Abstract

Despite increasing interest in investigating the effects of second/foreign language writing anxiety on the learners’ writing performance and attitudes over the last three decades, the potential sources of that phenomenon have not been widely researched and identified. Hence, the original study with its mixed approach design mainly explores and investigates the potential factors associated with writing anxiety and the strategies for alleviating it among the English language learners in Emirati universities. A total of one hundred and ten students in addition to six English language instructors were the study’s participants. Quantitatively, two survey questionnaires and students’ writing scores were used to investigate the anxiety levels, effects and sources. For the qualitative phase, ten highly anxious students and ten low-anxious ones were individually interviewed to deepen understanding about the possible sources of their anxiety and the strategies they use to mitigate its detrimental effects. Additionally, a focus group discussion with the instructors was held to explore their perspectives on the coping strategies they use and suggest to reduce the levels of anxiety in writing classes. The findings indicate that high levels of writing anxiety could primarily be attributed to writing tests, cognitive and linguistic factors. This article mainly sheds light on the findings that reveal how various affective, cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical mitigating strategies and the low-anxious students and participant instructors to lower the writing anxiety levels can use tactics.

Keywords: Anxiety, writing performance, error correction, tests, mitigating;

1. Introduction

Investigating second/foreign language anxiety is a necessity and of a great significance due to the negative effects it can have on language learning, performance, achievement and perception towards the whole educational process (Dornyei, 2005; Pajares, 2003). A considerable number of studies have pointed to the detrimental effects of anxiety on learners’ language achievement (e.g., Horwitz et al, 1986), and on social communicative interaction (MacIntyre, 1995), in addition to its interference in the three stages of learning: input, process and output (Tobias, 1986). The importance of creating a low stress learning situation in improving learner’s language competence is
stressed by Krashen (1982) when he proposes the Affective Filter Hypothesis which indicates that anxiety, motivation, and other affective factors greatly affect second language acquisition. Other researchers (e.g. Price, 1991) also claim that the psychological aspects of the learner towards learning languages influence the learning process and outcomes. Therefore, uncovering language anxiety producing factors will broaden insight into that affective construct and help language practitioners and teachers in creating a less anxious classroom environment.

The primary purpose of this extensive study is to explore and investigate the factors associated with writing anxiety and the strategies for alleviating it among the English language learners in Emirati universities when writing English compositions. Scarcity of studies investigating such an important topic in Arabic speaking contexts, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), makes the topic ripe for exploration through the following research questions:

1. To what extent do students in the UAE universities experience anxiety in English writing classes?
2. Is there a significant negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing performance?
3. Which factors are associated with writing anxiety of English language learners in the UAE universities?
4. Which strategies are perceived by the participants to be the most effective for reducing writing anxiety?

This article is exclusively limited to the alleviating strategies and the findings of the fourth research question. Regarding the possible factors associated with writing anxiety, the third research question has been designed to identify and explore those sources. Analysis of two questionnaire results and interviews with highly anxious students reveal several sources and causes of writing anxiety. The most three effective contributing factors are tests, cognitive and linguistic factors. Test related aspects include test difficulties, unfamiliar topics, unclear prompts, word count, time constraints and limits, and negative consequences of failing writing tests. Cognitive factors include inability to organize ideas, poor basic mechanics of writing, different writing genres, and little knowledge about the features of good writing. In addition, linguistic factors, which are rated as the third possible source of writing anxiety, include weakness in grammar, lack of vocabulary, and numerous spelling mistakes. The results also reveal other sources of students’ writing anxiety such as some teaching practices (excessive focus on accuracy, nervousness, and following the product writing approach), evaluation related factors and competitiveness with peers.

2. Method

One hundred and ten Emirati students (males and females) from three different universities in the United Arab Emirates participated in the quantitative phase of this study. In the second phase of the study, the researcher interviewed ten highly anxious students and ten low-anxious ones individually. Those students had been identified after analysing the results of the Second Language Writing Apprehension Inventory, which was administered in the first phase of the study. In addition to the students, six instructors who have been teaching English writing for tertiary level participated in the focus group sessions to investigate their experiences in how they try to alleviate their students’ writing anxiety.

3. The Findings

The fourth research question has been designed to explore the strategies, which could be adopted to reduce the levels of writing anxiety among the English learners in the UAE universities. Two qualitative data collection tools were used to explore the alleviating strategies. The first tool is conducting interviews with ten low-anxious students to explore the strategies they use to reduce writing anxiety levels and identify the strategies, which enable them to reduce the levels of writing anxiety and feel comfortable in writing classes. The second data collection tool is conducting a teachers’ focus group session with six English language instructors to investigate their perspectives about the tactics and strategies they use or suggest to help students feel comfortable and less anxious when writing English compositions. Exploring both student and teacher perspectives about alleviating strategies and possible solutions is based on the belief that overcoming foreign language anxiety in general is a shared responsibility between learners and their teachers.

3.1 Coping with English Writing Anxiety from the Students’ Perspectives

Data resulted from the individual interviews reveals the low-anxious student participants’ viewpoints and experiences which mainly focus on how they cope with writing anxiety and mitigate its effects on writing performance and abilities. The following concrete suggestions and strategies emanating from the interviewees’ responses and perspectives are classified into three categories ranging from affective, cognitive to testing related strategies.

With regard to the affective strategies used by the low-anxious interviewees, it appears that students are
aware of the connection between the writing anxiety and affective strategies. It is indicated by the interviewees’ responses that getting self-confidence in EFL classes in general and in writing classes in particular is essential and a basic strategy for reducing anxiety and fear. Extracts 1 and 2 from students’ responses clarify how self-confidence plays an effective role in this regard:

**Extract 1:** I always try to confide in my learning abilities since I realize the effect of nervousness and fear on my writings. Reciting certain prayers before I start writing in formal tests helps me to be relaxed and confident. I put in my mind, if I fail the test, nothing will happen. It is not the end of the world.

**Extract 2:** I view English writing as an easy task. I enjoy writing in English and in my native language, as writing is a good means for us to express thoughts and ideas.

Similarly, a positive view towards committing mistakes and error corrections by their teachers or peers seems to play a role in reducing writing anxiety. Several low-anxious interviewees emphasize that their self-confidence is not negatively affected by the mistakes they commit when writing or by the way they are corrected. So, dealing with committing mistakes when learning in a positive way and considering them a part of the learning process helps the low-anxious participants to promote their self-confidence and consequently reduce the levels of anxiety as indicated in Extracts 3 and 4:

**Extract 3:** ... I convince myself not to fear from teachers’ remarks and corrections since I know that I learn from their feedback and corrections. My teacher once told us that people learn from suffering. Personally, I don’t mind if my peers know about my mistakes as all of us inevitably learn from them.

**Extract 4:** I do not fear mistakes. I sometimes discuss my errors with my teacher in front of all the class. As a result, one of my English teachers commented on my courage and said that I have to be a journalist.

For the cognitive coping strategies, interviewees reveal that they use many types of strategies which generally involve interactions with writing compositions or genres to be learned or tested in writing courses and classes. Some students mention practice and much training on writing English essays and compositions outside classroom as major steps for minimizing anxiety. Other students as cognitive alleviating strategies also refer to imitating writing model samples, rehearsing writing essays/paragraphs, and practicing writing through establishing friendship through blogs and some social networks.

Other interviewees talk about the strategies they use to reduce writing anxiety caused by linguistic difficulties such as inadequate mastery of vocabulary and incorrect use of some grammatical rules. Extracts 5, 6, and 7 show that low-anxious participants’ awareness about vocabulary learning methods such as using writing notebooks or journals in addition to frequent use of the new words enable them to overcome the fears resulting from poor vocabulary knowledge. Besides, identifying one’s grammatical and spelling weak points and looking for remedial solutions contribute to anxiety reduction:

**Extract 5:** since I was a school student, I have been using a writing journal and a notebook to jot down any new English word I come across. In my free time I made it a habit to use the new words in meaningful sentences. So, I feel I have enough words to express myself through writing.

**Extract 6:** to reduce the number of the grammatical mistakes which frighten us when learning English, I agreed with my writing teacher to make me understand my grammatical mistakes particularly the ones resulted from misuse of verb tenses and [articles].

**Extract 7:** getting a list of common English spelling mistakes has reduced the spelling mistakes I am used to committing when writing English compositions.

In terms of test related alleviating strategies used by low-anxious students, the interviewees’ responses in this regard indicate that students (in addition to the relaxation exercises which are mentioned above) use other mitigating strategies pre and during English writing tests. Some of the pre-test strategies such as well preparedness, practice, and the use of checklists to review their writings with peers are reflected in interviewees’ responses. Other comments include the strategies taken during writing tests. Some responses
demonstrate how low-anxious students start writing essays, deal with difficult prompts and view a good writing composition. Extracts 8, 9, and 10 show that using some tactics such as outlining, prompt division, guessing the meaning when taking writing tests is a practical coping strategy. Importantly, realizing that fluency is more important than accuracy also helps students get rid of the fears resulting from the numerous grammatical and spelling mistakes committed when writing.

**Extract 8:** the easiest way I found to start writing and save time is to make an outline on the paperback. Following a certain pattern and outline save my time and make me more focused.

**Extract 9:** ... I read the prompt and divide it into three parts. In case of difficult words, I try to guess the meaning through the other words. In some writing prompts, I understand the prompt through the helping ideas, which come along with the writing prompt.

**Extract 10:** I do not let fear from grammatical and spelling mistakes prevent me from writing. My teacher always says that the fluency and flow of ideas are more important than wasting time thinking of grammar correctness.

The above-mentioned strategies and suggestions low-anxious students use to reduce the levels of writing anxiety indicate that these students are aware of the negative effect of such phenomenon on their writing performance. Furthermore, it could be understood that the different alleviating affective, cognitive and test related strategies are not far away from teachers’ encouragement and interference. In other words, most interviewees acknowledge their teachers’ assistance and roles in helping them mitigate writing fears and anxiety. In the next section, writing anxiety reduction techniques and strategies from the teachers’ perceptions are presented and analyzed.

### 3.2. Coping with English writing anxiety from teachers’ perspectives

The focus group discussion has been designed in this study to elicit EFL instructors’ opinions, attitudes and perceptions about the coping strategies and techniques they use or suggest to reduce the levels of writing anxiety among their EFL tertiary learners. Six instructors participated in the focus group discussion which was moderated by the researcher himself. Interestingly, the focus group participants have been teaching English for the foundation year students in different UAE universities and their experience ranges from seven to thirteen years. It should be noted that the findings resulting from the focus group discussions are not intended to be generalizable due to their qualitative nature and the small number of the participants. Nevertheless; the reported results provide rich insight and general trends, which might help learners and teachers understand how to act when they encounter similar situations. The focus group teacher participants interacted with the points and questions raised during the discussion and provided a great deal of rich information about the alleviating strategies they use when experiencing fears and anxiety among their students in English writing classes and tests. The coping strategies suggested by the participating teachers are addressed below under these five subcategories: writing tests, process writing approach, affective strategies, error correction, and vocabulary knowledge.

#### 3.2.1 Writing Tests

One of the most important coping strategies used by the focus group participants is related to writing tests. There is a consensus among the participants about the existence of stress in their English classes particularly during tests and evaluative assignments. Concerning the students’ fears that resulted from the possibility of not understanding the meaning of some words in the writing prompts particularly in standardized proficiency tests, a variety of affective and cognitive coping strategies are suggested. These strategies include focusing on fluency and the development of ideas rather than accuracy. In addition, teachers resort to training students on how to guess the meaning of difficult words in the prompt through context and neighbouring words. Extracts 11 and 12 exemplify what is being clarified and said by the writing teachers to students who fear the difficulty of some writing prompt words:

**Extract 11:** the most important step in this regard is to build self-confidence by informing students that there is no right-wrong answer in writing tests. For example, I always tell my students if you fail to know the exact meaning of some prompt words, do not give up since the examiners are not after testing your vocabulary...whatever you write about the related topic or the main idea will be considered and you will score something.
Extract 12: whenever you have a topic and you are unable to understand the meaning of some words, just guess the meaning through the other neighbouring words or expressions in the prompt and write something related to the whole context. Even if you fail to exactly write about the topic, you are not going to be penalized for the whole test. You will get some marks on vocabulary, grammar etc.

In addition to the above strategies being used, a suggestion was raised by one of the participants to use translation as a helping tool to make students understand the writing prompt. Claiming that in writing tests the main objective is testing writing abilities rather than testing vocabulary rationalizes that suggestion. That suggestion was very controversial since most of the participants did not support the idea of using Arabic translation in English writing tests. However, it was agreed to consider that suggestion as one of the possible coping strategies but in a different mechanism. Extract 13 summarizes the suggested mechanism:

Extract 13: facilitating students' understanding of the writing prompts in all writing tests sounds interesting. One of the possible practical ways is limiting the key words in writing prompts to the list of one thousand most common English words which all students should be familiar with... In case of having any key word from outside the list, explanation or synonyms should be provided in the footnotes but not in Arabic.

To help students who feel anxious about taking tests under time constraints, most of the participants assure the importance of exposing students to test-like situations and getting them accustomed to writing compositions within a time limit. It could be easily detected that most of the teachers’ suggestions and strategies for alleviating test fear and stress are in line with low-anxious students’ strategies in this regard as reported in the previous section.

3.2.2 Process Writing Approach

The process approach to writing as an alleviating strategy is evidenced in the comments made by the focus group participants. According to this approach, writing is looked at as a creative act requiring planning, editing, drafting, working in groups, and getting feedback rather than setting students a writing topic and receiving it as a product for correction without any feedback or discussion during the writing process itself. Many activities related to this approach such as group work, planning, chunking, and peer correction are referred to in the focus group discussion. Training students on how to start and end English essays, outline the ideas before starting writing, work in pairs and ask questions could help the students who lack writing cognitive competence (Holmes, 2001). So, engaging students in such skills could contribute to building self-regulatory abilities and the ability to practice and direct one’s composing process is a basic skill in writing (Brown, 2001).

3.2.3 Affective Strategies

Among the coping strategies used by the focus group participants, affective activities take a considerable part of the discussion. The vitality of providing a less fear-inducing environment in writing classes and tests, practicing some relaxation exercises, setting achievable realistic goals, and instilling self-confidence are assured and stressed by all the participant teachers. The affective strategies suggested by teachers could positively change the students’ attitudes in writing classes since inculcating self-confidence and encouragement among students have been referred to by low-anxious interviewees as practical coping strategies. Promoting self-confidence and positive beliefs develops learners’ self-efficacy. Importantly, self-confidence can also be inculcated in learners through teachers’ supportive feedback. In this respect Pajares & Johnson (1994, p. 327) assert, “that one important source of students' self-confidence lies in the feedback that students receive from their teachers.”

3.2.4 Error Correction

Changing the negative perception (mentality) towards committing mistakes and error corrections received much interest and emphasis as relieving strategies for anxiety. The focus group participants point out that they are battling the negative students’ thinking and looks when committing mistakes or when their writing is being evaluated or corrected. Some teachers clarify that they are trying to reduce the fear of committing mistakes when learning languages by creating positive attitudes and convincing students that learning through mistakes is a major part of improving writing skills and abilities. Extracts 14 and 15 clarify how other participants go a step further and suggest innovative tactics (creating mistake happy zones, celebrating grammatical mistakes, and reviewing common mistakes regularly before taking tests) to reduce anxieties emerging from grammatical and spelling mistake concerns:

Extract 14: personally, I suggest teachers to create the so-called mistake happy zone which
enables students to write non-judgmental compositions at least once a week. This lets ideas flow without being hindered by the fear of spelling or grammatical mistakes. In this way, students get used to paying more attention to the content.

**Extract 15:** Tension develops from the concern about numerous numbers of spelling and grammatical mistakes could be decreased by making students celebrate their mistakes. To activate this suggestion, once I asked my students to record the spelling and grammatical mistakes they committed during the writing course. Eventually, students were asked voluntarily to display the common mistakes in the class and present how they benefitted from them. By doing so, I am trying to make learning from errors a sign of pride instead of a source of embarrassment.

Within the discussions about students’ writing mistakes, the participants acknowledge that tracking the very slight spelling mistakes and the severe strictness during the marking sessions exacerbate students’ worries and anxiety. Consequently, there is a consensus among the participants on tolerating spelling and grammatical slight mistakes, which do not alter the meaning of words or largely affect the sentence structures and to allocate the biggest portion of the grade for the content rather than form.

### 3.2.5 Vocabulary Knowledge

The focus group respondents are generally in agreement that inability to master and use a reasonable number of words will inevitably lead to anxiety. Consequently, the importance of encouraging and directing students to read more to acquire new words has been a common suggestion across the focus group discussions. Some suggest that students should be provided with lists of the most common English words and certain words/expressions, which are designed to accommodate the two writing tasks (essay and report) in the IELTS. Generally, the insights gleaned from the focus group sessions reflect the affective, cognitive, pedagogical coping strategies and tactics which might contribute to lowering writing anxiety levels from the teachers’ point of view. A critical comparison between the alleviating strategies used by the low-anxious students in the previous subsection and the ones suggested or used by teachers reveals the significance and practicality of the teachers’ suggested strategies since most of the low-anxious interviewees attributed their success and low levels of writing anxiety to adopting such strategies mentioned by the focus group participants. Furthermore, it could be noted that teachers have been trying to interact with students writing concerns and find out proper solutions to the contributing factors which are mentioned by the anxious students as main sources for their writing anxiety and fears.

### 4. Conclusion

This article addressed the strategies that are perceived (by teachers and low-anxious students) to be most effective for reducing anxiety levels. Diversified coping strategies arise from the interviews with low-anxious students and focus group sessions with EFL instructors. From the students’ perspectives, different tactics and strategies are suggested and mentioned particularly by the low-anxious interviewees. The strategies include promoting self-confidence; enhancing background knowledge, creating positive attitudes toward committing mistakes, peer correction and relaxation exercises. Cognitively, other strategies are suggested such as good preparation, more practice and training on writing essays, and imitating some writing model samples. In terms of test-related strategies, rehearsing some tests, taking mock exams, learning the task of outlining and guessing the prompt difficult words, and using dictionaries in writing tests are among the suggested strategies. From teachers’ perspectives, affective alleviating strategies are reported such as building up self-confidence among students, encouraging students to accept positive criticism and view mistakes as an important part of the learning process. For the writing tests, they suggest to limit the keywords in writing prompts to familiar English words, training students on taking tests under time pressure, and making more non-judgmental tests. Other strategies include adopting process writing approach, tolerating slight grammatical and spelling mistakes, and providing students with lists of most common English words. As a researcher, I acknowledge that only the tip of the iceberg has been discovered during this researching journey and research on writing anxiety is still so underdeveloped that much investigation is needed to get a better understanding of this complex psychological phenomenon. As a teacher, this study has given me an impression that learners are not born anxious but the learning environment could contribute to their stress and negative attitudes when learning foreign languages. Whatever the level of students’ anxiety are, teachers’ appropriate teaching strategies, their tactful constructive feedback that considers students’ levels and backgrounds would inevitably lessen anxiety detrimental effects?
References


