

UNDERSTANDING WRITING ANXIETY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

Ghulam Ali Buriro

PhD Professor, Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

gaburiro@yahoo.com

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Corresponding Author: *

Ghulam Ali Buriro

Abstract

This study explores the impact of writing anxiety among university learners in Pakistan, motivated by participants' poor writing proficiency. Using qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 students from three universities. Data analysis with NVivo 11 identified key themes revealing that writing anxiety is influenced by multiple factors. The study highlights cognitive anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety as primary contributors to writing difficulties, suggesting these areas as focal points for interventions.



INTRODUCTION

This research study investigates the understanding of Writing Anxiety (WA) of Students at University Level in Pakistan. The study is conducted in three universities of Pakistan to know the perception of the students because most of these students lack the Basic English language skills and have significant difficulties in writing skills in language classroom. The ability to study English as a foreign language has become crucial for students, and proficiency in the language is usually correlated with success in the workplace. A sizable quantity of pupils' view acquiring knowledge of English as a difficulty, and it occasionally causes those problems (Ahmed, 2015). There are numerous internal and external elements connected to language learning that can slow down or speed up the language acquisition process; while internal determinants include attitude, self-image, self-confidence and anxiety. The curriculum, teachers with different backgrounds, and the standard of language

instruction are examples of external factors (Mirhadizadeh, 2016). Internal factors have a big impact on how well students perform and succeed in a course on foreign languages. Positive attitudes are helpful in learning a foreign language, thus it's necessary to pay attention to and understand internal issues like anxiety and influence toward learning English as a second language. One of the main intrinsic motivators in the classroom is anxiety. When students start learning a foreign language, they may suffer tension, concern, anxiousness, and fear. This is known as language anxiety (Kondo, & Ling 2004).

Research Background

Many educators and foreign language students have faced anxiety for years, and this has been their main problem. Teenagers who lack the capacity for self-awareness and potential may be disappointed as a result of failure and pessimism (Khan, 2009). Because

of their increased anxiousness, anxiety could make people feel less confident. Two types of linguistic anxiety were first described by Alpert and Haber (1960) i.e., debilitating anxiety and facilitating anxiety arguing that debilitating anxiety is the sort of anxiety that receives the most attention from researchers since it harms students and has a significant impact on their performance. Students may experience indirect stress and frustration as a result of it; or it may directly impair their activities by lowering their involvement in class. On the contrary, feeling worried, helps language learners to do well in their EFL classroom sessions. Researchers identified the feature of facilitating anxiety which is the kind of worry that are viewed as influence as a way to assist pupils in overcoming their anxieties (Naser Oteir & Nijr Al-Otaibi, 2019). Relevantly, anxiety has been found to be a barrier to learning a foreign language. Additionally, anxiety is one of the most prevalent causes of difficulties like demotivation, negative attitudes, and uncomfortable classroom environments in learning a language.

More than 70 languages are spoken by the population of Pakistan, which is diverse in terms of ethnicity and culture. Pakistan has a diverse population in terms of ethnicity and culture, speaking more than 70 languages. The majority of Pakistanis only speak English and Urdu, the country's official languages despite the fact that the country is multilingual (Hussain, Fareed, & Akhtar, 2020) and because of the privilege it enjoys, English is a status symbol for the affluent class and cannot be supplanted by other indigenous languages. Due to cultural differences, despite receiving English instruction throughout their education, learners have trouble in writing it (Ahmed, 2015). Research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing has shown that writing anxiety can have a significant impact on the performance of EFL learners. Many scholars use the term "writing apprehension" interchangeably with writing anxiety, as they are considered synonymous. However, the current study has found a limited number of studies that have specifically examined the issue of writing anxiety among EFL learners.

In the National Education Policy of 2009, serial numbers 57 and 82 which was put into effect in

Pakistan outlines the country's English language policy (Mahboob, 2002; Rahman, 2010).

"Since Urdu is Pakistan's official language, it serves as a common language among all its citizens.....Along with Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, local languages are spoken throughout the country....for them to compete on a national and international level, the pupils must acquire the necessary language skills".

Writing Anxiety

The complexity of writing in a foreign language has been found to be associated with feelings of anxiety. According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), foreign language anxiety is the underlying reason of students' adverse response to the process of language acquisition, as it pertains to their assignment with a non-native language. One distinguishing characteristic of foreign language anxiety, in comparison to other forms of worry, is the disparity between learners' proficiency in their native language and their proficiency in a foreign language. Individuals who possess proficient language and communication abilities in their own tongue may still have feelings of fear when confronted with a foreign language (Karakaya & Ulper, 2011). Despite the fact that writing anxiety is a distinct phenomenon, the correlation between foreign language learning anxiety and writing proficiency has only been shown relatively recently (Atay & Kurt, 2006). Writing anxiety is frequently referred to as writing apprehension in scholarly literature. The phrase "writing apprehension" was coined by Daly and Miller (1975), as used by Cheng (2002), to denote the specific form of anxiety that Learners have when confronted with writing assignments. According to Karakaya and Ulper (2011), students experiencing writing anxiety always come across challenges and demands during each stage of the writing process. Writing anxiety has been found to hinder students' learning process (Chen & Chang, 2004) and have a negative impact on their writing performance (Cheng, 2002; Daud, Daud, & Kassim, 2005).

English Language Anxiety

The study of language anxiety is not a recent topic; over the last three decades of the 20th century, it has

been the focus of much research. Each researcher has their own unique definition of anxiety. According to Brown (2007), anxiety is characterized by unease, irritability, self-doubt, apprehension, and worry. According to MacIntyre and Gardener (1994), language anxiety is the fear a learner has when speaking in a foreign language in a specific setting because they lack language proficiency. Horwitz and Cope, 1986 provide the definition of foreign language anxiety that is most generally used and accepted. (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986) "A distinct, intricate construct of beliefs, behaviors, feelings, and self-perceptions related to language learning in the classroom that arises from the specificities of language learning process." Many international researchers in the field of language learning and instruction have been interested in the issue of foreign language anxiety. Saviola, Pappaianni, Monti, Grecucci, Jovicich, & De Pisapia, (2020) investigated the general type of linguistic anxiety and came up with ambiguous and confusing findings. Other anxiety researchers who spoke English also used a variety of models to look into the connection between language anxiety and language achievement, but their findings were confusing and unclear. Researchers should be explicit and specific about the type of anxiety they measure (Saviola, et al. 2020).

Literature Review

According to Faraj et al. (2021), language learning can be defined as a method or tool that students utilize to finish learning tasks that are dependent on their language proficiency, such as writing, listening, reading, and speaking. "Cognitive abilities, behaviors, plans, habits, stages, and learning skills acquired by the learner throughout the learning procedures. (Hameed & Anwar, 2018), language process is a device for problem-solving, experienced when acquiring a second language. According to Hamza et al. (2021), the process of learning a language is how a student acquires, recalls, and holds new information and abilities. "Any combination of procedures, stages, or routines employed by the learner to enable the achievement, storage, recovery, and use of knowledge" is how (Ismael et al., 2021) describe the language learning process.

Jamal et al. (2021), learning language strategies are global behaviors and emotions that students employ during the learning process that help in their memory and retention of newly learned material. Thus, "specific methods of managing information that improves and recall comprehension (Sabir et al. 2021), learning, or sustaining information" have been classified as learning strategies. Definitions eventually offered a clearer picture of how language learners acted and thought when acquiring the language since earlier explanations of the process concentrated on learning materials and behaviors that resembled invisible cognitive strategies (Saleh et al. 2021). Moreover, Sorguli et al. (2021) defined "learning language" as "activity and technique choices made consciously by learners that may result in actions taken to improve the learning or use of a second language through the keeping, maintenance, recall, and application of information about that language (Talim, et al., 2021)."

The emphasis has recently shifted considerably from a provider-dominated approach to learning vocabulary to one that is student-centered. The effectiveness of the conventional method used by educators to teach vocabulary has been evaluated regularly (Ahmed et al. 2021), with a focus on the significance of student involvement and participation in the process (Akoi et al. 2021). The main argument in this discussion has been that students are rarely inspired to take independent action to improve their vocabulary and other skills. Rather, learners depend on institutions of learning to provide them with the necessary education. Teaching vocabulary to the students and learning a second language is a challenging endeavor, Ali & Anwar (2021). It has been popularly believed in recent times that giving a student a secondary position will usually cause them to retreat in their vocabulary development. Students must put in a lot of effort and concentrate on the main issue if they are to learn vocabulary effectively (Ali et al. 2021). Participate in a hands-on learning experience with the exercises. One of the most crucial things is to empower children to assume greater responsibility for their education, to take on more responsibilities, to expand their vocabulary, and to have more control over their daily activities and behaviors (Ali et al. 2021; Anwar & Ali, 2021).

The present study has developed the following research objective:

1. To examine the understanding of writing anxiety among university learners in Pakistan.

Research methodology

The site of this research and research sampling

The present study is conducted in three universities in Sindh province of Pakistan; these three universities include National University of Modern Languages (NUML-Karachi Campus), Karachi University (KU), and Sindh Madressatul Islam University (SMIU) Karachi. The study is conducted at Arts and Humanities faculties that includes English departments with the view to have urban perceptions from urban English language learners. By selecting these particular universities an attempt towards receiving neutral data is made. It is also important to specify here that, only BS students of English language teaching class were selected as sample of this study.

REPORT OF THE RESULTS

Table 1: NVivo generated themes

Level One Code	Level Two Codes
Writing Anxiety	1. Cognitive Anxiety 2. Somatic Anxiety 3. Debilitating anxiety 4. Facilitating anxiety 5. Class test or examination anxiety

Cognitive Anxiety

Most informants informed that their teachers taught them about writing skills and generating general and academic piece of written works but they (students) get mental distress, physiological distress and emotional agitation while learning how to write or when they practice on writing essays or any other piece of writing. Five of informants asserted that they get tension when the topic is difficult or some sudden tasks of writing are given to them. Most informants also informed that their teachers taught them to underline all the difficult terms and all-important sentences that need proper attention to practice on writing works. They expressed their opinions:

“Sure.... I often gets anxious when I have to write essays for my English class. I worry about whether I'm using the right words, if my grammar is correct, and if my ideas are clear enough. I often think.... things

The sample size of qualitative was purposively selected.

The data collection and the data analysis

The semi-structured interview was devised and conducted to answer the Research Questions. The qualitative data was analyzed thematically to measure the effects of Foreign Language Anxiety on EFL learners in Pakistani universities. The researcher approached 12 participants for the interview session, by using purposive sampling method. Interviews were conducted in their class room, to build a friendly environment and making them comfortable. The interview of each participant is recorded for 8 to 10 minutes. The analysis of these interviews is done by thematic analysis. The themes were generated using NVivo software, version 11. This software generated the following themes for interpretations of the results. The results are further described in the following section.

like...what if my writing is terrible? or I'm not going to be able to finish this on time.” [Informant one]

“.... Well, I think I am not good at writing....I always make many mistakes....that actually stop me to write and write.....” [Informant two]

Interestingly, three more students shared their own experiences of how they take part in writing activity in the class. They pointed out:

“.... I feel like there's a lot of pressure to write perfectly. My teachers are always emphasizing the importance of grammar and punctuation, and my classmates seem to be really good writers.” [Informant seven]

“I've had some teachers who were pretty critical of my work. It made me feel really discouraged and doubt my abilities as a...I write.... This makes me frightened and scared....” [Informant nine]

“.... It took me a while to get over it, but I eventually realized that everyone makes mistakes. I've learned to

take my work checked as we can improve my writing...definitely.... I get the most anxious when I have to write long essays or even a piece of composition.... I find it really difficult to stay focused and motivated for those kinds of assignments.” [Informant ten]

Similarly, two more participants stated:

“I think it's because they require a lot of time and effort. I'm afraid of not being able to meet the deadline or produce a high-quality written work.... I prefer a quiet and distraction-free environment. If there's too much noise or people around, it's hard for me to concentrate....my class has a huge number of students...and really is noisy...so I cannot produce good work...” [Informant Eleven]

“There was one time when I had to write a really important essay.....I was terrified, but I forced myself to sit down and start writing. I ended up writing a really good essay, and I got good marks...so, I should say...I broke the task down into smaller steps and focused on one thing at a time. I also reminded myself that I was capable of doing it, and I took breaks when I needed to....and I suggest my classmates may do the same....” [Informant Twelve]

Somatic Anxiety

Almost all informants informed that they feel somatic anxiety when any task for writing is given to them. They feel that their heart starts pounding and they get a knot in their stomach when they are said to write down on anything. Some informants stated that they feel anxiety, distress and discomfort while writing and my hands gets sweaty. Most of them expressed their opinions and asserted that while writing I get tensed, it slows them down and they hardly get into a flow. They stated:

“.... My heart starts pounding, and I get a knot in my stomach. It feels like I'm about to give a presentation, even though I'm just writing.... I think writing is very hard...it always confuses me” [Informant One]

“.....my hands often get sweaty, and sometimes my fingers feel numb. It's hard to concentrate when my body feels so tense. It slows me down. I keep pausing to calm myself down, and it's hard to get into a flow. Sometimes, the physical discomfort is so intense that I have to take a break....” [Informant Two]

“.... I remember one time I had to write a major essay. I started feeling a headache, and my vision became blurry. I couldn't focus on the words, and I ended up panicking. Writing seems very difficult task” [Informant Three]

“...In past...if I remember, anxiety affected my writing performance...due to slower in writing...I definitely.....and often handed over assignments tasks very late and frequently received lower grades because stress and anxiety overcome on me and I start shivering while writing...” [Informant Five]

“.....whenever, I write, I write the worst. The blank page is intimidating, and the pressure to come up with original ideas makes me feel physically sick and I get poor marks....my writing really is bad”. [Informant Seven]

“.... I am not a good writer...to whom I may discuss about how I may get improved in my writing....I think I may talk to my English teacher to improve my writing....but I haven't talked to anyone professionally, but I've mentioned it to a few friends. They've been supportive, but I haven't found any concrete solutions....” [Informant Twelve]

“I think there are certain ways to pen down on the given topics. We should follow some writing support or strategies in managing our writing tasks. I also think for writing practice and give more time to write and we may not take any pressure to be perfect in generating handy ideas.....” [Informant Ten]

Debilitating Anxiety

Most informants informed that they have debilitating anxiety when any task for writing is given to them. They feel incapacity to generate a piece of composition in and sometime outside the class. Two of them expressed that they try to pen down on given topic what they feel during writing tasks in classroom but find them unable and incapable. Most informants also informed that they know to underline all the difficult terms and all-important sentences that need proper attention to describe the clear meaning for the clarity of the text before writing but feel difficulty. Most of them expressed their opinions:

“I try to write in English but sometimes I face vocabulary problems so, I get confused in writing. I feel a little bit anxious and feel incapable and I cannot due to anxiety and hesitation....” [Informant Two]

“.... I feel anxious and uncomfortable during writing in English in English language classroom. My friends have also inability to write a paragraph or any letter.... they request their other class fellows.” [Informant Three]

“I feel the effects of fear, anxiety and issues like weak vocabulary and due to these factors, I give up writing.....” [Informant five]

“...I feel many difficulties, I can’t understand things properly in the English language, so I am unable to write.....and my teachers do not teach me with care and attention. I feel fear from my teachers.” [Informant nine]

Interestingly, two of the interviewees reported that debilitating anxiety involves self-approach process used by the learners to make personal ideas before writing the articles and building temporary thoughts but show inability for producing written text in a better way and their interest to compose for any topic and practice in the class. Two of them noted:

“.... before actual writing tasks...writers should make their thoughts.... temporary...not permanent about the text. This [thinking] strategy for generating ideas would develop interest in writing.... I think teachers would involve them (students) in writing tasks with full strictness for practice in and outside of class...” [Informant One]

“....to me...good readers do connect the authors’ writing with their own thoughts about the text.... I assert my friends (students) should go in the world of imagination for at least few minutes before starting their writing and make personal opinions and confirm after writing.” [Informants Seven]

However, one of interviewee informed that brainstorming at pre writing stage can lead to create a piece of article but I have no capacity to practice of thinking and collecting ideas. One of them said:

“....to me...thinking about article at the beginning may lead to draw positive picture of the given topic to write.....this needs capability which I lack....” [Informant Eight]

Conversely, three of them shared different response in terms of debilitating anxiety and considered it as the waste of time and asserted peers (class mates) to practice on writing activity in class and at home: they suggested:

“.... I does not think writing can be hard...nor it be waste of time...I practice and tell my friends to practice in and outside class...may be at home...” [Informant four]

“My friends think they are unable to write but I encourage them you can write as I writes....” [Informant six]

“.... I understand English but actually it’s a language that I cannot convey my opinion in written form....one cannot deliver properly and one cannot explain in a proper way, generally I feel confident but sometime get nervous to write” [Informant ten]

“When my class fellows have tried to write in English.... a...but they feel hesitation and they cannot write...so I also think no capacity to write down on anything properly....” [Informant twelve]

Facilitating Anxiety

Most informants informed that they have found Facilitating anxiety influence on the English language writing in classroom. Almost all participants expressed that they made their complete efforts and trails instead of avoiding participating in writing class. They asserted that they continued to facilitate themselves instead of getting afraid of writing assignments and they tried to control their anxiety for better performance in EFL classroom. Almost all participants indicated that they managed their written tasks very well by creating their interests. In this, others spoke that when they are given writing tasks, they feel worried about writing on the given topics but they try to overcome their anxiety which ultimately enhances writing habits. These informants stated:

“.....to me, facilitating anxiety involves creating a supportive environment where students feel safe to take risks and learn from mistakes. This can be achieved through by providing clear guidelines and rubrics helps students understand the requirements and reduce uncertainty.....” [Informant One]

“I think focusing on the writing process rather than just the final product encourages experimentation and growth. Similarly, peer review and group activities can foster a sense of community and shared learning and teachers should engage students with real-world writing tasks that align with their interests which can make the process more meaningful.....” [Informant Two]

“.... I believe students should strike a balance between support and challenge; teachers can harness the motivating power of anxiety to enhance EFL writing skills and create a positive learning experience. Similarly, writing anxiety, a common phenomenon among EFL learners, can have both debilitating and facilitating effects on their writing performance.....”
[Informant Four]

Class Test or Examination Anxiety

Almost all informants stated that Class test or examination anxiety is a common experience for many learners of language classes. These Informants stated:

“I think, to address students EFL writing anxiety, it is crucial to foster a positive learning environment where students feel supported and encouraged. Teachers can create a safe and inclusive space where students can freely express their ideas and receive constructive feedback. This can help alleviate the fear of making mistakes and promote a growth mindset....”
[Almost All Informants]

Discussion and conclusion

The interview data revealed the most promising results in terms of writing anxiety as the main variables. This study analyzed qualitative data by using NVivo software version 11 which generated the most important themes that include Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety, facilitating anxiety, Class test or examination anxiety and debilitating anxiety based on writing anxiety. These areas have major influence in strengthen the English writing anxiety investigated as a major variable of the study. Due to debilitating anxiety EFL learners avoid writing in English language. Meanwhile, due to facilitating anxiety EFL learners struggle with writing anxiety and puts efforts to perform or write in English language confidently. The interview data also indicated that EFL fear of negative evaluation is a major influential area which strengthens the English writing classroom anxiety among EFL learners. The interview data revealed that, EFL test or examination anxiety is major influential areas strengthen the English writing classroom anxiety among the EFL learners.

Further, this research indicates that writing anxiety is a complex issue that can significantly impact university learners' academic success and overall well-

being. By understanding the various levels, causes, and consequences of writing anxiety, learners can take proactive steps to manage and mitigate its effects. By implementing effective strategies such as mindfulness, positive self-talk, time management, and seeking support, learners can overcome writing anxiety and achieve their academic goals. These findings agree with many studies including Dar and Khan (2015); Clark (2005); Choi (2013); and B. Quintos (2022) suggesting anxiety arousal at the pre-stages of processing may cause cognitive impairments that may only be corrected when the individual has the opportunity to recover the lost data or when they can return to the input and/or processing stages. Less anxiety may lift a student's spirits and increase their prospects of future success. On the contrary, this present research approves the claims made in the past research in terms of the strategies identified and used by the participants.

To sum up, this study proves and confirms that writing is an intricate skill that involves a complex interplay of cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors. While it is a fundamental tool for academic and professional success, many learners, particularly those in second language contexts, experience significant anxiety when faced with writing tasks. This anxiety can manifest in various ways, including procrastination, avoidance, and a decline in writing quality.

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