

# **A Pilot Study of Emotions of Writing in L2:**

## **Unpacking the Felt Sense of an EFL Writer**

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### **Keywords**

L2 writing, emotions, felt sense, Thinking at the Edge (TAE), EFL writer

### **Abstract**

This study explores one EFL writer's emotional aspects towards writing in second language (L2) through verbalizing her felt sense using the Thinking at the Edge (TAE) approach. Data collected include the participant's autobiography of learning English, TAE-based reflective worksheets, and an individual interview. To analyze the data, thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) in a qualitative method was employed. The findings reveal that the participant showed difficulty in expressing herself clearly in English and remained apprehensive about using English words and expressions properly. However, she realized the importance of English writing, which has promoted her creating a sense of confidence and writing proficiency. This study indicates that the findings obtained by the TAE approach will enhance the importance of seeking learners' psychological engagement with writing in L2 in a qualitative manner.

### **Introduction**

Research on emotion in second language (L2) writing has been conducted as a part of psychological anxiety (Dewaele, 2010; Gabrys-barker, Bielska, 2013; MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2016). Especially, the paradigm of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a prevailing approach to address the effects of negative feelings on language development (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2018). Currently, in the case of L2 writing, FLA has examined the individual development and performance at the skill-specific level, employing a measurement tool in a quantitative method (Han & Hiver, 2018). However, such investigations of the writers' emotions have paid scant attention to emotional aspects. Research on emotion in L2 writing needs to explore the meaning of the emotions that the writer expressed and to separate emotions from a positive and negative stance (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017). To explore the emotions of L2 writing, the use of autobiographical narratives and poetry is a plausible way to illustrate

the writer's self and inner struggles, as well as the writer's language use about the genre and experiences (Chamcharatsri, 2013a, 2013b; Fujieda, 2010; Hanauer, 2004; Iida, 2016, 2018; Pavlenko, 2005, 2014).

An alternative approach for the emotion of L2 writing is to understand the writers' un-verbalized feelings and sense, which is called a "bodily felt sense," in conjunction with the Thinking at the Edge (TAE) method (Gendlin, 1962, 1978). By so doing, this line of research contributes to providing a new insight into a reflective practice of L2 writing and the significance of constructing the meaning of the writers' emotions. Thus, this study examines one English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writer's emotions of writing in English. Specifically, this inquiry explores her emotional aspects towards writing in L2 through verbalizing her felt sense and using the TAE approach.

This paper begins with a discussion of FLA of language learning and shows the concepts of bodily felt sense and TAE for the pilot case study. Then, the methods of this research demonstrate the context of the research and the background of the research participant, explaining the data sources and analysis of the study. Finally, the research issues of emotions in L2 writing are discussed.

## 1. Literature Review

Anxiety is inherent in the nature of language learning and inseparable from the process of learning foreign languages (Horwitz, 2010; Sparks & Ganschow, 1995). As such, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has garnered attention in the area of L2 acquisition. The definition of FLA is an emotional experience, where one feels that a sense of fear or failure has occurred as a reaction to foreign language learning (MacIntyre, 1998). The fundamental concept of FLA is related to learners' psychological affective factors during the process of L2 acquisition and sees the effects of the negative emotions on language development (Krashen, 1985; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2018).

A body of FLA research has examined the learners' anxiety in the classroom by mainly adapting the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, as proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) (Aida, 1994; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Park, 2014; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2018). Aida (1994) examined 96 undergraduate students studying Japanese as a foreign language in the U.S. Her research found that four major factors impacted the students' language anxiety: (1) speech anxiety and fear of negative assessment, (2) anxiety of class failure, (3) comfort in speaking with native Japanese speakers, and (4) a passive attitude towards learning Japanese. In the contexts of Japanese English classes, Toyama and Yamazaki (2018) investigated 237 Japanese

undergraduates at two different universities. The results indicated that most Japanese undergraduate students felt worried about their communicative performance in English and felt daunted by failure. Matsuda and Gobel's study (2004) investigated FLCA and English reading anxiety, focusing on 252 Japanese EFL students' demographic backgrounds (e.g. experiences of study abroad, performance in class). The results demonstrated that students who had an overseas experience felt high self-confidence in English speaking, while gender and proficiency also had a key role in first-year students' language performance.

Currently, FLA has shifted to the language skill-specific level; how anxiety influences the individual's development and performance. The research on anxiety in L2 writing mainly employed a measurement tool in a quantitative method (Han & Hiver, 2018). In particular, the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test was common as "an instrument of satisfactory internal consistency reliability, as well as concurrent and predictive validity" (Chen, 2004, p. 314). However, these studies in quantitative measurement have taken little account into the writer's emotional aspects and deeper feelings. Moreover, L2 writing in FLA is premised on containing somatic anxiety, such as difficulty or frustration, which conceives the writer as situated in a negative state. Since emotions involve complex and affective psychological factors in their very nature, research on the emotions of L2 writing has to move beyond the dichotomy between positive and negative viewpoints by exploring the writer's meaning of emotions.

In studies of emotion in L2 writing, the use of narrative is a significant tool, which provides "insight into the hidden conceptual and emotional world of the individual" (Hanauer, 2004, p. 4). Such autobiographical or self-reflective narratives show the writer's self, cultural beliefs, and inner struggles (Fujieda, 2010; Pavlenko, 2005). Another way is poetry writing in L2 (Hanauer, 2004, 2010). L2 writers expressed their emotions about the genre in L1 and L2 (Chamcharatsri, 2013b) and recounted a traumatic event in L2 (Iida, 2016, 2018).

To delve into the writer's emotions on the narrative accounts, the interpretation and meaning of emotional words need to be described. While practicing writing in English, L2 writers perceive un-verbalized feelings and sense; however, their body knows, and such a sense is called a "bodily felt sense" (Gendlin, 1978, 1996; Rome, 2014). To elicit such a sense is difficult to articulate, and thus, a structured method, Thinking at the Edge (TAE), can be applicable as a way of "elaborating a bodily felt sense, something vague, hard to describe yet feeling important" (Tokumaru, 2011, p. 5). The TAE approach was proposed by Eugene Gendlin, and was introduced into psychotherapy and counseling. Incorporating the TAE method into a reflective practice

helps learners verbalize their emotions of L2 learning and teaching by focusing on constructing the meaning of their felt sense (Nagamine, Fujieda, & Iida, 2018<sup>1</sup>).

## 2. Methods

### 2-1. Background of the Research and the Participant

As a pilot study, this research examined one Japanese EFL writer's emotions of writing in English based on her felt sense. A qualitative single-case study was used to ensure validity with a holistic description of experiences and practices of English writing by providing various data sources (i.e., an autobiography of learning English, TAE-based worksheets, and an individual interview) and to strengthen the interpretations of the data from multiple lenses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). One significance of the single-case study is that this approach can contribute to knowledge and theory reconstruction by confirming the existing theory (Yin, 2018). Thus, the research framework used an inductive thematic analysis.

In this investigation, a convenience sampling method was employed to recruit participants as follows. First, prospective participants had to have completed a required freshman writing class, *Written English I and II* (two credits per class), which was provided in the academic year 2016. Second, they could voluntarily and regularly participate in the TAE workshop of this study because the TAE sessions required some guidance to explain the steps of the TAE worksheets and took much time to fill out the documents and summarize them. Finally, they had to agree to submit informed consent forms, to provide all written documents (i.e., an autobiography and TAE worksheets) and conduct an individual interview. Mayu (pseudonym) was the only participant that I recruited. She satisfied all the conditions, completing the writing classes during her first-year as a student and voluntarily joining this research project.

The research participant, Mayu, was a sophomore majoring in English at a private four-year university in Japan. Mayu was enrolled in the university in April 2016 and joined the second highest level, B1. Her English proficiency at that time was intermediate, and her score on the TOEIC test was around 450. She had studied English for around 14 years, since she was seven years old, emphasizing the reading and writing practices at school and practicing English speaking at a private institute near her house. In terms of English writing, she had a lot of sentence-making practice, translating Japanese into English for her college entrance exams, but had never had experience in paragraph writing in high school. In the required writing class, it was the first time for her to produce some genres of written products (e.g. narrative, cause-effect, and argumentative) in paragraphs.

## 2-2. Data Collection and Analysis

To obtain multiple data sources of the participant<sup>2</sup>, I collected Mayu's autobiography of learning English to contextualize her history of English studies and what practices she did by her secondary school years. I requested that the participant write her autobiographical account in Japanese so that she could explain her language history clearly. Next, Mayu and I worked on the TAE-based reflection activities with worksheets (Tokumaru, 2008) by guiding how to respond to each question. The TAE reflections included five major activities (1) writing poetry about her writing in English, (2) making sentences about the felt sense, (3) taking the felt sense as an analogy from the experiences, (4) summarizing the felt sense logically, and (5) theorizing the felt sense. After the reflections, I conducted an individual unstructured interview<sup>3</sup> with her in Japanese for around 50 minutes to share her thoughts about the TAE reflection activities and writing in English based on her TAE worksheets. With her permission, the interview was recorded, and her autobiography and TAE worksheets were collected to analyze the data sources.

To analyze the data sources, I used inductive thematic analysis that was developed by Boyatzis (1998). The analysis involved three phases. First, I carefully translated all writing documents (autobiography and TAE worksheets) and recorded interviews into English. I then conducted member checking with the participant to confirm the complete accuracy of the translations and interpreted meanings. The primary focus of the first step was to create the coding schemes based on the topical entries as considered pertinent to writing in English. After that, all data sources were stored in NVivo 11 Pro, a software of qualitative research, to reexamine the rich databank because qualitative methods require a recursive and dynamic process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In the second phase, I compared each sentence of Mayu's documents and interview transcripts with the codes and built new categories if necessary. In the last step, I evaluated the reliability of the coding system, revisiting and re-analyzing the coding schemes used in the previous phase and the databank in NVivo to establish the credibility of the research findings.

## 3. Findings

This section illustrates Mayu's emotions towards writing in English. Three major themes emerged in this case study of her emotions towards writing in English: (1) struggling to write with clear expressions, (2) feeling insecurity at using words and phrases, and (3) contributing to developing her writing proficiency. The case profile

elucidates how she felt through practicing English writing and interpreted the meaning of her emotions based on the TAE approach.

### 3-1. Struggling to Write with Clear Expressions

*It looks cool for me to write sentences in English, but  
it is difficult because I'm confused by various expressions.  
Yet, English enables us to engage in conversations with people all over the world.  
It looks cool for me to write sentences in English, but  
it is challenging because I'm confused by various expressions.  
Yet, English enables us to share our thoughts with people all over the world.  
It looks cool for me to write sentences in English, but  
it is hard because I'm confused by various expressions.  
Yet, we can hear English around the world. (Worksheet #1: Mayu's poetry)*

The TAE worksheet #1 is a brief task to make poetry with three emotional words about the topic (in this case, writing in English). In the poetry, Mayu used her emotional words with respect to her writing in English, such as difficult, challenging, and hard. The three general emotional words stemmed from struggling to use various English phrases.

Mayu had a lot of practice of making English sentences during her secondary school years. However, she had never had experiences of paragraph writing in English until she started to take the required writing class. While reflecting on her background of English learning, Mayu remarked that writing itself was her weak point. She said, "I am very poor at building sentences in English, even in Japanese" (Individual interview). Due to the requirements for the variations of English expressions, she had difficulty in paraphrasing with different words and her intended phrases. Her phrases in English were often different from those in Japanese, which produced longer sentences than she expected. Moreover, she used a few colloquialisms in her writing that should be avoided in the writing style. Mayu's autobiographical account of English writing clearly showed such problems:

What I felt difficult while writing in English was to change other expressions, not repeating the same words. I tried to think about what I should say, but new words did not occur to me. Finally, I always felt discouraged because I did not know what to say (Mayu's autobiography of writing in English).

### 3-2. Feeling Insecurity of Using Words and Phrases

To elucidate the meaning of the poetry, the worksheet requires the writer to make an example about three keywords. Mayu answered that writing in English was likened

to taking regular exams, having an interview, and going out with her old friends (Worksheet #2).

The first answer, “taking regular exams,” represented that she felt like measuring her language ability while writing in English. Mayu made grammar mistakes in English classes during the middle and final tests in junior and high school. She answered, “I always made simple (grammar) mistakes on the exams in junior/senior high school... Let’s see... I missed the third-person singular’s ‘s’” (Individual Interview). Even though she understood the grammar structures, she still made simple mistakes, which caused the unclear sentences and made her perplexed. These minor troubles made her feel unconfident in English writing, answering, “I felt again and again, ‘why did I make such mistakes?’ I really realized that I haven’t completely understood English grammar yet” (Individual Interview).

The second issue, “having an interview,” showed the difficulty of conveying her meaning of the sentences properly. The worksheet showed, “When I took an interview for a university entrance exam and part-time job, I often thought I should have clarified my opinions... (Worksheet, #2). In English writing, I often felt, ‘my writing should be clear’”. Mayu reflected on her experiences of interviews when she had an interview test at her university and did a part-time job interview. During the interviews, she wanted to deliver her opinions clearly as intended. Yet, she did not answer the questions directly and thought about the proper choice of words too much. As such, she actually replied to the questions, but she could not provide a simple answer. Then, she became confused to see whether or not the answer was appropriate to respond to the question. Such an experience reflected her performance of English writing. She alluded, “I had trouble thinking clearly, and my writing was wandering point to point. Eventually, I couldn’t write well what I would most like to say” (Individual Interview).

The final issue, “going out with her old friends,” pointed to an example of her performance. In the previous section, Mayu claimed that she could not give expressions with a variety of words in English. In her writing, she wrote sentences by repeating the same word and phrase patterns. She mentioned, “I used the same patterns of phrases and words in writing, which is boring”. Such an iterative fashion made her dull and reminded her of going along with her old friends, answering, “I felt bored when I saw my old friends and went to the same places and shops”. According to Mayu, it was fun to see her friends; however, they eventually stopped by the usual spots (e.g. a café or familiar places) when they decided to hang out in town. She associated this action with her English writing performance and stressed that her writing in English was always lacking in quality. She said, “When I found that ‘this expression was correct,’ I felt that

I should use it again. It is an assurance not to fail. Then later, I realized that my writing seems to be stereotyped” (Individual Interview).

### **3-3. Contributing to Developing her Writing Proficiency**

This part explains the participant’s interpretations of felt sense of writing in English theoretically by describing her practices of English writing.

Mayu stressed that she could understand the characteristics of English writing and the ways of clear writing. As mentioned earlier, she had difficulty in expressing herself with clear phrases. Especially, she struggled to transform her thoughts in a Japanese way to those in English. In addition to such difficulties, she developed the accuracy of writing and language skills by writing in English many times.

Talking about her attitude towards writing in English, Mayu still lacked confidence. One of the reasons why she felt so was that the readers (her classmates) gave her feedback on the meaning of the sentences. She sometimes misunderstood the use of the phrases and made a wrong choice of words, which made the reader fail to grasp the meaning correctly. She answered, “If I used wrong phrases or words, even in Japanese, the receiver cannot understand. I used impolite words” (Worksheet #4). Also, Mayu showed a solution to write more clearly to overcome her problems of writing, saying, “I should read more to make my writing clear. I have to write, highlighting my weakness and mastering writing in English” (Worksheet #5).

Mayu felt that she is still in a formative stage of developing her writing proficiency. Even though she also felt insecure about her writing performance, her writing practices have encouraged her to build upon a sense of confidence. In the worksheet, she answered, “Writing is striving with difficulties, but it makes me strong and provides a chance to gain confidence” (Worksheet #5).

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Prior work has demonstrated the effect of anxiety on learners’ development and performance at the skill-specific level. In the case of L2 writing, quantitative studies using a measurement scale model, such as the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test, were prevalent. For instance, Chen (2004) developed the measurement tool, Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), to evaluate the individual-report L2 writing anxiety measure and claimed that the SLWAI model with multidimensional features glimpsed the possibility of examining “the relationships between different facets of L2 writing anxiety and aspects of writing performance and practices” (p. 331).

However, these studies have not fully examined the writer’s emotional aspects, not just acknowledging positive or negative feelings but exploring the consciousness



behind the emotions. This present study particularly highlighted one EFL writer's felt sense of writing in English to verbalize her sense, which was difficult to articulate and elaborate on her meaning of emotions of writing through practice and experience by using a structured method, TAE.

This present study found that three major themes emerged concerning Mayu's emotions of writing in English: (1) struggling to write with clear expressions, (2) feeling insecurity when using words and phrases, and (3) contributing to developing her writing proficiency. Mayu showed difficulty in expressing herself clearly in English due to a wide range of alternative phrases. She also remained apprehensive about using English words and expressions properly. However, Mayu realized the importance of English writing, which has promoted her into creating a sense of confidence and writing proficiency. The findings lend support to other investigations of emotion in L2 writing (Chamcharatsri, 2013b; Hanauer, 2004; Iida, 2016, 2018). These studies employed poetry writing in L2; however, the contribution of this study to L2 writing scholarship is to be conducive to suggesting an alternative means to explore emotions difficult to articulate and unpack the hidden meanings behind them. Such an approach helps the research deliberate on the language use "to express and communicate our real-life experiences in expressive forms of writing" (Iida, 2018, p. 9). Therefore, this case study therefore indicates that the findings obtained by the TAE approach may enhance the importance of seeking learners' psychological engagement with writing in L2 in a qualitative manner.

Most notably, this inquiry is challenging but uses an innovative approach to delve into the writer's emotional aspects by understanding the meaning and interpretation of felt sense. Thus, this case study provides a new insight into exploring the emotions of writing in English. Furthermore, this line of study will help teachers improve their teaching of writing to meet the expectations of students' needs and suggest the approaches for reducing the restlessness of L2 writing.

However, some limitations are worth noting in this pilot case study. First, this investigation emphasized only one EFL learner, employing the TAE worksheets and an individual interview. Future research should collect more samples of the TAE reflections, since the data of this case study included the general five steps of the TAE. The TAE worksheets (Tokumaru, 2008) contain a total of 25 steps to complete the reflective activities. Even though it might take some time to cover the learners' felt sense, more rich data can be collected to elucidate the exact nature of the learners' use of emotional words. Second, the particular words towards writing in English that the participants showed should be illustrated. The frequency of the characteristic words

helps to understand the clear meaning and interpretation during the writing process and unpack the clarification of the key concepts that involve un-verbalized feelings. Finally, further ramifications of exploring felt sense through the TAE approach are required (e.g., Eigen, 2014). Such research will contribute to further refinement of using the TAE and a new perspective on exploring emotions of L2 writing.

This pilot case study explored one Japanese EFL writer's (Mayu) emotions of writing in English by verbalizing her felt sense with the TAE approach. The research on L2 writers' felt sense facilitates open discussions of emotionality in L2 writing. This type of study contributes to gaining a glimpse into the internal meanings of the emotional words that the writer used. Such inquiries also provide a hint and suggest ways to improve the teaching of writing in the situated context.

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2. The data collection began at the end of January 2017 and finished in April 2017.
3. The Individual interview was conducted in the researcher's office on May 26th, 2017.

## 要旨

### 第二言語ライティングにおける情動研究

#### —感受概念の観点から—

藤枝 豊

第二言語ライティング研究において、情動や感情面に着目した研究は、書き手の不安がライティング力発達や能力にどう影響を与えているかを検証している。しかしながら、これらの研究は量的研究手法を用いた事例が多く、書き手の内面的および情面を探究する研究は皆無に等しい。本研究はEugene Gendlinが提唱したThinking at the edge (TAE)手法を用い、EFL 学習者 1 名の感受概念に焦点をあて、第二言語で書くことの情動的小および感情的側面を言語化した。研究データとして、被験者の英語学習を記述した語りのレポート、TAE ワークシート、個別インタビューを収集した。本研究は定性研究のケーススタディで、帰納的テーマティックアナリシス(inductive thematic analysis)を用いて分析を行った。本研究で、被験者は英語で明確に表現すること、そして英単語や言葉遣いの正確に使用する困難さを指摘した。しかしながら、高等教育での英語ライティング経験と訓練を通じ、被験者は英語ライティングの重要性を強調し、英語で書くことの自信感の構築を促した。本論文では、第二言語ライティング研究において、定性研究を用いた情動研究の重要性と意義を指摘する。