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Iranian EFL Students' Writing Anxiety: Levels, Causes and Implications

Abstract:

This mixed methods study examined the writing anxiety of selected EFL students majoring in English language teaching at an Iranian University. In the quantitative part of the study, 85 male/female EFL students responded to the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) (Cheng, 2004). In the qualitative section of this study 10 students (5 skilled and 5 less skilled) took part in the study. The quantitative results revealed that the majority of Iranian EFL students experienced high level of writing anxiety. Furthermore, somatic anxiety was the most common type of anxiety, followed by cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behavior. The qualitative findings demonstrated that the selected EFL students majoring in English language teaching have a high level of anxiety because of a variety of reasons including instructional practices, feedback received from writing instructors, and linguistic knowledge level. Finally, based on the findings, some implications for L2 writing instruction are provided.

Keywords: Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA), Iranian EFL learners, L2 writing, Writing instruction.

1. Introduction

Of the four language skills, writing has always been the main concern of EFL practitioners and researchers (June, 2008). The usual justification for this is that the ability to write in English is

considered vital to equip learners for success in college and their future careers (Tuan, 2010). In addition, the writing process contributes to the development of learners cognitive skills in attaining the required strategies in the learning process such as analysis, synthesis, inference, etc (Bacha, 2002). However, most of Iranian EFL students have been found to have an inadequate competence in L2 writing (Jafari & Ansari, 2012; Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011; Zaree & Farvardin, 2009). The failure of Iranian EFL students in L2 writing as effectively as they should, can perhaps be attributed to a variety of factors including L2 writing instruction, lack of motivation, L2 writing feedback, lack of target language proficiency and vocabulary, the interference of L1 into L2 and psychological variables such as anxiety which is the focus of this study. Many language educators and researchers believe that anxiety can be considered as one of the major predictors of academic performance (e.g. McCraty, 2007, as cited in Sioson, 2011). In this regard, Tanveer (2007, p. 1) states that "Students' feeling of stress, anxiety and nervesnous may impede their language learning and performance abilities" . Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, as cited in Trang et al 2012) conceptualize foreign language anxiety as a specific type of anxiety and define it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning process" (p.128). Research studies with L1 writers show that language writing anxiety has an adverse effect on their writing outcome (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, since much research in this area has been done on L1 writing anxiety and research studies on L2 writing anxiety is dearth, further research on L2 writing anxiety is necessary in order to understand its nature and its detrimental effects on students' writing performance. With respect to the Iranian EFL context, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no published research has investigated L2 writing anxiety of Iranian EFL students. Furthermore, most studies that have been carried out regarding second language writing 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.
To summarize, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1- What is the level of writing anxiety for selected EFL university students majoring in English language teaching at an Iranian University?

2- What are the types of writing anxiety for selected EFL university students majoring in English language teaching at an Iranian University?

3- What are the causes of writing anxiety for selected EFL university students majoring in English language teaching at an Iranian University?

2. 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. Participants were 67 Egyptian English language teaching students. The results indicated that second language anxiety was negatively associated the students' 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 towards writing. 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 in order 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 EWAS questionnaire and in interviews revealed that there six sources of the students' 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 about 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. 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 high anxious while 21% are labeled to be low anxious and the rest (60%) are categorized as moderate anxious. Aljafran (2013) tried to identify whether Saudi EFL students experience anxiety in their academic writing in the 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.

3. Methods

 This study used a mixed methods approach, defined as a "procedure for collecting and analyzing, and mixing quantitative and qualitative data …[in] the research process within a single study in order to understand a research problem more completely"(Ivankova & Creswell, 2009, p. 137). This section first describes the quantitative research design (phase 1) including the following sub sections: (a) participants, defined in terms of their number, age, major, (b) instrumentation, the adopted version of the Second Language writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) (Chen, 2004), the reliability of the instruments, (c) procedures, and (d) data analysis. A description of the qualitative research design (phase II) follows.

3.1. Participants

A total of 85 EFL students majoring in English language teaching participated in the present study. Of these, 35 were male and 50 were female. The participants represented a "convenience sample" as going through randomization was not practical. The sample included second and third years university students. Junior students were included because they have studied in and successfully completed more courses presented in English than had first-year and second-year

students; consequently, it was assumed that they had more experience with academic writing. They also passed two English courses in academic writing. At the time of data collection, all of the participants were studying at an Iranian University in the academic year 2012-2013. The mean age of the participants was 24.2 years of age, ranging from 21 to 24 years. They were all native speakers of Farsi. All of the participants had been studying English as a required subject for seven years in middle school and secondary school before they entered the university.

3.1.2 Instrumentation

The adopted version of SLWAI (Cheng, 2004) was employed in this study. The 22 items of the SLWAI survey instrument were translated into Farsi in order to enable the participants more easily to understand and answer the questions. The Farsi translation was developed based on translation and back translation: one of the researchers translated the questionnaire into Farsi. The SLWAI employed a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The SWAI consisted of three subscales: (a) somatic anxiety, (b) cognitive anxiety, and (c) avoidance behavior. The researchers obtained permission to use the SLWAI for this study from the premier authors (Yuh-show Cheng, personal communication, July 14, 2013). Cronbach's alpha was employed to estimate the reliability of the RMQ. The alpha coefficient for the overall questionnaire (22 items) achieved 0.80, which is accepted as indicative of a high level of reliability.

An interview was administered at the end of the project and the students were asked to specify the contexts and situations in which they feel anxious to write, and the difficulties they experience when they write in English.

3.2 The Qualitative Phase

Following the quantitative design, one of the researchers purposefully selected 10 participants— 5males, and 5 females— for semi-structured interviews. He recruited them based on their scores on their final marks on advanced English writing course (i.e., five skilled and five less skilled L2 writers). All ten agreed to participate. Five interviewees belonged to high English writing proficiency group and 5 interviewees belonged to low English writing proficiency group. They were Mehran, Rahim, Mahsa, Sanaz, Mahnaz, Parvin, Nader and Jamshid. Pseudonymous names were used in order to keep the participants" identity confidential.

3.2. Data collection and data analysis procedure

The researchers contacted the English instructors of the classes and obtained permission to ask their students to participate in the study. The data of the study were collected in the fall semester, 2013. Administration of the instruments occurred within the context of class period. Each participant received a copy of SLWAI questionnaire. Directions and procedures were explained to the participants by the researchers. The participants were assured by the researchers that strict confidentiality would be observed with respect to all of the information and data obtained from them, and that only anonymous cumulative data results would be made public. The participants were also assured by the researchers that their performance on SLWAI questionnaire would have no bearing on the participants' course marks. The regulated administration time was 15 minutes. In order to understand the holistic picture of writing anxiety, following the quantitative data collection 10 students (five skilled and five less skilled writers) were interviewed. Then the participants were asked the questions about their perceptions of L2 writing anxiety. Each interview lasted 25 minutes. These semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face and individually. Interviews took place in the interviewer's office. The interviews were conducted in Farsi. The idea of using Farsi in the interview sessions was based on the suggestion of Professor

Gass. She believes that using someone's native languages allows the researcher to be more confident that the comments reflect what the individual intends. On the other hand, conducting an interview in the learner's second language leaves one with the possibility of needing to interpret what is said (Susan Gass, personal communication, July 10, 2012).

4.Results and Discussions

4.1. Levels of writing anxiety

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of SLWAI (Questionnaire I). As may be observed in Table 1, 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 indicates a high level, a low level, and a moderate level of writing anxiety, respectively.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the SLWAI

Scale	Possible Range	Range	Mean	SD
SLWAI	22-130	22-59	54	19.24

As can be seen in this table, total SLWAI scores ranged between 22(the score indicating the lowest anxiety level in this group) and 59 points (the score showing the highest anxiety level in this group) , the participants' scores in this study ranged from 37 to 98. Through the mean, it seemed that the participants experienced high level of anxiety (Mean= 54).

4.2. Types of writing anxiety

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

Figure 1. Types of SLWA
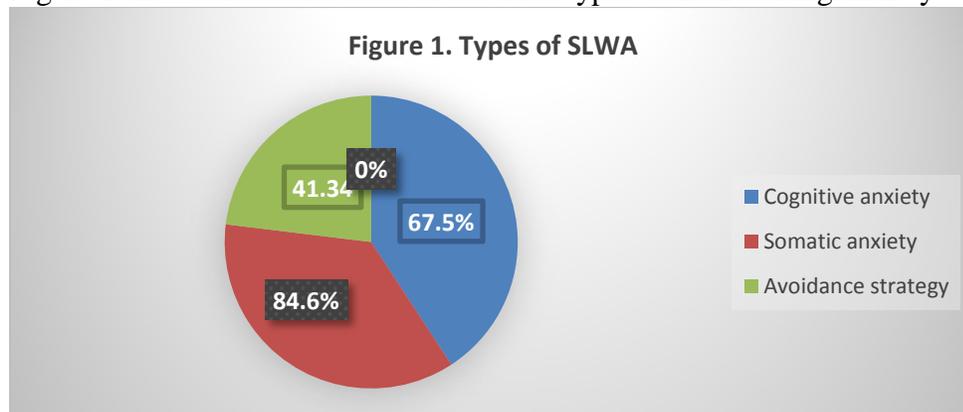
It is obvious that Somatic Anxiety (84.6%) is the most common type of writing anxiety among EFL student writers. Cognitive anxiety (67.5%) and Avoidance strategy (41.34%) are the next common types of writing anxiety, respectively. This finding is consistent with that of Zhang (2011).

4.2. Results of the qualitative phase

As mentioned in the methodology section, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students (5 skilled writers and less skilled writers). These interviews were primarily employed to find out the sources of second language writing anxiety. Three themes were identified from the qualitative analysis of students' responses.

4.2.1. Instructional practices

First instructional practices were found as an important source of anxiety for both skilled and less skilled writers. For example, students are asked to write about topics that they do not have enough background knowledge or they are not given adequate time, based on the given task, to fulfill the given task. This result is in line with Cheng's (2004a) and Latif's (2012) findings. Parvaneh said that:

> My teacher assigns us topics which we do not have knowledge about it, I do not know what to write about in this situation, as a result I felt anxious and want abandon the writing. But, when you see that you have to continue your writing you fell that a current is carrying you away which leads to much more anxiety.

Sara stated:
> I think our instructor does take into account the point that students need to have some knowledge about the topic in order to be able to finish their writing successfully. In other words, he does not consider our lack of knowledge. In my opinion, the fear of not having ideas about the topic can be a source of deep anxiety to students.

4.2.3. Feedback received from writing instructors.

Second, feedback received from writing instructors is also a key source of L2 writing. The results of the qualititative phase revealed that the non-anxious students have received much more positive feedback on their writing than anxious ones. For example, Nader said:

> Well, when my teacher let me know that I've followed all the rules of composition, I feel less anxious. You know that receiving positive feedback is a kind of reward which shows that your teacher is satisfied with you. It encourages me to try to focus on my subsequent composition without any anxiety. Even the final exam becomes easy for me when I compare myself with those students who have received negative feedback during the term assignments.

4.2.4. Linguistics knowledge level

The third most salient source of anxiety that emerged from the qualitative analysis was the recognition of the importance of linguistics knowledge level. For example, For example, students think that a perfect writing is one that is grammatically correct and accuracy is superior to content. This finding concurs with Latif's (2012) results. In this regard, Rahim elaborated:

> I think writing means focusing on structures. If my writing is free of ungrammatical features then I have followed the essential building blocks of texts. I'm anxious when I do not have about vocabulary choices, syntactic patterns, etc. For example, when I see that I have to look up words in a dictionary to make sure that I have selected the correct word created a high level of anxiety within me.

5. Conclusions and implications

The findings show that writing anxiety is found at high level among Iranian EFL students. Cognitive anxiety was recognized as the main type of writing anxiety among Iranian EFL students. Fear of teacher's negative feedback, low self-confidence in writing and poor linguistic knowledge were reported as the main causes of second language writing anxiety. The pedagogical implications of this study are as under:

- Writing anxiety can be decreased among Iranian EFL 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 EFL learners.
- By solving Iranian EFL learners' linguistic difficulties and increasing their self-confidence ,writing anxiety can be minimized.
- 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.

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Appendix I
ESL Writing Anxiety Questionnaire I- Adopted from Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) (Cheng, 2004)

Demographic information

Name:
Gender:
Academic Year:
Date:

Instruction
Read the following statement and express your degree of agreement / disagreement by ticking.

Check the appropriate column.
Note that   SA: Strongly Agree
         A: Agree
         U: Uncertain
         D: Disagree
         SD: Strongly Disagree

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. While writing in English, I'm not nervous at all.					
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint.					
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.					
4. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.					
5. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.					
6. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.					
7. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others'.					
8. I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure.					
9. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.					
10. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.					
11. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.					
12. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write					

composition.					
13. I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint.					
14. I'm afraid that other students would deride my English composition if they read it.					
15. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.					
16. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.					
17. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.					
18. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.					
19. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.					
20. I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample to be discussed in class.					
21. I'm not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.					
22. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions.					

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