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ESL Pre-university Learners' Writing Apprehension Levels in Argumentative Writing

J.D. Kumuthini Jagabalan¹, Helen Tan¹, Vahid Nimehchisalem¹

¹Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
University Putra Malaysia (UPM)

Correspondence: Helen Tan (helen@upm.edu.my)

Abstract

Writing ability is essential in second language (L2) learners' educational and professional life. However, experiencing writing apprehension can inhibit the L2 learners' confidence (Daly, 1975). The objective of this study was to investigate the writing apprehension levels of ESL pre-university learners in writing argumentative composition. 320 pre-university learners from a local institution participated in the study. Two instruments were employed in the study. The first was the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and the other one was the Analytic Scale of Argumentative Writing (ASAW). The findings revealed a moderate level of writing apprehension among the pre-university learners in argumentative writing. Among the three Second Language Writing Apprehension (SLWA) dimensions, avoidance behaviour obtained the highest mean score. As writing is one of the important components tested in Malaysian University English Test (MUET), the findings of the present study may become a platform for instructors to develop a better understanding about SLWA. Hence, it may throw light on what educators can do to help these L2 learners cope with or eliminate writing apprehension as it hampers the writing quality.

Keywords: writing apprehension, argumentative writing, pre-university learners

Introduction

Writing ability is fundamental for second language (L2) learners since they have to write in English other than in their first languages (L1) at pre-university institutions. Most evaluations of these pre-university learners' attainment in L2 is related to their writing skill because successful writing of compositions and reports is a confirmation of the learners' mastery of the L2 writing skills. However, writing in L2 can be an uphill task for most L2 learners and one of the primary issues that is related to development of writing ability is writing apprehension.

Learners generally feel that apprehension is a major obstacle to be overcome in L2 learning (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) because the findings of previous studies such as Foroutan, (2012) and Cheng (2004) indicated that apprehensive writers were less courageous to be involved in the writing activities and therefore they achieved lower performance than the low apprehensive writers. Hence, writing apprehension is not merely an add-on element that can be neglected in L2 acquisition; rather it is a fundamental affective construct that affects L2 writing (Zhang 2001). According to Cheng (2004), writing apprehension is a relatively stable anxiety disposition associated with L2 writing, which involves a variety of dysfunctional thoughts, increased physiological arousal, and maladaptive

behaviours. These effects could include anxious somatic reactions, preoccupation with the potential evaluation of others, preoccupation with one's own perceived ability, procrastination, or even avoidance and withdrawal (p. 319).

In any pre-university setting, mastering the skill of academic writing is the norm. As academic writing involves the tedious process of composing, telling, re-telling and transforming information into extended writing (Termit, 2012) learners at the pre-university level often perceived academic writing such as argumentative writing skill a challenging task. The conscious effort and practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas make these learners feel anxious about writing particularly when they know that their compositions would be assessed- (Buley-Meissner, 1989). As a result, some of these learners would avoid the writing tasks (Atay & Kurt, 2006) and they would find the experience of writing in classrooms disappointing (Daly and Miller, 1975)

In an attempt to comprehend the issues of writing anxiety of L2 pre-university writers, this study seeks to investigate how L2 learners' writing quality can possibly be affected by writing apprehension. Such knowledge and understanding are needed, particularly at pre-university level where written tests often officially administered in testing learners' proficiency in language classrooms. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role of writing apprehension in argumentative writing. The following research question was formulated to guide the study:

What is the writing apprehension level of the pre-university learners in argumentative writing?

Previous research on the role of anxiety in language learning classroom

Many studies on writing apprehension have been conducted and different conclusions reached. Negari (2012) investigated the association between the learners' composition writing apprehension and writing performance in EFL context. 27 learners majoring in English who studied either English translation or English literature were involved as samples. SLWAI, Open - ended questionnaire and Writing performance tests were used to collect data. The results of the study reported that the learners demonstrated low anxiety when the instructor assured them that their papers will not be graded in contrast to the time when their papers were to be graded by the instructor. However, the correlation between final writing test and anxiety were significantly high. Meanwhile, the learners' responses to the open-ended questionnaire reported that during their first stage of writing experience (when the teacher assured them that their papers will not be graded); the learners had less physiological and psychological changes than their final test. To conclude, the results suggested that by taking advantage of the facilitative aspect of anxiety, the learners' writing performance can be improved.

One the other hand, Zhang (2011) studied ESL Chinese's (English major) effects of ESL writing apprehension on English writing competence, the learners' perception of the main causes of ESL writing apprehension and their learning style preferences in ESL writing class. The results revealed that there was a high level of writing apprehension and Cognitive Anxiety was the most common type of anxiety experienced by the subjects. Secondly, the correlation analysis findings reported negative relationship between writing apprehension and writing performance (course grade and timed writing grade). Moreover, the findings revealed linguistic difficulties, insufficient writing practice, fear of tests (TEM), lack of topical knowledge and low self-confidence in writing performance as the main sources of ESL writing apprehension.

In a more recent study, Rezaei (2014) had studied the levels, types, and causes of writing apprehension. The findings of this mixed method design indicated a high level of writing apprehension among Iranian EFL learners, with cognitive anxiety as its main anxiety. The study also reported that the anxiety was caused by preoccupation with performance and high expectations, fear of teacher's negative feedback, low self-confidence and poor linguistic knowledge.

Apart from that, Asmari (2013) did a study on writing strategies, writing apprehension, and writing Achievement among Saudi EFL-Major. 198 English-major learners from Taif University participated

in the study. The study used a mixed method design. The participants responded to SLWAI and a Writing Strategies Inventory. The results of the study indicated that writing apprehension had a significant negative correlation with writing achievement. Furthermore, the learners with low writing apprehension were users of writing strategies than the high anxious ones. Meanwhile, Noorzaina's (2009)\ study indicated that 82 Pre-TESL learners in Universiti Islam Teknologi Malaysia (UiTM), Shah Alam generally had high anxiety level in L2 writing. The findings also indicated that most of them were not anxious to write in English but were more concerned if their compositions were evaluated and when writing under time constraint. Nevertheless, they were no statistical significance of learners' writing apprehension with regard to the learners' gender, age, CGPA and MUET scores.

Different from Asmari's (2013), Foroutan (2012) conducted a study on the effect of dialogue journal writing through the use of conventional tools and E-mail on writing apprehension in the ESL context. 42 Universiti Putra Malaysia undergraduates with intermediate writing skill proficiencies from ESL programme were the participants of this study. She revealed that after going through seven weeks where learners wrote their dialogue journals (using two different tools) in dyadic groups, pre and post-test writing, SLWAI showed statistically no significant difference between groups in terms of writing apprehension. However, mean scores revealed that e-mail group's writing apprehension was higher than their counterparts in conventional group.

After exploring all these studies, it was concluded SLWAI had very little exposure in Malaysian context. Hence, the results of this current research will hopefully expand the existing literature on measuring L2 writing apprehension levels using SLWAI in a Malaysian context.

Method

The target population for the study consisted of pre-university level learners of a local pre-university in Selangor, Malaysia. The subjects were taking a one year programme for the academic year 2014/2015. Convenience sampling was administered in this study. This sampling method helped to get the sample size needed in a relatively fast and inexpensive way. The sampling size of the study was 320. The sampling ratio was determined by the formula of sampling illustrated by Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Second Language Writing apprehension Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) was one of the instruments employed in this study. SLWAI is a scale which measures the anxiety level in L2 writing. It has 22 items with a five-point Likert Scale ranging from "strongly agree" that equated to numerical value 5 to "strongly disagree" which is equated to numerical value 1. With this, the scale determine the relationship between different levels of writing apprehension (high, medium and low) and the three dimensions of writing apprehension (somatic anxiety, avoidance behaviour and cognitive anxiety).

A higher score obtained in SLWAI indicated a higher level of L2 writing apprehension, or more specifically, a higher degree of physiological arousal, avoidance tendency or fear associated with L2 writing (Cheng, 2004). Among the twenty two items of the SLWAI (see Appendix 1), seven items (1, 4, 7, 17, 18, 21, and 22) were negatively worded therefore, their ratings were reversely scored before summing up the total scores of all the questionnaire items. Hence, in all instances, a high score indicated a high level of writing apprehension. Specifically, the respondents whose total scores of the twenty two items were equal to or smaller than 50 were judged to be low-anxious while those whose scores were equal to or higher than 65 were considered to be highly-anxious. The total scores in-between indicated average (moderate) levels of anxiety (Cheng, 2004). There are seven items on the somatic anxiety subscale (items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 19), eight items in cognitive anxiety subscale (items 4, 5, 10, 12, 19, 16, 18, 22) and seven items in avoidance behaviour (items 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, 21). It is worth mentioning that the reliability of the questionnaire was computed through KR-21 and the internal consistency estimated for the writing apprehension measure (SLWAI) for this pilot study was .882.

Apart from that, an argumentative writing was also administrated to determine the subjects' writing quality. As content validity is considered important in the writing test, the topic was chosen based on the materials learned previously. The writing task of this study was developed by Malaysian Education Ministry (MUET, 2008):

"People are becoming more materialistic. They are concerned with making more money and what money can buy." What is your opinion on being materialistic?

The writing quality score was measured using Analytic Scale of Argumentative Writing (Nimehchisalem, 2010). The scale – ASAW was selected because it has clear descriptors and meets the objectives in this study. There were five criteria of assessment in ASAW. They are content, organisation, vocabulary language convention and overall effectiveness and each component comprised 20 marks. The final score that determined the overall writing quality was based on the overall scoring guide in ASAW. Two language instructors who had substantial experience in rating MUET writing scripts in pre-university institutions were determined the writing quality of the argumentative task. The results of the correlation analysis revealed that there was a positive correlation between Rater 1 and Rater 2 ($r = .834$). It was claimed that the rating was highly reliable.

The questionnaire and the writing test were administered together to a total of 320 samples in the academic session of 2015/16 during the learners' regular course hour for a week time. The learners were asked to circle their choices in the questionnaire. The participants spent approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire, although there was no time limit. Before computerization process the collected questionnaires were coded systematically.

SLWAI answers were interpreted quantitatively using SPSS for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 21 to obtain the levels and types of writing apprehension experienced by the pre-university learners.

Findings of the research questions

Data collected from SLWAI were analyzed to disclose the level and types of pre-university learners' writing apprehension in argumentative writing.

The overall writing apprehension level of the L2 learners

The range of the scores of writing apprehension in this study was from a minimum of 26.00 to a maximum of 103.00. One sample t-test was used for testing the significance of difference between high apprehension score (65) and the mean score (Table 1). The mean score indicated that the learners were with moderate apprehension in argumentative writing. Based on the results of one sample t-test, $[t(319) = -6.058, p=.000, 95\% \text{ CI } [-4.84, -2.47]]$ the negative t value indicates that the mean apprehension scores ($M=61.34, SD=10.79$) of the pre-university learners were not greater than the hypothesized value (65). Hence, it can be concluded that overall writing apprehension scores were significantly lower than the standard. This implied that the pre-university learners in the institution were mostly suffering from writing apprehension in argumentative writing.

Table 1: One-sample t-test - writing apprehension mean of pre-university learners (n=320)

	Test Value = 65					
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Writing	-6.058	319	.000	-3.65625	-4.8437	-2.4688

Apprehension

Table 2 shows the findings of SLWAI. It indicates the three different writing apprehension levels. The total scores on the SLWAI range from 22 to 110 and the participants' scores in this study ranged from 26 to 103. A total score above 65 points indicates a high level of writing apprehension. A total score below 50 points determines moderate level of writing apprehension. Meanwhile, a total score between 50 and 65 reflects a low level of writing apprehension.

Table 2 Writing apprehension level of pre-university learners (n=320)

Apprehension	Frequency	Per cent	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
High	96	30.0	66	103	73.82	7.80
Moderate	185	57.8	50	65	58.37	4.15
Low	39	12.2	26	49	44.69	4.75

Key:

Above 65 - High apprehension
From 50-65 - Moderate apprehension
Below 50 - Low apprehension

The findings (Table 2) revealed that 30.0% (N=96) learners' experienced high level of SLWA while writing argumentative compositions. Meanwhile, 12.2% (N=39) and 57.8 % (N=185) of the learners experienced low and moderate levels of SLWA respectively. This result indicated that majority of the pre-university learners encounter moderate level of writing apprehension in argumentative writing. Such moderate level of writing apprehension among learners reveals that the learners are deprived of help and support during writing because they were yet to master the skill (Tsui 1996). Hence, writing in L2 is considered stressful and provokes much anxiety (Tsui, 1996). The level of writing apprehension among pre-university learners of this study (Table 2) reveals the inadequacy of our writing contexts and a lack of argumentative writing practices. As a result, the significance of this result lies in its being a call for the stakeholders to pay more attention to the existence of writing apprehension in L2.

Besides, the 22 items of SLWAI were divided into three dimensions of writing apprehension. Somatic anxiety refers to physiological aspects and effects of anxiety experience such as tension, nervousness and unpleasant feelings. Meanwhile, cognitive anxiety refers to the cognitive aspects relating to negative expectations, concern about others' evaluation or test results. On the other hand, avoidance behaviour refers to behavioural aspects resulted from anxiety experience such as avoiding writing situations and finding excuses for not practicing writing compositions (Cheng, 2004). A close examination of the frequencies and mean scores related to each writing apprehension dimension (Table 3) showed that the participants had moderate apprehension in writing argumentative composition.

Table 3: The level of writing apprehension dimensions of pre-university learners (n = 320)

Writing Apprehension Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Somatic anxiety	19.3000	4.61468
Avoidance behavior	22.2687	3.96097
Cognitive anxiety	19.7750	4.77776

Taken together and analysing the mean scores of the three types of writing apprehension and individual items of the questionnaire (Refer Table 4.4) demonstrated that the learners' writing apprehension was largely attributed to the behavioural of avoidance (M = 22.2687). However, cognitive and somatic anxiety were also significant at M= 19.7750 and M= 19.3000 respectively. As such, it could be claimed that behavioural aspects, mainly contributed to the pre-university learners'

writing apprehension in argumentative writing. Nevertheless, this finding was different from the past studies. Min's (2014) and Atay and Kurt's (2006) studies showed a significantly high level of somatic anxiety. Meanwhile, past findings by Cheng (2004) and Zhang (2011) reported a high occurrence of cognitive anxiety. Apart from that, a qualitative data collected by Lin (2009) from face-to-face interviews of 16 Taiwanese University students revealed that they experienced somatic and cognitive anxieties. Hence, the findings denoted that different learners from different geographical, social and cultural background experience writing apprehension differently.

Table 4 Analysis of the individual SLWAI statements of pre-university learners (n = 320)

ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
1. While writing in English, I'm NOT nervous at all.	5.0	33.8	37.2	19.4	4.7	2.8500
2. I feel my heart is pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint.	15.6	37.2	31.6	13.8	1.9	2.4906
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.	15.3	47.8	23.8	11.2	1.9	2.3656
4. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.	1.2	12.2	32.8	40.3	13.4	3.5250
5. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.	5.3	31.2	33.4	22.8	7.2	2.9531
6. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.	12.5	27.8	35.3	20.9	3.4	2.7500
7. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others'.	23.8	35.9	22.5	14.7	3.1	2.3750
8. I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure.	10.6	30.6	29.1	23.8	5.9	2.8375
9. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	31.2	45.6	13.4	6.9	2.8	2.0438
10. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.	7.2	29.4	30.0	24.4	9.1	2.9875
11. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.	9.4	42.8	34.4	10.6	2.8	2.5469
12. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write composition.	3.1	26.2	37.5	23.4	9.7	3.1031
13. I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint.	11.9	38.8	28.1	17.2	4.1	2.6281
14. I'm afraid that other students would deride my English composition if they read it.	19.7	40.9	17.8	15.9	5.6	2.4688
15. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.	9.7	29.1	35.3	20.0	5.9	2.8344
16. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.	3.8	17.2	35.3	33.1	10.6	3.2969
17. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.	11.2	31.9	26.6	23.4	6.9	2.8281
18. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.	5.9	18.4	42.5	26.6	6.6	3.0938

19. I usually feel my whole body rigid/stiff and tense when I write English compositions.	2.2	18.4	41.6	31.6	6.2	3.2125
20. I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample to be discussed in class.	17.8	35.0	29.7	12.8	4.7	2.5156
21. I'm not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.	5.9	18.4	42.5	26.6	6.6	2.3281
22. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions.	3.4	13.8	40.0	34.1	8.8	3.3094

Subsequently, analysis of the individual SLWAI statements (Table 4) indicated that items 4 (M=3.5250) and 22 (M=3.3094) received the highest mean score from the pre-university learners. Item 4 and 22 of the questionnaire determined the learner's willingness to choose English language to write down their thoughts and the frequency of English language usage to write compositions. Item 2 had the highest mean score (Mean=3.5250) because 53.7% of the learners' disagree/strongly disagree that they often choose to write down their thoughts in English. Meanwhile for item 22, 42.9% of learners' disagree/strongly disagree (Mean=3.3094) that they would use English to write compositions whenever possible. The result implied high occurrence of avoidance behavior among these learners.

In addition, the data yielded by SLWAI provided convincing evidence that over-thinking about grades, the traditional evaluation and testing systems in addition to some social considerations like high expectations might be responsible for having negative attitudes towards writing among the pre-university learners (Item 7, 14, 17, 20, 21 – Table 4.4). These findings concurs with the findings of Daly and Miller (1975) who found that high apprehensive writers approach writing with negative attitudes and avoid writing whenever possible. Furthermore, they are likely to suffer from the concerns of possible failure from flawed performance, fear of evaluation and negative attitudes towards writing tasks (Cheng, 1999 and Huwari, 2011). Therefore, the study concluded that pre-university learners' with high and moderate writing apprehension often avoid writing because they expect to fail (Daly & Miller, 1975).

As a consequence, it could be argued that the social context set up by the instructors can have tremendous consequences and implications for the learners. According to Young (1991), "Instructors who believe their role is to correct students constantly when they make any error,...and who think their role is more like a drill sergeants than a facilitator's may be contributing to learner language anxiety" (p. 428). In this regard, through adapting effective teaching and learning strategies, pre-university learners' attitude towards writing can be improved in ESL classes.

To conclude, the results of the study has some pedagogical implication in for ESL writing instructors. It is important for the language instructors to recognize and take responsibility for the regular presence of second language writers in writing classes, to understand their characteristics, and to develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs. Most instructors of composition recognize in their learners who seem to be unduly apprehensive about writing. A remedy to help these learners is discovering exactly who they are. Hence, Second Language Writing Apprehension Inventory (SLWAI) is a more effective and efficient means of isolating apprehensive writers as it is an empirically based, standardised measure.

Although the study has generated interesting results of ESL learners' writing apprehension, the study is not without any limitations.. First of all, it was difficult to draw strong generalizations due to the particular sample used. The learners involved in this study were full-time Science Stream learners in local Matriculation College. Thus, the sample is not representative of other pre-university level institution. The result might only be able to be generalized to the above population. Perhaps for future studies, writing researchers could expand the sample size by including learners from different pre-university colleges. In other words, the findings might be different if the scope is increased to include more pre-university level colleges since pre-university learners with different demographic background might pose different distinct features.

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