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FACTORS INFLUENCING SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING ANXIETY

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Abstract

For college students, second language writing anxiety is an important factor affecting their second language writing development. Therefore, it is meaningful to analyze the causes of second language writing anxiety and propose strategies to alleviate it. This study was conducted with Chinese college students to explore the main factors influencing their English writing anxiety, and the data were collected through a questionnaire. The results showed that insufficient writing practice, fear of composing in exams, and difficulties in second language expression are the major factors influencing students' second language writing anxiety.

Keywords: Writing anxiety; second language; factors

1. Introduction

Writing anxiety refers to "the anxious behaviors that learners display during the writing process, such as avoiding writing tasks, worrying about having their writing read or critiqued by others, etc." (Daly & Miller, 1975:242). As a specific branch of writing anxiety, the study on Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA) began in the 1970s and was first called Writing Apprehension, which refers to the behavior of avoiding writing and avoiding situations in which writing is possible. The research on the factors influencing second language writing anxiety has been explored in terms of both internal and external factors.

In terms of studying internal factors, Pajares and Johnson (1994) investigated the relationships between self-confidence and writing performance in

30 undergraduate preservice teachers over one semester. They pointed out that students' beliefs about their composition skills and the pre-performance measure were the only significant predictors. Writing apprehension was negatively correlated with writing self-confidence but was not predictive of writing performance, self-confidence was correlated with writing self-confidence, expected outcomes, apprehension, and performance but was not predictive of writing performance in the regression model. Cheng (2002) examined the relationship between second language writing anxiety and individual differences and different forms of language anxiety among college students using four language anxiety scales and a background information questionnaire. The results showed that perceived second language writing ability was a better predictor of second

language writing anxiety than writing performance; second language writing anxiety was different from native language writing anxiety; and women had significantly higher levels of second language writing anxiety than men. Domestic scholar Bai (2021) has similarly studied the effects of individual differences on English writing anxiety and has come up with different findings. She administered a battery of tests to investigate 396 second-year Chinese college English learners and found that: the English writing anxieties consist of six components—the inducing factors from the language learners (expression competence, language competence, and discourse competence) and the inducing factors from the writing process (feedback process, task characteristics and output modes); the performance representations of the English writing anxieties do not demonstrate the gender discrimination, but they do show the same characteristics among the male and female college English learners during the class English writing process; there does exist significantly negative correlation between the English writing anxieties and the English writing proficiency, of which the inducing factors of language competence and feedback process demonstrate the significant influence on the English writing proficiency with the priority of the former one over the latter one.

In terms of studying external factors, Domestic scholars Zhou and Tang (2010) used the method of audible thinking to reveal the influence of anxiety, an affective factor, on Chinese students' second-language writing, as well as the relationship between this influence and students' mother-tongue interventions during the process of completing writing tasks, and found that writing anxiety was positively correlated with the amount of mother-tongue use in the process of audible thinking. After analyzing and studying six root causes that trigger second language writing anxiety, the authors and offer some suggestions for teachers. One is to improve students' actual writing skills to reduce classroom writing anxiety. The second is to increase writing confidence and enjoyment through interesting classroom activities. The third is to downplay the role of writing assessment to improve students' fear of second language writing. Kara (2013) similarly linked research to teacher factors.

He found that the causes of writing anxiety were also related to teachers and teaching materials. Learners reported that teachers did not encourage them, did not give feedback, and were not interested in the problems they had in writing. Teachers' teaching styles may also cause problems, such as not giving examples in class or teaching in a boring way. The textbooks do not give students enough examples and exercises and are not adequately explained. The teacher's teaching style may also cause problems, such as not giving examples or teaching in a boring way. Yan and Zhang (2015) tried to take the subject-object interaction perspective, to propose a two-dimensional role of cognition and social cognition. Exploring the effects of task complexity, task difficulty, and self-efficacy on foreign language writing, task complexity, and self-efficacy have a significant interaction effect on foreign language writing accuracy. The high self-efficacy group showed a significant interaction between task complexity and self-efficacy on the accuracy of foreign language writing. The high self-efficacy group had a significant interaction between task complexity and self-efficacy on the accuracy of foreign language writing.

Based on the previous studies on second language anxiety, this paper identified eight factors that may affect Chinese college students' English writing anxiety (Pajares and Johnson, 1994; Cheng, 2002; Kara, 2013; Yan and Zhang, 2015; Bai, 2021): insufficient writing practice, fear of composing in exams, difficulties in second language expression, limitations in knowledge, lack of writing skills, fear of negative evaluation, lack of timely feedback, and lack of self-confidence. This paper attempts to find which are the major factors influencing Chinese college students' English writing anxiety.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participant

A total of 76 college students from freshmen to seniors at North China Electric Power University were enrolled in this research. There were 10 freshmen (13.14%), 11 sophomores (14.47%), 18 juniors (23.68%), and 37 seniors (48.68%). The sample is not limited to grades and majors, so the range is larger and reflects a more realistic picture.

In this study, they were asked to complete a Chinese questionnaire according to their actual situation.

2.2. Questionnaire

The design of the questionnaire was based on the research conducted by Zhang and Zhu (2012). The questionnaire consists of 10 option descriptions and 1 subjective description. In addition to the first part of the personal information survey, the options can be described as 8 major factors of English writing anxiety among college students. The scale questions are titled as follows: 1. difficulties in second language expression; 2. insufficient writing practice; 3. fear of composing in exams; 4. limitations in knowledge; 5. lack of self-confidence; 6. fear of negative evaluation; 7. lack of writing skills; 8. lack of timely feedback. These eight questions provide more comprehensive coverage of the causes of second-language writing anxiety. By compiling the data from the survey, a ranking of the degree of influence of these eight factors can be obtained. By collating the answers to the subjective questions in the questionnaire, we can come up with more practical strategies to alleviate second language writing anxiety.

The questionnaire was based on Likert's five-point scale, and the participants were asked to describe the options according to 1. strongly disagree; 2. disagree; 3. neither agree nor disagree; 4. agree; 5. strongly agree. Each option corresponds to a specific score, the sum of the scores of all the options is the anxiety index, and the higher the score, the higher the level of anxiety. The eight factors were then ranked in order based on the number of students who chose each option. The final subjective description asked the subjects to give their opinions and ideas on strategies to alleviate second language writing anxiety. A total of 76 questionnaires were distributed, 76 valid questionnaires were returned, and the data were analyzed descriptively using the "Questionnaire Star" software.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Factors for Second Language Writing Anxiety

Figure 4.1 shows the ranking of the main factors that cause second language writing anxiety

among college students. The mean scores of each item were calculated according to the criteria mentioned above, and the following data were obtained. According to the survey, the mean score of "language difficulties" was 3.89. 50 (65.8%) of the 76 students agreed or strongly agreed that difficulties in expressing themselves in a second language, such as insufficient vocabulary, grammatical errors, and simple sentence structure, were the main factors that caused their anxiety in second language writing. The mean score for "insufficient writing practice", was 4.28, and 64 students (84.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt anxious because of insufficient practice in second language writing in class or after class. The mean score of "fear of exams" was 4.14. 59 students (77.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were anxious about time-limited essays in exams, such as the CET and TEM. The mean score for "limitations in knowledge" was 4.11. 60 students (78.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they often feel at a loss in writing essay topics, that their limited knowledge leads to a lack of ideas in writing, and that this nervousness about what to write is more pronounced in time-limited essays. The tension caused by not knowing what to write is more obvious in the time-limited essay. The mean score for "lack of confidence" was 3.76, and 52 students (68.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that they often feel anxious because of a lack of confidence in improving their writing. "Fear of negative evaluation" had a mean score of 3.16, and 31 students (40.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were anxious about writing in a second language because of fear of negative comments from teachers and classmates. "Lack of writing skills", had a mean score of 4.08, with 59 students (77.6%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they attribute their anxiety about second language writing to a lack of mastery of English writing skills. The mean score for "lack of timely feedback" was 4.12. 62 students (81.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that teachers' lack of timely and effective feedback on compositions was the cause of their writing anxiety.

As shown in Figure 4.1, the eight causes of second language writing anxiety among college students, ranked by mean score, are insufficient

writing practice, fear of exams, lack of timely feedback, limitations in knowledge, lack of writing

skills, language difficulties, lack of confidence, and fear of negative evaluation.

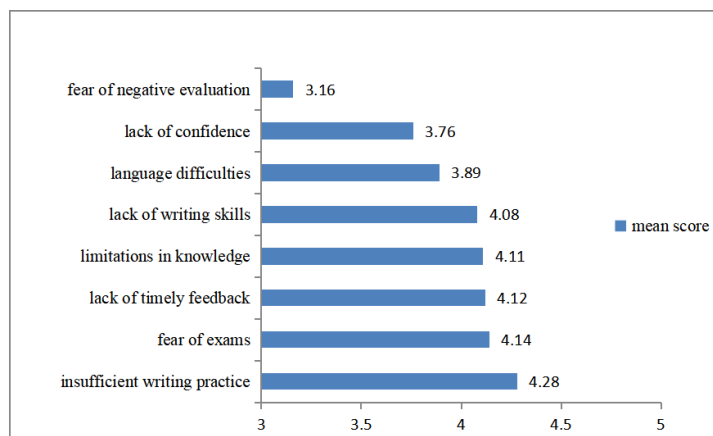


Figure 4.1 Factors of Second Language Writing Anxiety

3.2. Discussion for the Reason

First, 84.2% of the students felt that the less time they spent on second language writing practice, the more anxious they felt. Anxiety due to inadequate writing practice is common in both L1 and L2 writing learning. According to Tobias' three-stage writing model, "input - processing - output", practice plays a very important role between the input and output stages (Tobias 1979:71). Without sufficient practice time in the text processing stage, it is impossible to perform well in the language output stage. Students' self-perception of insufficient writing practice in turn creates negative psychological cues that make learners lack confidence in whether they can perform well in the output stage, which leads to a multiplication of anxiety.

Secondly, fear of exams, especially for the CET and TEM, is the second major factor of English writing anxiety. Even the smartest or best-prepared students may make more mistakes than usual and be more nervous than usual, which may affect the performance of their writing skills. Due to the influence of test-based education, exams or assessments play an important role in determining students' academic performance and even their future careers. Due to the special status and social influence of the CET and TEM, the fear of failing the test essay has become the second most important factor triggering English writing anxiety among English majors.

Once again, linguistic difficulties and limitations in knowledge are the two major factors contributing to English writing anxiety, a result that validates Hyland's view that the most direct and obvious factor identifying bilingual writers is their inability to express themselves adequately in a second language (Hyland 2003). Some researchers have also pointed out that time, topic, and language are the main causes of writing anxiety. Accuracy has been considered by Chinese second language teachers and learners as the primary goal of second language learning, teaching, and assessment, and as a result, Chinese students tend to be very concerned with correct grammar, sentence structure, and spelling. Arnold has found that learners' knowledge and language ability can affect their emotional approach to writing tasks. Due to their limited language proficiency, learners often struggle to find the right language to express their ideas even if they have sparkling content in the actual writing. To complete the writing task, they have to settle for the second-best by choosing simple vocabulary to complete the writing task, so the effect of expression is greatly reduced. This lack of language proficiency greatly affects the expression of content and reduces students' interest in writing.

Finally, excessive fear of negative evaluation and lack of self-confidence can also cause students' second language writing anxiety. Because of the Chinese tradition of respect and reverence for authority, the praise of authority becomes a

measure of one's ability, and students tend to view teachers as their readers. Students worry about making mistakes or receiving negative evaluations from teachers, which creates a psychological barrier to anxiety. Teachers' evaluation methods also contribute to students' anxiety objectively. In the current teaching of English writing, which emphasizes "writing results", teachers' evaluation methods are mainly to write comments and score students' essays, and the focus of the evaluation is mainly on grammar, vocabulary, and discourse structure, but fail to provide targeted and substantive suggestions and evaluations of students' compositions. These simple comments can create a serious sense of frustration in students and lead to self-denial and fear of writing.

3.3. Strategies to Alleviate Second Language Writing Anxiety

Synthesizing the answers to the subjective questions of the questionnaire as well as previous research, this paper has come up with many strategies that can be used to alleviate students' second language writing anxiety. Firstly, to alleviate students' anxiety about second language writing due to their fear of negative evaluation, the assessment methods of second language writing should be improved. Change the teacher as the sole evaluator and allow students to self-evaluate and evaluate each other. Teachers can try to arrange several times for students to self-evaluate their essays as well as to evaluate each other's essays. At the same time, as the students are lack of experience, teachers are needed to guide students in effective self-evaluation. Teachers should take into account students' existing levels of second language writing when using student self-assessment or peer assessment.

Secondly, teachers can alleviate students' second language writing anxiety by helping them identify self-regulation strategies that are effective in relieving anxiety. Specifically, college second language teachers can design targeted and oriented writing tasks with textbook learning content, relevant reading materials, and video materials to help students accumulate writing materials, reduce language barriers, and guide students to adopt

positive behavioral strategies to help them develop the habit of consciously collecting writing materials in their daily second language learning process and transform second language writing learning into autonomous behavior. Pre-writing idea training is conducted through activities such as mind mapping, brainstorming, and critical reading to guide students to adopt flexible idea strategies. Adopt an individualized approach of encouragement and guidance, especially for students with high levels of second language writing anxiety, to guide students to reduce their excessive concern about linguistic errors as well as their excessive apprehension and fear of writing failure expectations. This will encourage students to use less or even no negative avoidance strategies and eventually develop good habits of actively completing second language writing tasks.

Thirdly, creating a good atmosphere for second language writing also can help reduce students' communicative fear, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation during the learning process, thus alleviating second language writing anxiety. As a foreign language, students have a strong communicative fear of writing in a second language due to the lack of strong motivation and practice opportunities to write in a second language. Therefore, college teachers should cultivate students' intrinsic interest in foreign languages and cultures, create writing opportunities with real communicative meaning, enhance their self-confidence and self-efficacy, help them establish internal motivational mechanisms, stimulate students' strong desire to communicate in the second language, and overcome their communicative fears.

4. Conclusion

Second language writing has practical significance in helping students improve their language learning abilities. However, the lack of writing practice, writing skills, feedback, self-confidence, the pressure of exams, difficulties in language expression, limitations in knowledge acquisition, and negative evaluation can cause students to become anxious when writing in a second language. Of these, insufficient writing

practice, fear of composing in exams, and difficulties in second language expression are the major factors influencing students' second language writing anxiety. Excessive anxiety can hinder the improvement of second language writing. Therefore, we need to pay attention to this emotional factor, strengthen psychological quality training, and develop proactive self-regulation strategies. At the same time, we need to create a better second language learning environment and improve the second language teaching mode and the evaluation method. Enhance students' confidence in writing by improving their second language writing capacity, to alleviate their second language writing anxiety.

This paper found the major factors that produce second language writing anxiety and gave strategies to alleviate them. However, there is no empirical research on the measures to alleviate second language writing anxiety, and as far as the research subjects are concerned, this paper only investigates the English writing of college students. With the popularity of second language learning, second language writing anxiety is not only generated in college students' learning and English learning, so the research subjects have to be expanded in the following research.

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