, educational, professional, and commercial careers (Parina & de Leon, 2013; Tuan, 2010) because communicating scientific and technological information effectively and efficiently is necessarily dependent on 'good writing skills'. Therefore, how to equip EFL learners with good writing skills is an important pedagogical concern. However, even though a great deal of time, energy, and money has been devoted to the instruction of English in Iranian schools and universities, one of the goals of teaching English—to prepare students to write in the target language—has not been achieved (Jafari & Ansari, 2012;

Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011; Zaree & Farvardin, 2009). In other words, after eleven years of learning English (7 years in primary and secondary schools and 4 years at university), many Iranian university graduates are not able to communicate effectively in written communication (Gholaminejad et al, 2013).

Such failure in the educational system of Iran may be attributed to different factors such as: (a) teaching methods that are used in the classrooms: each method places emphasis on different language areas and skills and has different perspectives on learner and teacher roles and learning itself; (b) teachers' attitudes towards teaching methods: teachers' perspectives, experiences, and their perceptions of students' needs may lead them to be attracted in particular method(s) which affects their teaching; (c) the educational problems of the Ministry of Education of Iran; (d) the impact of the national university entrance English examination: in this exam among language skills and language areas just reading skill, vocabulary, and grammar rules are assessed respectively; and (e) individual learner differences. According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, as cited in Liu, 2012), these are a language learner's inner characteristics that could impact his/her reactions to any classroom atmosphere and, accordingly, may also influence the whole path of second language learning processes (Dörnyei, 2009, as cited in Gan, 2011). Learner variables are categorized into two main areas, namely, cognitive and affective factors. In the literature on learner characteristics in the second language (L2) writing, there is abundant research on how cognitive factors impact L2 writing (Whalen & Menard, 1995; Sasaki, 2000; Yun, 2005; Lu, 2010; Dulger 2011; Sadi & Othman, 2012). However, research on L2 writing to date has neglected another highly important dimension of the L2 writing process, affective factors, or the L2 writer's point of view (Latif, 2012).

Affective factors include language motivation and beliefs, self-efficacy, and language anxiety. Arnold and Brown (1999, as cited in Liu, 2012) assert that to construct a more comprehensive and rounded framework for the L2 acquisition process besides cognitive variables, affective factors should be taken into account. Among effective writing constructs, this study sought to explore writing anxiety. According to Faigley, Daly, and Witte (1981, as cited in Parina & de Leon, 2013) "writing apprehension makes people avoid writing or find writing burdensome, and this reflects on their written products" (p. 234). Research studies with L1 writers show that language writing anxiety has an adverse effect on their writing outcomes (Daly & Millar; 1975; Daly & Shamo, 1975; Bloom, 1980; Leki, 1990; Matthews, 2001). Therefore, an implication would be that the writing performance of EFL learners might be affected by levels of anxiety. However, because much research in this area has been done on first language writing anxiety and research studies on L2 writing anxiety are lacking, further research on L2 writing anxiety is necessary to understand its nature and its detrimental effects on students' writing performance.

Concerning the Iranian EFL context, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, almost no studies in the literature have investigated the causes of L2 writing anxiety among Iranian ESP students as well as its relationship with learners' writing proficiency. Furthermore, most studies that have been carried out regarding second language writing anxiety in EFL contexts have adopted a quantitative approach. The present study aims at filling this methodological gap by adopting mixed methods. According to Mertens (2005 as cited in Dörnyei, 2007), mixed methods have particular value when the researcher wants to examine an issue that is embedded in a complex or social context. Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Is there any significant relationship between L2 writing anxiety and L2 writing proficiency for selected EAP students majoring in medicine at an Iranian Medical University?
2. What is the level of writing anxiety for selected EAP students majoring in medicine at an Iranian Medical University?
3. What are the types of L2 writing anxiety for selected EAP students majoring in medicine at an Iranian Medical University?
4. How do highly anxious participants describe their thoughts and feelings while writing an essay in English?

Literature Review

Cheng (2004a) investigated the sources of L2 writing among Chinese EFL learners. Using an open-ended questionnaire and an in-depth interview, the author found that L2 writers' anxiety is probably caused by a variety of reasons such as (1) instructional practices, (2) personal beliefs about writing and learning to write, (3) self-perceptions, and (4) interpersonal threats. Latif (2007) aimed to examine second language writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy in the context of English as a foreign language in Egypt. The participants were 67 Egyptian English language, teaching students. The results indicated that second language anxiety was negatively associated with the student's writing performance. In another study, Erkan and Saban (2011) attempted to identify whether writing performance in EFL students is related to writing anxiety, self-efficacy in writing, and/or attitudes toward writing. The participants were 188 university students, whose mother tongue was Turkish. They found that writing anxiety and writing performance are negatively correlated. In addition, the relation between writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy is negative. In his investigation conducted to explore the sources of writing anxiety in 57 Egyptian university students of English, Latif (2012) adapted the English Writing Apprehension Scale (EWAS), consisting of 12 items, each with five Likert-type responses (from 1 "strongly agree" to 5 "strongly disagree"). Responses to the EWAS questionnaire and in interviews revealed that there are six sources of the student's English writing apprehension: linguistic knowledge level, perceived language competence, writing performance level, perceived writing competence, instructional practices, and fear of criticism. Kara (2013), in an investigation of writing anxiety involving 150 Turkish university students of English, used a 20-item writing anxiety scale. The results demonstrated that have high levels of writing anxiety while writing a composition. In another study, Sawalha, Salem, and Voon Foo (2012) attempted to examine the effect of writing anxiety on the writing process of Jordanian EFL students. The instrument used was the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) developed by Daly and Miller (1975). The findings demonstrated that the majority of Jordanian EFL students experienced a high level of writing anxiety.

Susoy and Tanyer (2013) studied the L2 writing anxiety levels of Turkish pre-service teachers of EFL and the relationship between their writing anxiety and writing performance. The findings showed that the relation between writing anxiety and writing performance is significantly negative. Based on the findings, 19% of the participants are found to be highly anxious while 21% are labeled to be low anxious and the rest (60%) are categorized as moderately anxious. Aljafran (2013) tried to identify whether Saudi EFL students experience anxiety in their academic writing in science colleges and where these problems come from. The results revealed that participants share the same moderate feeling of English writing anxiety. Furthermore, the analysis of the open-ended

questionnaire uncovered the sources of writing anxiety such as the weakness of students' past English education, lack of confidence in writing, and inappropriate evaluation. Al Asmari (2013) researched the relationship between writing anxiety and the writing strategy used by EFL students in Saudi Arabia. The results revealed that students with low writing anxiety were more users of writing strategies than the highly anxious ones.

Kahraman (2013) in an experimental study explored the correlation among learners' beliefs about corrective feedback, their writing anxiety, and their writing performance. The participants were 125 first-year Turkish EFL students. Concerning writing anxiety, the results showed a significant difference between perceptions of corrective feedback and writing anxiety: ($P < .01$; $t = -13,767$). The negative correlation demonstrated that although students' perceptions of corrective feedback were boosted, their anxiety levels lessened after receiving the treatment. As a result, the author stated that using coded instructor feedback could be effective in decreasing foreign language writing anxiety. Parina and de Leon (2013) examined the relationship between English language exposure, writing anxiety, and writing self-efficacy. The instruments the authors used were the language exposure questionnaire, the writing apprehension test, and the self-efficacy questionnaire. The findings showed that exposure and writing anxiety were not correlated. In other words, writing apprehension is possible despite high exposure to the language. The results also revealed that writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety were inversely correlated, which means that the lower the writing anxiety the higher the self-efficacy and vice versa.

Methods

This study applied the explanatory mixed methods design. In this type of mixed methods design, quantitative and qualitative research methods are employed in sequence. In other words, qualitative results are used to "explain, refine, clarify or extend quantitative findings" (Ivankova & Creswell, p. 139). In this study, quantitative methods were used to address the first three research questions. In addition, interview data analyses were also applied to further understand the causes and natures of students' writing anxiety to address the subsequent research questions.

Participants

As Hatch and Lazaraton (1991 as cited in Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012) suggest, a basic rule of thumb is that, for a sample to be representative, it should include 30 or more cases. The participants of this study were, therefore, forty-five (29 females & 16 males) students majoring in medicine at an Iranian Medical University during the winter semester of 2021. They ranged in age from 20 to 24 years with an average age of 21.5 years. The majority of the participants were sophomores (42), with 2 juniors and 1 senior. At the time of the study, they were enrolled in an "advanced writing" course. This course was worth three credits. The participants all spoke Persian as their mother tongue. All of the participants had already studied English for seven years before entering the university. The researcher contacted the chairperson of this university beforehand and obtained permission to include their students as subjects of this study. All of the participants volunteered to take part in the study.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study consisted of The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), a writing proficiency test (TOEFL). The SLWAI questionnaire was translated into

Persian to facilitate and ascertain students' reading and understanding of the items and provision of correct responses on their parts. Three Iranian TEFL professors verified the accuracy through a back-translation process.

The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory

The SLWAI is a 22-item questionnaire developed by Cheng (2004) about the anxiety student writers experience when writing in English which also contained a demographic questionnaire. This is perceived as consisting of three independent components of cognition, physiology, and behavior (see Appendix A) so it consists of three subscales namely, Somatic anxiety (as reflected in negative feelings such as tension), Cognitive anxiety (as reflected in negative expectations, preoccupation with performance) and Avoidance behavior (as reflected in avoidance in writing). The reason for selecting this inventory as a measure of writing anxiety was that it has been proven as being highly reliable and valid employing correlation and factor analysis (Cheng, 2004). The questionnaire followed a Likert-type 5-choice response format: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). The distribution of items across three subcategories is as follows: Cognitive Anxiety (1,3,7,9,14,17,20,21), Somatic Anxiety (2,6,8,11,13,15,19), and Avoidance Behavior (4,5,10,12,16,18,22). The questionnaire was first piloted by administering it to a group of 40 students from the same university and was evaluated with an exploratory factor analysis which showed optimized interpretability. As Allison *et al* (1996 as cited in Li, 2004) state: "For this purpose, you need people who are of ability and background similar to your target population and who are willing to think aloud while filling in... *They* are the ultimate judges of what is clear and what is not" (p. 95). The Cronbach's Alpha of the Inventory was 0.89 which was within an acceptable range of reliability. To determine the main type of writing anxiety, the frequency of the items related to each subscale of the SLWAI, i.e., Somatic anxiety, Cognitive anxiety, and Avoidance behavior was calculated.

Writing Proficiency Test

To assess participants' writing proficiency level, an argumentative writing task adapted from the TWE (Test of Written English) section of the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) was administered. The test takers were provided with this topic: 'do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Children need to learn a foreign language as soon as they start school. The argumentative essay type was selected since it is one of the essay types that students are most frequently asked to write at the tertiary level (Shin, 2008). Then, to assess the quality of the essays, Ashwell's (2000) content scoring scheme was employed. The rating was carried out based on such criteria as writing organization, the smooth flow of the ideas, the use of appropriate transitions, etc.

Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews aimed to specify the contexts and situations in which students feel anxious to write, and the difficulties they experience when they write in English. The interviews were conducted in Persian. The semi-structured interview was used in this study because it allows the researcher to ask for further information and go into an in-depth understanding of the study participants' perspectives or experiences on writing anxiety.

Data Collection And Data Analysis Procedure

Data gathering was conducted in one of the regular English writing classes, the students were asked to write an English essay on a topic introduced by the second researcher but they were only given 35-40 minutes to finish the task. After that, the students were informed about the purpose of the study, and The SLWAI was administered within 15 minutes. The interview of each of the 6 selected students lasted for about 15 to 25 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed into English for further analysis. The interviews were held in the second researcher's office.

In this study, the collected data was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. In other words, a mixed study design (Lynch, 1996) was utilized to validate the data using triangulation. Concerning quantitative analysis, the data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), version 15.0. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviation were calculated to summarize the results of participants' responses to the questionnaire. In addition, Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to determine the relationship between foreign writing anxiety and writing proficiency. For the qualitative analysis, content analysis was used to analyze data obtained from the interviews. Patton (2002) has defined qualitative content analysis as "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (p.453). For content analysis, recordings of interviews were transcribed, the participants' perspectives about writing anxiety were categorized and the factors affecting students' writing in English were identified.

Results And Discussions

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SLWAI AND WRITING PERFORMANCE

To ascertain the relationship between writing performance and SLWI scores, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. Table 1 reveals the results of the correlational analysis.

Table 1 Pearson correlation between LC and FLCA scores

	Writing test	SLWI
Writing test Pearson correlation	1	-.228*
Sig. (2-tailed)		.011
N	45	45
SLWI Pearson correlation	-.248*	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	
N	45	45

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results illustrated in the above Table demonstrate a significant negative correlation between the writing task scores and the SLWAI scores ($r = -.228$, $p < 0.05$), which indicates that students who experienced higher SLWAI had lower writing task scores than those who experienced lower SLWAI. That is, it appears students' writing scores decrease while writing anxiety is high. The

results are in line with some previous research studies which assert that writing anxiety is negatively linked to writing performance (Al Asmari, 2013; Susoy & Tanyer 2013; Erkan & Saban, 2011; Zhang, 2011; Cheng, 2004; Hassan, 2001). This finding, however, is inconsistent with Singh and Rajalingam (2012) and Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley (2000) studies in which the relationship between writing anxiety level and writing proficiency showed that the higher the anxiety level the better the respondents' writing performance.

Levels Of Writing Anxiety

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of SLWAI (Questionnaire I). As can be seen, there is a high level of ESL writing anxiety among Iranian EFL students. A total score above 65 points, a total score below 50 points and a total score in between indicate a high level, a low level, and a moderate level of writing anxiety, respectively.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the SLWAI

Scale	Possible Range	Range	Mean	SD
SLWAI	22-110	37-98	67.21	25.43

Whereas the possible scores on the SLWAI range from 22 to 110, the participants' scores in this study ranged between 37 (the score indicating the lowest anxiety level in this group) and 98 points (the score indicating the highest anxiety level in this group). The mean score was 67.21 (≥ 65), indicating a high level of anxiety among Iranian EFL students. Such a high level of writing anxiety among English major students is concerning and reflects the inadequacy of our writing contexts and practices. The results are consistent with Huwari and Aziz (2011), Dedeyn (2011), and Gkonou (2010) studies. However, the findings are inconsistent with Aljafran (2013) and Singh and Rajalingam (2012) studies in which students revealed a moderate level of writing anxiety in L2 writing.

Types Of Writing Anxiety

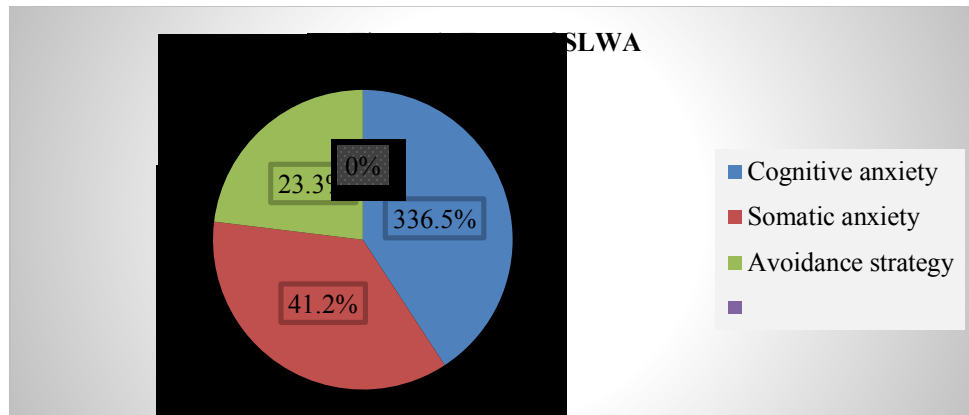


Figure 1. The distribution of the three types of ESL writing anxiety.

Cognitive Anxiety (41.2%) is the most common type of writing anxiety among EFL student writers. Somatic anxiety (36.5%) and Avoidance strategy (23.3%) are the next common types of writing anxiety, respectively. This finding is consistent with that of Zhang (2011).

Causes Of Writing Anxiety

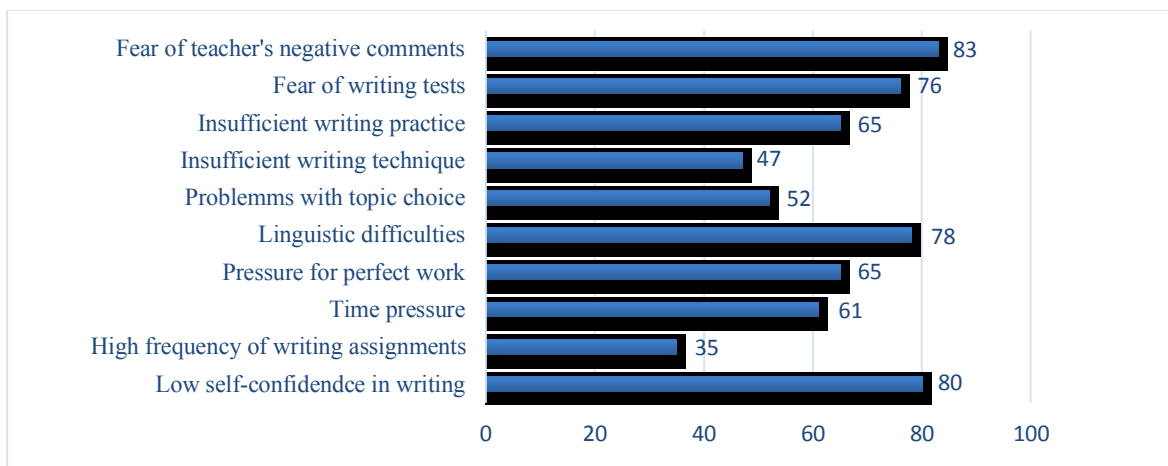


Figure 2. Descriptive statistics of the CWAI

As can be seen in the figure above, the primary source of writing anxiety was fear of the teacher's negative comments (83%). Students' fear of the teacher's negative comment shows that students are not aware of the purpose of writing. They do not write to reflect their voices, rather, they write to the teacher solely to get a good mark and pass their exam. This finding particularly demonstrates the Iranian educational system in which the teacher is viewed as the authority. Low self-confidence in writing and linguistics difficulties were the next causes of writing anxiety with almost the same percentage (80% & 78%). It is not surprising for these two items to have the same percentage as a correlation can be found between the two. Developing a good command of linguistic knowledge is a demanding and time-consuming task for EFL learners. It comprises an important aspect of writing skills without which significant improvement in writing cannot be achieved. Poor linguistic knowledge, consequently, results in low self-confidence and discourages students to write. This finding is consistent with those of Zhang (2011) who found that linguistic difficulty was the major cause of anxiety among Chinese English major students (83%). Fear of writing tests with 76% was another highly ranked item selected by the students. Students, even those with good command of writing skills, often demonstrate some degree of anxiety as far as writing exams are concerned. Although some researchers suggest some degree of anxiety to get the work done, as indicated by the findings of this study, a high degree of anxiety acts as a debilitating factor, inhibiting students to achieve the desired outcome.

The same number of students reported pressure for perfect work, and insufficient writing practice (65%). It seems logical that students cannot offer good writing because they do not have sufficient writing. So, if they are forced to provide good quality writing, they feel anxious. 61% of the students mentioned that time pressure made them feel anxious. 52% of students had difficulty with topic choice and 47% suffered from insufficient writing techniques which makes them upset and unable to write. High frequency of writing assignments (35%) was the least chosen item by the students illustrating that, to Iranian EFL students, the frequency of writing assignments seems logical as the advanced writing course is held once a week and students are required to prepare only one

composition each week. However, findings show that to master writing skills, students require more writing practice.

Results Of The Interview

The semi-structured interviews of the 15 students (5 from each category of High-anxious, Moderate-anxious, and Low-anxious) asked the students to specify the contexts and situations in which they feel anxious to write and the difficulties they experience when they write in English presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Contexts and Factors Generating Anxiety When Writing in English

	HA	MA	LA
Poor grammar knowledge	5	3	2
Insufficient writing practice	4	3	1
Inability to organize thoughts and generate ideas	5	2	2
Fear of writing tests	4	3	1
Fear of teacher's negative evaluation	4	3	3
Lack of interest in writing	2	2	1
Lack of sufficient time for writing practice	4	3	3

The data obtained from the interview showed that students, particularly in the HA group, found poor linguistic and writing abilities as the main sources of writing anxiety. In this regard, some students in the MA group mentioned:

- *I have lots of ideas to write about, but I'm not sure how to express them in English. My instructor believes that my writings are Penglish!*
- *I always have lots of grammatical errors and my writing is difficult to understand.*

The students were also upset about writing tests and the teacher's negative evaluation as reflected in the following statement by students in the HA group:

- *I study hard before my writing exams and even prepare for some writing exams, but as the exam starts, my mind goes blank.*
- *I am afraid that my classmates finish their writing before I do and leave the class.*
- *I'm worried about getting a low score from the teacher. This makes me anxious.*

Though most of the results obtained from the interview were in line with the data obtained from the CWAI, some areas of differences between the two were spotted. The students reported other sources of writing anxiety, namely lack of sufficient time for writing practice, and lack of interest in writing as reflected in the statements below made by a student in a HA group:

- *Teachers expect us to practice writing but they do not consider the time pressure we experience as lots of projects are assigned by the instructors. I like to write but I simply don't have the time, then I start feeling anxious as I cannot finish my writing projects.*
- *Hum... my English is good, I just don't enjoy writing.*

They also stressed that they require a silent place to be able to write. One of the students in the LA group said:

- *I cannot write anything if the class is noisy.*

- *I cannot concentrate on my writing when my surrounding is noisy or when the teacher steps into the class.*

In general, the results of the interview confirmed the data obtained from the CWAI. It was concluded that students suffer from nervousness as far as writing is concerned due to poor linguistic knowledge, fear of negative evaluation and writing exams along with time constraints or lack of interest in writing.

Conclusion And Implication

The findings show that writing anxiety is found at a high level among Iranian ESP students. The results provided more concrete, empirical evidence of writing anxiety, the existence of which has been suggested by several L2 writing or anxiety researchers (Al Asmari, 2013; Susoy & Tanyer 2013; Sawalah et al, 2012; Erkan & Saban, 2011; Zhang, 2011; Cheng, 2004; Hassan, 2001). Cognitive anxiety was recognized as the main type of writing anxiety among Iranian ESP students. Qualitative findings generally supported the quantitative findings about writing anxiety, providing more specific data about how ESP students feel about their writing anxiety. Fear of teachers' negative feedback, low self-confidence in writing, and poor linguistic knowledge was reported as the main causes of second language writing anxiety. The pedagogical implications of this study are as follows:

- Writing anxiety can be decreased among Iranian ESP learners through appreciation of the teacher and finishing the fear of writing tests.
- Sufficient writing practice and awareness of writing techniques can decrease the level of writing anxiety among Iranian ESP learners.
- By solving Iranian ESP learners' linguistic difficulties and increasing their self-confidence, writing anxiety can be minimized.
- An abundance of writing assignments should be avoided so that the students may feel relaxed to complete writing tasks.
- The teachers should guide the students to minimize their writing errors. Through positive reinforcement, writing anxiety can be lowered and gradual improvement in learners' writing can be ensured.
- To lessen writing anxiety, Iranian ESP instructors should shift their attention from product to process in teaching writing to ESP students. McDonald (2000) indicates that the process approach considers writing as an art that will help learners to become aware of strategies that confirm their learning style.
- ESP instructors should provide positive feedback at every step of writing instruction since recurring failure can produce accumulated fear about writing, leading to a real physiological hinder to efficient writing. Therefore, successful writers should be provided with appropriate encouraging feedback after finishing each task, while unsuccessful writers need to become aware of their weaknesses and practice dealing with those with warm support from teachers.

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