

Chinese College Students' English Writing Anxiety and Its Related Factors: A Survey Study

Yujun Li^{1, a} and Gengsheng Xiao^{1, b}

¹School of Languages and Literature, University of South China, Hengyang 421001, China.

^a906034425@qq.com, ^bxgstudy@126.com

Abstract

This study explores the current situation on English writing anxiety of 261 Chinese college students by means of questionnaire and interview surveys and compares the English writing anxiety of college students with different genders, majors and English proficiency. It is found that: (1) College students' English writing anxiety is moderate, writing anxiety is higher in cognitive anxiety, followed by physiological anxiety, and finally avoiding behavior; (2) There are no significant differences between male and female students in English writing anxiety; (3) The students of liberal arts majors have the highest level of English writing anxiety, followed by science majors students, and finally medical majors students; (4) As students' English proficiency improves, students' English writing anxiety levels gradually decrease, and significant differences were observed in the physiological anxiety, avoiding behavior.

Keywords

English writing anxiety; Gender; Major; English proficiency.

1. Introduction

Writing anxiety refers to the anxiety behaviors that learners perform during the writing process [1], such as evading writing tasks, worrying about others reading or evaluating their essays and other anxious behaviors. Writing anxiety hinders the progress of the writing, which makes students' writing difficult and is not conducive to their language learning and health growth. Foreign language writing anxiety is an anxiety produced in the context of specific foreign language writing learning [2], including cognitive anxiety, physiological anxiety and avoidance behavior [3], which is an important factor affecting the performance of foreign language writing. In the past, scholars agree that foreign language learners generally have writing anxiety, and writing anxiety is significantly negatively correlated with writing performance. However, there is no consistent conclusion about whether foreign language writing anxiety is related to learners' difference (such as different genders, different majors and different English proficiency) or not. The relevant factors of writing anxiety also need to be further clarified.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies by scholars mainly focused on the development of English Writing Anxiety Assessment Scale, the study of the relationship between English writing anxiety and writing performance, and the research on the regulation strategies of English writing anxiety.

2.1. Development of English Writing Anxiety Assessment Scale

In the 1970s, Daly et al. first proposed the concept of writing anxiety, and developed the "Writing Anxiety Test Scale" for English native speakers [4]. However, the scale is mainly produced for English native writers and is not for foreign language writers. Later, Horwitz et al.

proposed that foreign language anxiety is a combination of self-awareness, beliefs, emotions and behaviors related to classroom foreign language learning caused by learners' uniqueness in foreign language learning process [5]. Based on this, they compiled the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" (FLCAS). However, the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" mainly focuses on the anxiety caused by oral expression in the classroom, but the anxiety of other aspects of foreign language learning is not specifically involved. Cheng developed the "Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory" (SLWAI for foreign language writing anxiety). This scale is suitable for measuring foreign language learners' writing anxiety, and has high reliability and validity after testing.

2.2. Research on the Relationship between English Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance

With regard to the relationship between English writing anxiety and writing performance, it is found in the previous research: English writing anxiety is different from general psychological stress, which will offset the learner's desire to learn, and the writing process can not be carried out normally [5]. Students' English writing anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with English writing scores [6]. In recent years, Li Hang conducted a dynamic follow-up examination of 330 non-English major undergraduate students, and found that different degrees of anxiety have different effects on students' English writing scores [7].

2.3. Study on the Regulation Strategy of English Writing Anxiety

The study on regulation strategy of writing anxiety, in the previous scholars' research, found that the teaching center of writing should be pre-writing preparation rather than writing stage. Teachers should change their roles to help students to filter bad emotions and eliminate writing anxiety [8]. Teachers should encourage students to participate in interactive writing activities to reduce anxiety in English writing [9]. Enhancing students' self-efficacy is an important method for teachers to help students regulate English writing anxiety [10].

In general, English writing anxiety is a hot topic in applied linguistics research in recent years, and the related results are fruitful. However, there has been no consistent conclusion on whether different English writers have different levels of writing anxiety and how to further improve writing anxiety. In view of this, this study investigates college students' English writing anxiety, and further explores whether there is a difference in learners for English writing anxiety and give suggestions on how to improve English writing anxiety.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions

The research tried to discuss and answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the current situation of college students' English writing anxiety?
- (2) Are there significant differences in English writing anxiety between different genders, majors and English proficiency on the total and three dimensions?

3.2. Subjects

In this study, a random sample method was used to extract 386 freshmen and sophomores from a key university in Central China. They come from science, liberal arts and medical majors. The survey finally collected 261 valid questionnaires. The average age of the subjects was 19 years old. Among them, there are 118 boys, accounting for 45.2% of the total number, and 143 girls, accounting for 54.8% of the total.

3.3. Questionnaire

This study designed the “College Students’ English Writing Anxiety Questionnaire”, which is based on the “the Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale” designed by Cheng (2004) and revised according to the current situation of college English writing teaching. In the questionnaire, there are 25 questions, with each question having 5 options from “completely disagree” (1 point) to “fully agree” (5 points). The reliability analysis-scale (Alpha) of the questionnaire is 0.84, indicating a high reliability.

3.4. Interview

In order to better explain the survey results, this study extracted eight typical samples of different English writing anxiety levels from the subjects for semi-structured interviews, and analyzed the content of the interview texts to supplement the quantitative research results.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

In December 2018, the College Students’ English Writing Anxiety Questionnaires were distributed to 386 different subjects in different departments, and 261 valid questionnaires were collected. The effective recovery rate of the questionnaires was 87%. The collected data were analyzed by SPSS 18.0 software. Descriptive statistical analysis was first carried out. Secondly, Independent Sample T Test was used to compare the current situation of English writing anxiety among students of different genders. Finally, the status quo of English writing anxiety between students of different majors and English proficiency was analyzed by One-Way ANOVA.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Current Situation of College Students’ English Writing Anxiety

The average scores of the questions in the questionnaires about the English writing anxiety are taken as the factor scores. The English writing anxiety are measured by the factor scores, and the average scores of the three factor scores are taken as the overall level of college students’ English writing anxiety.

Table 1. The current situation of college students’ English writing anxiety(N = 261)

Factor	Cognitive Anxiety	Physiological Anxiety	Avoiding Behavior	Total
Mean	2.7887	2.7427	2.5968	2.7248
Standard Deviation	43369	71709	58155	44389

The level of English writing anxiety of the subjects in the test is shown in Table 1. In the Likert subscale, the average score is equal to or higher than 3.5 for high level writing anxiety, the average score is between 2.5 and 3.4 for medium level, and the average score is equal to or lower than 2.4 for low level [11]. In Table 1, the total mean of college students’ English writing anxiety is 2.7248, and the mean of cognitive anxiety, physiological anxiety, and avoidance behavior are respectively 2.7248, 2.7887, 2.7427, and 2.5968, which are between 2.5 and 3.4. It can be found that the total and the three dimensions of English writing anxiety are moderate, and this result is basically consistent with the conclusions of previous studies [12][13]. Among the three anxiety factors, the avoidance behavior was the lowest, the physiological anxiety was medium, and the cognitive anxiety was the highest, reaching relatively high-frequency .

Cognitive anxiety is mainly reflected in the learner’s psychological state of worrying about others’ (such as teachers, peers, etc.) evaluation. Through interviews with typical students of different levels of anxiety, we found that as the university study progressed, they began to realize the importance of writing and gradually paid attention to the feedback of teachers and

peers. However, out of the psychology of “loving face”, they were more worried that their essay were evaluated by the teacher in public and their essay scores were low so that their classmates laughed. Therefore, it is known that cognitive anxiety is one of the biggest causes of anxiety in English writing. Physiological anxiety refers to physiological phenomena such as nervousness, blushing, rapid heartbeat, trembling, and cold sweat produced by students during the writing process. In the interview, some students said that when they saw the essay topic, their brains were blank, and they couldn't think of good sentences, which made them nervous, trembling, and sweaty, which would lead to thinking jam. Therefore, physiological anxiety is also one of the important reasons for the anxiety of English writing. Avoidance behavior refers to the delays and escapes when students do English writing. Some students said in the interview that they generally do not write in English unless the teacher specifically asks them. They generally do not like it, and even fear English writing and often avoid writing. It is found that avoidance behavior is also one of the important reasons for the anxiety of English writing.

4.2. Comparative Analysis on English Writing Anxiety of College Students of Different Genders

In order to investigate whether there is a difference in English writing anxiety among college students of different genders, the author conducted Independent Sample T Test in 261 students(boys 118, girls 143) on the total and three dimensions of English writing anxiety. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Independent Samples T Test Results of Male and Female Students' English Writing Anxiety

Gender Factor		Cognitive Anxiety	Physiological Anxiety	Avoiding Behavior	Total
Male	Mean	2.8238	2.7625	2.6508	2.7595
	SD	.44256	.75615	.58889	.45773
Female	Mean	2.7596	2.7263	2.5522	2.6962
	SD	.42560	.68543	.57365	.43165
Mean Difference		.0642	.0002	.0986	.02608
T		1.192	.406	1.366	1.146
P		.234	.685	.173	.253

It can be seen from Table 2 that the mean of male and female students in all dimensions is between 2.5 and 3.4, so English writing anxiety of students is moderate. At the same time, through the mean difference in each dimension, it can be seen that male and female students' English writing anxiety is relatively close, and the total average score of males (2.7595) is slightly higher than that of females (2.6962). The mean difference between male and female students on physiological anxiety, cognitive anxiety and avoidance behavior dimension are respectively .0002, .0642, .0986. It can be seen that the English writing anxiety of male and female students is the most similar in the physiological anxiety dimension. Because P values of cognitive anxiety ($p=.234$) physiological anxiety ($p=.685$) avoidance behavior ($p=.173$) and total ($p=.253$) are all higher than .05, it can be concluded that English writing anxiety of males is slightly higher than that of females in total and three dimensions but there is no significant difference in male and female students for English writing anxiety. Previous studies of English writing anxiety have shown that female students have relatively low English writing anxiety [14], which is relatively consistent with the results of this study. There are also related studies that indicate that male students' English learning anxiety is significantly greater than that of female students [15], but because the study does not involve specific skills in English learning

such as English writing anxiety, the results are slightly different from the study, but basically the same.

4.3. Comparative Analysis on English Writing Anxiety of College Students with Different English Proficiency

In order to investigate whether there is a difference in the status quo of English writing anxiety among college students with different English proficiency, the author has divided three groups according to CET-4 scores of college students in the questionnaire: high (≥ 500), middle ($\geq 500 < 425$) and low (< 425). The author conducted One-Way ANOVA Analysis and Multiple Comparisons of Post Hoc Tests of the high English proficiency students (85), middle students (108) and low students (68) on the total and three dimensions of English writing anxiety.

Table 3 shows that with the improvement of college students' English proficiency, the level of English writing anxiety on the total and physiological anxiety and avoidance behaviors dimensions of college students gradually decreases. Students with low English proficiency have significantly higher levels of English writing anxiety than those with high English proficiency ($p=.030$). College students' English writing scores are significantly negatively correlated with English writing anxiety, which is consistent with previous research results [16][17]. There were significant differences in physiological anxiety and avoidance behavior dimensions and overall aspects among students with different English proficiency (physiological anxiety dimension $F=3.408$, $P=.035$, avoidance behavior dimension $F=5.953$, $P=.003$, overall $F=4.647$, $P=.010$).

Table 3. Results of Descriptive Statistics and Analysis of One-Way ANOVA on English Writing Anxiety among College Students with Different English Proficiency

Gender Factor		Cognitive Anxiety	Physiological Anxiety	Avoiding Behavior	Total
Low	Mean	2.7700	2.8981	2.7765	2.8164
	SD	.45276	.75928	.55881	.46858
Middle	Mean	2.8553	2.7584	2.5944	2.7567
	SD	.41305	.54281	.52558	.35495
High	Mean	2.7887	2.5983	2.4561	2.6110
	SD	.43638	.84587	.63221	.50305
F		2.466	3.408	5.953	4.647
P		.087	.035	.003	.010

Table 4 further shows that students with high English proficiency in cognitive anxiety, avoidance behavior dimensions and total are significantly higher than those with high English proficiency in English writing anxiety ($P = .036, .003, .017$), but there was no significant difference in the other two groups.

.Students with low English proficiency, due to lack of knowledge in grammar, vocabulary and writing skills, often have insufficient self-confidence in their language ability, which is easily translated into fears of making mistakes in writing, which leads to writing anxiety [18]. In the interview, some students said that many of vocabularies they can think of in writing can't be written. Even if there are one or two words they can write, these words will not be known how to use, and writing skills will not be discussed for them. They are always anxious in English writing. On the contrary, students with high English proficiency have rich vocabularies and grammar knowledge and they have high proficiency in language use and confidence in their English writing. Their self-concepts are positive, so English writing anxiety is low. Therefore, students with intermediate English proficiency are in the middle position of English writing

anxiety, and their English writing anxiety is slightly higher than that of students with high English proficiency, which is slightly lower than those with low English proficiency.

Table 4. Results of Multiple Comparison of Post Hoc Test

Gender Factor		Cognitive Anxiety	Physiological Anxiety	Avoiding Behavior	Total
Low/ Middle	Mean	.08537	.13973	.18203	.05976
	Difference				
	P	.443	.447	.122	.678
Low/ High	Mean	.05105	.29979	.32039	.20542
	Difference				
	P	.768	.036	.003	.017
Middle/ High	Mean	.13642	.16006	.13837	.14566
	Difference				
	P	.095	.301	.249	.074

4.4. Comparative Analysis on English Writing Anxiety of College Students of Different Majors

In order to investigate whether there is a difference in the status quo of English writing anxiety among college students of different majors, the author has conducted One-Way ANOVA Analysis and Multiple Comparisons of Post Hoc Tests on the total and three dimensions of English writing anxiety among 261 college students (39 students from liberal arts major, 89 from science major and 133 from medical major). The specific results are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. Results of Descriptive Statistics and Analysis of One-Way ANOVA on English Writing Anxiety among College Students in Different Majors

Major Factor		Cognitive Anxiety	Physiological Anxiety	Avoiding Behavior	Total
Liberal Arts	Mean	2.8811	2.9930	2.7268	2.8817
	SD	.41828	.54581	.57054	.38075
Science	Mean	2.8201	2.7679	2.6475	2.7585
	SD	.37152	.73069	.61397	.43058
Medicine	Mean	2.7436	2.6549	2.5298	2.6595
	SD	.46679	.73896	.56009	.45747
F		1.910	3.670	2.281	4.412
P		.150	.027	.104	.013

Table 5 shows that liberal arts major students have the highest level of English writing anxiety (M = 2.8817), followed by science major students (M = 2.7587) and finally medical major students (M = 2.6595). One-way ANOVA Analysis results showed that there is a significant difference in writing anxiety among three groups in the total (F = 4.412, p = .013) and physiological anxiety dimension (F = 3.670, p = .027).

Table 6 further shows that in the physiological anxiety dimension, the significant differences on English writing anxiety between liberal arts and science major students, liberal arts and medical major students, science and medical major students are respectively .257, .029, .526, which shows that liberal arts and medical major students have significant differences. The liberal arts students is significantly higher than that of medical students on English writing anxiety, while the other two groups have no significant differences.

Table 6. Results of Multiple Comparison of Post Hoc Test

Major Factor		Cognitive Anxiety	Physiological Anxiety	Avoiding Behavior	Total
Liberal Arts/ Science	Mean Difference	.06101	.22517	.07933	.12325
	P	.764	.257	.775	.344
Liberal Arts/ Medicine	Mean Difference	.13748	.33810	.19707	.22205
	P	.203	.029	.161	.018
Science/ Medicine	Mean Difference	.07647	.11293	.11774	.09880
	P	.452	.526	.350	.276

The university surveyed by the author is a comprehensive university. While, the well-known majors of the school are medical majors and nuclear majors (the science majors contain nuclear majors). These majors' enrollment admission scores are higher than other majors, so the high quality students are more. Relatively speaking, the English college entrance examination scores of these major students are also better. Previous studies have shown that the overall English writing anxiety and the related anxiety factors are significantly negatively correlated with English scores, and the English academic performance has a significant impact on the English writing anxiety [15]. Because the highest quality students are from medical major and this major students have generally highest English scores, these students have the lowest English writing anxiety. Because the quality of liberal arts students are not as good as the medical and science majors and this major students have the lowest English scores, so these students have the highest English writing anxiety. Students majoring in science are in the middle position of English scores, so the anxiety of English writing is slightly lower than that of liberal arts students, slightly higher than that of medical major students.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study explores the current situation on English writing anxiety of 261 college students by means of questionnaire and interview surveys and compares the English writing anxiety of college students with different genders, majors and English proficiency. It is found that: (1) College students' English writing anxiety is moderate, writing anxiety is higher in cognitive anxiety, followed by physiological anxiety, and finally avoiding behavior; (2) There are no significant differences between male and female students in English writing anxiety; (3) The students of liberal arts majors have the highest level of English writing anxiety, followed by science majors students, and finally medical majors students; (4) As students' English proficiency improves, students' English writing anxiety levels gradually decrease, and significant differences were observed in the physiological anxiety, avoiding behavior.

Through this research, the author draws the following inspirations about college students' English writing:

Firstly, college English teachers should face up to English writing anxiety and cannot ignore the negative impact on English learning. At the same time, teachers should consciously teach students some ways to overcome and regulate anxiety according to their performance on English writing, such as using deep breathing and self-psychological suggestion to relax themselves to reduce anxiety.

Secondly, college English teachers should constantly change the teaching method of English writing. Western second language writing teaching pays great attention to pre-writing and conceiving activities to reduce students' writing anxiety [19]. Teachers can use mind mapping,

brainstorming, Socratic questioning, critical reading of different perspective materials on the same subject, etc. [20] to make students familiarize with the writing process and avoid writing anxiety.

Finally, college English teachers should reform the writing evaluation mechanism, not only pay attention to the finished products of students' writing, but also incorporate the elements of students' English writing attitude, hard work, mentality and mode into the formative evaluation of writing. In the process of writing teaching, students should be given the necessary encouragement and help to get rid of their negative and frustrated psychological perceptions.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by grants from the Hunan Provincial Foundation for Philosophy and Social Sciences (No.18WLH33), the Hunan Provincial Higher Education Research and Reform Project (No. 2017-229), the Hunan Provincial Research and Innovation Project for Post Graduates (No. CX20190782), the Hunan Provincial Education Science Planning Project (No. XJK014YYB014), and the Degree & Postgraduate Education Reform Project of University of South China (No. 2018JG002).

References

- [1] Daly, J. A., & Wilson, D. A. Writing Apprehension, Self-esteem, and Personality [J]. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 1983, 17: 327-341.
- [2] Woodrow, L. College English Writing Affect: Self-efficacy and Anxiety [J]. *System*, 2011, 39(4): 510-522.
- [3] Cheng, Y. A Measure of Second Language Writing Anxiety: Scale Development and Preliminary Validation [J]. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2004, 13(4): 313-335.
- [4] Daly, J. A., & Miller, M. D. The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension [J]. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 1975, 9(3): 242-249.
- [5] Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety [J]. *The Modern Language Journal*, 1986, 70(2): 125-132.
- [6] Balta, E. E. The Relationships Among Writing Skills, Writing Anxiety and Metacognitive Awareness [J]. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 2018, 7(3): 233-241.
- [7] Li, H. The Quasi-causal Relationship between College Students' English Writing Anxiety and Writing Achievements: Evidence from Tracking Research [J]. *Foreign Language World*, 2015(3): 68-75.
- [8] Tao, Y. Eliminating Writing Anxiety from the Theory of Affective Filtering Theory [J]. *Journal of Suzhou University: Engineering Edition*, 2006, 26(6): 77-78.
- [9] Abdullah, M. Y. The Effect of Peers' and Teacher's E-Feedback on Writing Anxiety Level Through CMC Applications [J]. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 2018, 13(11): 196-207.
- [10] Choi, N., No, B., Jung, S., & Lee, S. E. What Affects Middle School Students' English Anxiety in the EFL Context? Evidence from South Korea [J]. *Education Science*, 2019, 9(1): 1-11.
- [11] Oxford, R. L. & Burry-Stock, J. A. Assessing the Use of Language Learning Strategies Worldwide with the ESL/EFL Version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) [J]. *System*, 1995, 23(1): 1-23.
- [12] Li, H. , & Liu, R. The Relationship between College Students' Foreign Language Writing Anxiety and Writing Self-Efficacy and Their Prediction of Writing Achievements [J]. *Foreign Languages Research*, 2013, (2): 48-54.

- [13] Guo, Y., & Xu, J. Multi-dimensional Study on English Learning Anxiety of Non-English Majors [J]. Foreign Language World, 2014, (4): 2-11.
- [14] Al, Asmari A. Investigation of Writing Strategies Writing Apprehension, and Writing Achievement among Saudi EFL-Major Student [J]. International Education Studies, 2013, 6(11): 130-143.
- [15] Xu, S., & Yang, X. Relationship between adolescents' English learning anxiety and English achievement [J]. Chinese Journal of Health Psychology, 2013, (9): 1384-1386.
- [16] Guo, Y., & Qin, X. The Foreign Language Writing Anxiety Test Report of Chinese Non-English Majors and Its Implications for Writing Teaching [J]. Foreign Language World, 2010, (2): 54-62, 82.
- [17] Guo, J. The Influence of Writing Self-Concept and Self-Efficacy on College Students' English Writing Achievements: The Mediating Role of Writing Anxiety [J]. Foreign Languages Journal, 2018, (2): 69-74.
- [18] Guo, Y., & Fan, W. An Empirical Study of Writing Anxiety in College English Teaching [J]. Journal of Beijing International Studies University, 2009, (10): 79-84.
- [19] You, X. Y. "The choice made from no choice": English writing instruction in a Chinese university [J]. Journal of Second Language Writing, 2004, (2): 97-110.
- [20] Ma, J., & Dong, P. Research on self-regulation strategies of college students' English writing anxiety [J]. Foreign Language World, 2017, (5): 83-89.