

Review on Foreign Language Writing Anxiety in Second Language Context

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Abstract: With a comprehensive study of foreign language (FL) acquisition, language-skill-specific anxiety has increasingly garnered the interest of scholars. Among them, foreign language writing anxiety, as a significant influencing factor of second language (L2) acquisition, has become a research focus in the domain of L2 acquisition. In-depth researches on foreign language writing anxiety can provide useful references for FL teaching practice. Therefore, this paper provides an overview of foreign language writing anxiety by summarizing previous researches and introducing typical studies in detail. Researchers have found that, most L2 learners experience moderate anxiety when performing foreign language writing (FLW). Language writing anxiety (LWA) can affect writing achievements. There are many causes of foreign language writing anxiety, in addition to peer influence and other outside influences, the majority of L2 learners suffer from anxiety for personal reasons. L2 learners can address foreign language writing anxiety through various strategies such as self-regulation and some external means.

Keywords: Foreign language writing anxiety, second language acquisition, intervention.

1. Introduction

Foreign language writing (FLW) has a significant impact on L2 acquisition. First, writing enhances the mastery of language structure and vocabulary. Through writing practice, learners can better understand and use grammar rules [1]. Second, writing promotes critical thinking and self-expression skills, enabling learners to organize and express ideas clearly [2]. Third, writing is also a social tool. Through self-feedback and collaborative writing, learners can increase their self-assurance and communication skills [3]. Fourth, writing assessment provides learners with an important standard to measure language ability and helps to track learning progress [4]. Anxiety is one of the major influencing factors that L2 learners encounter. Thus, research on the impact of anxiety on FLW in an L2 context is required. Foreign language writing anxiety (FLWA) has been the subject of extensive researches. This paper will make an overall review of the level of, the effect on, the causes of and the strategies to deal with FLWA. Therefore, future researchers can have a clearer understanding of FLWA in L2 context.

2. Theories on FLWA

2.1. Anxiety

The psychological issue of anxiety is intricate and abstract. Anxiety can be divided into three categories: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety [5]. Trait anxiety refers to a person's relatively stable personality trait, which implies a permanent tendency to feel anxious [6]. An emotional reaction that views a specific stimulus as posing a personal threat or danger, such as an important test, is known as state anxiety [7]. Situation-specific anxiety is strongly tied to a certain circumstance and will persist throughout time [8]. This paper primarily discusses anxiety that arises in the particular setting of learning a FL.

2.2. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Horwitz et al. proposed the concept of FLA as "a distinct self-perception, belief, emotion, and behaviour complex associated with language acquisition in the classroom because of the process's distinctiveness" [9]. MacIntyre and Gardner claim that the context of the FL has a direct impact on the subjective sensations of tension, stress, and anxiety [10]. Furthermore, Young defined FLA as fear and negative emotional responses brought on by acquiring or employing L2 [11]. Based on these definitions, this essay characterizes FLA as a multifaceted emotion that is mostly impacted by the circumstances of learning a FL and can either hinder or adversely impact language acquisition.

Scholars contend that while trait anxiety is a consistent tendency, learning a FL is linked to situation-specific worry, with all situations causing anxiety, while the former is only associated with specific situations [12]. According to MacIntyre and Gardner, studying FLA from the perspective of specific situations is the most effective approach [10].

2.3. FLWA

With more and more researches on FLA, it can be separated into four aspects according to specific situations: writing, reading, speaking and listening. Writing has frequently been considered the most anxiety-inducing skill in FL learning.

The relevant results are confusing [9]. For example, a great many of researchers, like Chastain, lacking of measurement tools with high reliability and validity found that it always acquired puzzling results without distinguishing language anxiety (LA) from other situation-specific anxiety [13]. To get around the drawbacks of earlier research, Horwitz created a scale to gauge the degree of anxiety that students could feel when learning FL. [14]. A period of research without standard LA measurement instruments came to an end with the creation of FLCAS [15].

3. Review of Empirical Studies

3.1. The Levels of FLWA

Through the analysis and comparison of a large number of essays, it can be found that the academic consensus on the classification of the levels of FLWA is to assign three anxiety levels to participants: high, moderate, and low. L2 learners generally have a moderate level of FLWA.

Ziauddin Quvanch and Kew Si Na conducted an empirical study in Afghanistan [16]. They used a purposive sampling method to select 133 undergraduate EFL learners. Among them, there are 77 males and 56 females, with a relatively equal gender ratio. This study used questionnaires to collect data and conducted quantitative research, with SPSS used for data analysis. Researchers converted the items in the scale into scores, calculated the average scores of the participants, and divided them into three categories: high, moderate, and low, to determine the level of anxiety (scores above 65 are

considered high anxiety, scores between 50-65 are considered moderate anxiety, and scores below 50 are considered low anxiety). According to the research results, participants often exhibit a moderate level of FLWA, with cognitive anxiety—a psychological component of state anxiety—being the main type [17]. There was no significant difference in LWA levels among different genders and study years. Although there was no discernible difference when compared to other groups, it should be noted that beginners experience higher level of anxiety. Meanwhile, Students' anxiety levels varied significantly depending on their degree of English proficiency. Finally, this study also has certain limitations. Firstly, the study was limited to a university in Afghanistan, and the researchers did not obtain a large number of respondents, resulting in a small sample size. Secondly, the researchers only conducted quantitative research using questionnaires, lacking the collection of qualitative data.

3.2. The Effects of FLWA on Writing Achievements

Although some researches have suggested that LA can support or promote certain aspects of FL learning, the majority of results of language researches indicate that LA affects academic achievements. With WA being a type of LA, therefore, FLWA is negatively correlated with writing achievements, meaning that it has a negative impact on writing achievements. Xiaoyi Hu et al. studied the relationship between FLA and FL achievements in pupils using scales, regular assessments, and formal examinations [18]. 631 students (324 boys and 307 girls) from an elementary school in Guangdong Province participated in the study. The gender ratio was balanced. This school's English instruction adheres to national requirements, which can be seen as the standard environment for English instruction in Chinese elementary schools. The researchers made minor modifications to the classic scales, and they referred to the scores of "formal examinations" and "regular assessments" to measure FL achievements, which were obtained from two low-stakes unit tests, the higher-stakes mid-term and final examinations, respectively. After data entry and analysis using SPSS, the correlation between FLA and FL achievements was obtained. According to the research findings, FLA and FL achievements have a statistically significant negative correlation. The result is in line with a large number of earlier investigations carried out in various settings. In addition, the study also found that the higher the stakes of assessments that used to evaluate FL achievements, the stronger the negative correlation between FLA and FL achievements.

In order to evaluate writing performance, external evaluation, which is the evaluation method used in the study of last paragraph, is the most commonly used measurement standard. Although highly effective, external evaluations are to some extent influenced by subjective judgments and preferences. In contrast, internal evaluation explores inherent textual features and provides objective observations. Due to its objectivity, internal evaluation has also been applied in prior studies. For example, Zhang Chen used internal evaluation methods to conduct extensive and thorough research on the mediating role of FLWA [19]. He believes that procrastination is frequently employed as a coping strategy for anxiety. And though procrastination might momentarily reduce anxiety, it quickly rises to higher levels because the unresolved state of academic tasks can cause more severe anxiety. Through the use of convenience sampling, Zhang Chen recruited 55 English Language and Literature majors in their second year from a renowned university in China. He conducted empirical research by using the Academic Procrastination Scale, L2 WA Scale, Coh-Metrix, and L2 writing tasks. Coh-Metrix is an online analyzer that provides researchers with real-time analysis to assess text difficulty and readability. Text readability can indicate the degree of vocabulary and sentence usage difficulties as well as text properties., making it an innovative method for internal evaluation of L2 writing performance [20]. This study focuses on the examination of traditional features, and therefore uses Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, two tools that reflect the difficulty and readability of text in exploring traditional features. The results showed that in the three dimensions FLWA, the anxiety levels of participants from high to low were cognitive anxiety, avoidance behavior,

and somatic anxiety; Participants typically experience moderate L2 WA; Academic procrastination (AP) is not related to Flesch Reading Ease, but affect Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, with L2 WA playing a fully mediating role; L2 WA has a significant negative impact on Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. In summary, AP can significantly impair L2 writing performance through L2 WA.

3.3. The Causes of FLWA

There may be a variety of causes for L2 learners' anxiety in FLW, but some common causes can be found from extensive researches. Rasool et al. studied FLWA and its reasons among pre-service EFL teachers in Pakistan [21]. This study used a mixed method through two WA questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. 72 college students (37 males and 35 females) from the University of Education's English Teacher Training Department's preparatory class participated. Among them, 20 students, 13 males and 7 females, voluntarily shared their views on FLWA and the reasons for their anxiety during interviews. Researchers' 2022 study served as the model for the directed qualitative content analysis technique employed for the qualitative paradigm. [22]. The research's findings show that the data collected through semi-structured interviews is different from previous studies: most participants did not believe that their anxiety is caused by teachers' teaching strategies and feedback, and they considered that the reasons for FLWA are more related to writing ability and knowledge for writing. Most participants have limited vocabulary and inappropriate language expression, and they feel that they are lack of grammatical accuracy, which is one of the reasons why they often have FLWA. In addition, other causes that contribute to participants' FLWA support previous research findings, including language difficulties, time constraints, and lack of writing experience, ideas, confidence, thematic knowledge, and the ability to generate and organize, as well as a fear of receiving unfavorable peer reviews.

In the same year, Rasool et al. used similar research methods, analytical methods, and research steps as described above to reveal L2 learners' perceptions and causes of FLWA [23]. The study selected 76 students from the Education University in Turkey (Lahore) as subjects. Among them, 11 males and 9 females participated in the interview. The information collected from the interview revealed how the participants perceived their WA and what triggered their FLWA. The study's findings strongly supported and agreed with the earlier research's conclusions in the preceding paragraph.

3.4. The Strategies to Deal with FLWA

Scholars have studied the self-regulation strategies of L2 learners in dealing with FLWA. For instance, Ma, J. et al. investigated FLWA and the types and self-regulation techniques used by Chinese college students who do not major in English [24]. The researchers used random sampling to select 286 non-English major freshmen and sophomores from two universities in Hubei Province as participants. They designed a questionnaire about English writing, which consists of two parts. The first part is the Chinese translation of the classic L2 WA Scale, and the second part is designed based on first-hand data. The research data was obtained from the semi-structured open-ended questionnaire distributed by the first author of the study to 39 students in the class the researchers taught. The researchers require students to refer to the items of the classic L2 WA Scale and describe how they deal with anxiety in English writing. After conducting reliability and validity tests, factor analysis, and analysis of variance, the study discovered that there are four main types of self-regulation strategies in English WA: action strategies, ideation strategies, avoidance strategies, and affective strategies. Specific strategies include native language intervention and grammar reinforcement in addition to those covered in the questionnaire items. Besides, although discernible difference between anxiety levels does not exist, the frequency of applying self-regulation strategies typically declines as anxiety levels

rise. Moreover, the research findings provide teachers with suggestions. Firstly, creating focused and guided writing assignments to help students embrace proactive action techniques. Teachers can assign small tasks such as reading and listening to relevant materials based on writing topics to assist students in lowering linguistic barriers and collecting writing source materials. Secondly, pre-writing exercises can be used to help pupils develop adaptable ideation techniques. Teachers can use mind maps, brainstorming, and Socratic questioning to conduct critical reading exercises on materials with different perspectives on the same topic. Thirdly, implementing tailored support to help pupils use avoidance techniques less. In order to reduce anxiety, teachers should focus on students who exhibit high levels of anxiety, take a tolerant stance towards grammatical errors in their writing, recognise their precise wording, clever sentences, original arguments, etc., and turn their focus away from fear and worry about mistakes.

L2 learners can not only focus on their own regulation when dealing with FLWA, but also rely on external means. For example, Daniel Bailey and Richard Cassidy studied how students' levels of L2 WA, language learning strategies, and writing performance were affected by peer-to-peer feedback processes [25]. Peer to peer feedback process refers to a peer response task — peers read each other's articles and provide detailed evaluations, rather than just identifying errors in each other's articles. The participants of this study were 20 freshmen (13 females, 7 males) and 21 sophomores (15 females, 6 males) of a South Korean university. All participants majored in English education and are proficient in using university's learning management system which provides peer-to-peer feedback services. During one semester of conducting research, participants were asked to provide feedback on their peers' writing assignments and modify their own assignments based on the feedback that peers provided. In the second and twelfth weeks of the semester, researchers used the L2 WA Scale to determine the initial level and final state of participants' L2 WA, and asked them to write "problem solution" style paragraphs as pre/post treatment reflection papers. Researchers rate reflection papers based on accuracy and fluency. In the second week, the researchers also employed a language learning strategy scale to measure the direct strategies and indirect strategies used by participants to alleviate the negative effects of FLWA. Combining quantitative and qualitative data obtained from scales and reflection papers, the researchers described the improvement in participants' writing performance and conducted analysis to demonstrate the relationship between the results of the two scales and writing performance at the beginning and end of the study. The research results indicate that peer-to-peer feedback practice can help improve the exactness and volubility of L2 writing. Research has confirmed that the extensive writing exercises involved in providing feedback to peers' articles may themselves help improve writing skills. In addition, the study also suggests that the collaborative and social nature of the peer-to-peer feedback process can help reduce L2 learners' anxiety levels. Finally, the findings of earlier studies on the peer-to-peer feedback process are supported by this study, which suggests that it can enhance students' awareness and use of cognitive, affective, metacognitive, and social learning strategies. If students are adequately prepared and the peer-to-peer feedback processes studied in this study can be successfully incorporated into the curriculum, it can become a successful language-learning strategy to dealing with English WA in terms of cognitive and metacognitive significance, as well as social and emotional significance related to writing quality.

4. Conclusion

Considering that language learners encounter several obstacles, anxiety is a significant influencing factor, particularly when writing. It is essential to comprehend how anxiety affects FLW in L2 context. The purpose and importance of the study are first discussed in this paper, followed by a review of FLWA theories and a detailed introduction to the researches of several scholars. Through in-depth analysis of 7 researches, this paper aims to summarize and gain a clearer understanding of previous studies on FLWA in L2 context. Specifically, it is divided into four aspects to introduce previous

research on FLWA: the levels of FLWA, the reasons why L2 learners feel anxious in FLW, the effects of FLWA on writing achievements, and the strategies to dealing with FLWA. In general, three categories are typically used to categorize anxiety levels in FLW: high, moderate, and low. Moreover, most L2 learners experience moderate anxiety when performing FLW; There is a negative correlation between FLWA and writing achievements; The causes of FLWA are also multifaceted. Most L2 learners consider their own internal factors, such as limited vocabulary, inappropriate language expression, lack of grammar accuracy, writing practice, ideas, confidence, thematic knowledge, and generating and organizing. L2 Learners are sometimes also fear of negative evaluations from peers and time constraints, which can cause stress and lead to FLWA; L2 learners can address FLWA by improving self-regulation and utilizing external means, such as adopting action strategies, ideation strategies, avoidance strategies, and affective strategies, or practicing a peer-to-peer feedback process. It is anticipated that this paper can provide teachers with teaching inspiration, enrich and improve their teaching strategies and writing review modes, support students as a participant and with an equal attitude, discuss with students, and enable students to actively face writing in a harmonious atmosphere. By combining in-class and outside-class activities, students can accumulate rich writing source materials, develop an interest in writing, improve their writing confidence, enhance their writing abilities, and thus reduce WA.

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