

Analysis on the Sources of L2 Writing Anxiety*

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Abstract—L2 writing anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon. Second language writing anxiety is an important factor affecting the improvement of second language writing. This paper analyzes the two main sources that induce writing anxiety of L2 learners: students with writing anxiety generally have difficulty in expressing themselves in writing and have no writing habits; they lack self-confidence and have trouble in organizing and arranging ideas for content development. It is important for teachers to concern second language writing anxiety and realize its role in second language writing so that they can effectively adopt positive strategies to help students reduce their writing anxiety.

Keywords: *writing anxiety, sources, second language*

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing, as one of the basic four skills in language learning, is important while difficult for students. Writing is seen as arduous, challenging, and frustrating because students may feel poor in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, and language use. It is very common that students are asked to write only for assignments and exams. Without practice in class or after class, students may feel anxious and even frightened when asked to write in English. As Cheng (2000) and Lee (2005) said, writing in a foreign language is an acknowledged difficulty for a majority of EFL students because writing is an affective as well as cognitive activity. For second language writing, limited language knowledge and language ability is a challenge to second language learners who may lack the social and cultural awareness of writing in a foreign language and do not know how to achieve language functions in a proper way or do not understand the expectations of readers of different cultures. Motivation and emotional factors may also affect the normal performance of writing level. From the perspective of output results, there are often obvious Chinglish in students' compositions, or to some extent, they are interfered by their mother tongue (Zhou Baoguo & Tang Junjun, 2010).

Anxiety research in the past 40 years mainly involves the nature of anxiety, the development of anxiety scale, the influence of anxiety on performance and related factors of anxiety (Shi Yu & Xu Jinfen 2013: 60). Researchers have attempted to identify and define the construct of anxiety in foreign language classrooms for many years since students

are often apprehensive about their ability to successfully communicate in written form (Schmidt, 2004). Horwitz et al. (1986) and Mac Intyre & Gardner (1991a) claimed that foreign language anxiety is a unique type of anxiety specific to foreign language learning. Students with high levels of foreign language anxiety may engage in negative self-talk or even have a mental block, which affects their ability to process information in foreign language contexts (Liu, 2006; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a). This paper attempts to discuss the sources that induce writing anxiety so that teachers can effectively help students reduce their writing anxiety.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Writing anxiety

Writing anxiety, also called writing apprehension (Daly & Miller, 1975), is a persistent feeling of not being ready to write or not being good enough to write. Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualize foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. According to Hjortshoj (2001), anxiety in writing is a wide variety of apprehensive and pessimistic feelings about writing. However, these feelings do not pervasively characterize a person's writing life and it is naturally situational. As writing anxiety does not describe psychological attributes, students are likely to experience the anxiety in particular contexts caused by their negative or difficult experiences with writing (Al-Sawalha & Chow, 2012; Hjortshoj, 2001). It is a common fact that writing in foreign language is perceived as a difficult task among EFL students (Blasco, 2016; Cheng, 2002; Daud, Daud, & Kassim, 2005; Kurt & Attay, 2007; Latiff, 2007). However, some problems experienced by EFL students in writing are related to their distinctive English language competence that is greatly influenced by their competence in their own native language (Silva, 1993).

Second language researchers and theorists have long been aware that anxiety is often associated with language learning. Teachers and students generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language, and several recent approaches to foreign language teaching, such as community language learning and suggestopedia, are explicitly directed at reducing learner anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986: 125). In order

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to achieve this goal, it is quite necessary for teachers to know about the factors that cause foreign language anxiety.

B. Studies about writing anxiety

Since the 1970s, anxiety, as one of the most important affective factors, has gradually become an important part of SLA research at home and abroad (Arnold 2005: 59). Daly (1978:11) discussed the different written results of students with "high apprehension about writing," as writing anxiety was then called, and the written results of students with lower apprehension. In his research, he showed that those with high apprehension have poorer writing skills and, therefore, receive lower grades. Because of this, they avoid writing and, because they write less frequently than those with lower apprehension about writing, they have fewer opportunities to develop their writing skills. According to Kean, Gylmn and Britton (1987), the effect of writing anxiety is most likely to be manifested when the apprehensive writer composes under time pressure. Hassan (2001: 4) describes a similar situation with nonnative-English-speaking writers when discussing second language writing anxiety, which he defines as "a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing". His study found that "low apprehensive students had higher self-esteem than high apprehensive students and vice versa"; and "low self-esteem students obtained significantly higher writing apprehension scores than their high self-esteem counterparts... This means that the low self-esteem group was more apprehensive/anxious than the high self-esteem group". Hassan (2001: 25) concluded that students with low self-esteem and with low apprehension scored less than their counterparts on the writing quantity task. Writing anxiety can make students concentrative and accurate when writing.

In China, researchers used different measurement tools to test the foreign language writing anxiety of Chinese non-English majors, and the results showed that there was a negative correlation between foreign language writing anxiety and writing performance; there were significant differences between high and low anxiety level subjects in foreign language writing performance (Xue Lifang 2005; Zhou Baoguo, Tang Junjun 2010; Guo Yan, Qin Xiaoqing 2010). Zhou Baoguo & TangJunjun (2010) dynamically studied 30 Chinese students' L2 writing process. Their findings show that there is a negative correlation between L2 writing anxiety and L2 writing quality or level. On the whole, the students with high writing anxiety use more mother tongue than the students with low writing anxiety. Li Hang (2015) used a follow-up survey and cross lag regression analysis, and found that writing anxiety is an important factor in writing performance, which is negatively related to writing performance. This finding is similar to what Horwitz et al. (1986) found. On the other hand, it proves that the writing performance of students with high anxiety is often worse than that of students with low anxiety. Bai Liru (2017) attempted to develop an English writing anxiety inducing factor scale suitable for the context of College English teaching and learning in China, and concluded that English

writing anxiety inducing factors include the writer's individual inducements and writing process inducements, the former involves the expression ability, the speech ability and the text ability inducing factors, the latter involves the review feedback, the task characteristics and the output mode inducing factors.

The above-mentioned research showed, foreign language writing anxiety are induced by different reasons and high level of writing anxiety is positively related to poor writing performance. But on the contrary, there are some scholars who believe that moderate writing anxiety can improve EFL students' writing ability (Brown, 2007; Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012). On the other hand, in support of interference model, Horwitz (2000) claims that anxiety can interfere with learning and the deficit model may be true to some extent but not for all cases of anxiety. The interference model claims that the anxious learners' low performance is due to their difficulties in retrieving information. Writing anxiety can make students concentrative and accurate when writing. Such facilitative anxiety can help students cope with the writing assignment. Empirical studies have shown that EFL students who experience anxiety in writing will concentrate more; thus, will write more accurately (Brown, 2007). Concentration and accuracy in writing are among the contributing factors for better writing performance (Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012). In their research Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) found that students with higher level of anxiety performed better in all aspects of their writing assignment. Such finding strengthens the dichotomy of the role of anxiety in student's writing performance (Jawas, 2019).

Generally speaking, more previous studies have been focused on the relationships of L2 language writing anxiety to L2 writing performance and writing attitudes. But what are the sources of L2 writing anxiety?

Since the 1970s, more research about L2 writing anxiety is on its effect on writing performance and its sources of writing anxiety. Many studies have demonstrated its negative impact on foreign language writing performance. Scovel (1978) and Oxford (1999) held the belief that second language writing anxiety may have two effects on second language writing: one is positive facilitation, for example, moderate anxiety may help writers to maintain a sharp state of mind, etc.; the other is the negative inhibition ("deliberating"), for example, anxiety will bring negative effects on learners' learning motivation and writing performance (Hassan, 2001; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner (1994). But what writing anxiety causes induce the positive and negative impacts?

Cheng (2004) conducted his research and found that student writers' anxiety might stem from a variety of sources related to (1) instructional practices, (2) personal beliefs about writing and learning to write, (3) self-perceptions, and (4) interpersonal threats. The category of instructional practices includes those sources of anxiety that are external to the student writers and related to instructors' requirements and practices. Those that induce stress of an interpersonal nature and involve threats to self-esteem or status were

subsumed under the category of interpersonal threats (Otto & Hupka, 1999). The findings by Jawas (2019) showed the main three sources are related to writing anxiety: arranging ideas for essay content development; types of essay assignment and time-restricted assignments; and classroom atmosphere. Arranging ideas for essay content development was the most likely essay writing process that created higher level of anxiety to the students compared to the other essay writing process. Types of essay assignments that potentially caused the students to feel most anxious were that of individual essay assignment done in the class with the topic decided by the lecturer and within time restriction. It also showed that the lecturer was the one of the classroom atmospheres factors that was likely to produce anxiety to the students while their classmates had equal chance to cause them to feel anxious or not. Selma Kara (2013) found the reasons related to writing anxiety are 1) students have no writing habit and 2) they are not used to writing and expressing themselves in writing. Zhang Hongxia and Zhu Yingying (2012) conducted a study among 96 English-majors and got such findings that there are five main causes of ESL writing anxiety for English majors: language difficulties, lack of writing practice, fear of test writing, limited knowledge and lack of self-confidence. Bai Liru's research (2017) showed that there are two sources of writing anxiety — individual inducements and writing process inducements. Young (2009) pointed out that learners' anxiety in foreign language learning will vary in different teaching environments and Dewaele, et al. (2008) also believed that learners' foreign language learning environment will affect their foreign language learning anxiety. Cheng (2004) found in his study the majority of the interviewees expressed anxiety as well as disruptive emotions such as boredom, frustration, aversion, and even learned helplessness in the process of writing and learning to write in English. These detrimental emotions had their roots partly in learners' low self-confidence or perceived limited L2 competence, especially in the areas of vocabulary and word usage. For these limitations seem to hamper L2 writers' authentic communication and presentation of their "true self" to others (Horwitz et al., 1986). Similarly, Zhang Hongxia and Zhu Yingying (2012) found lack of confidence is another major cause of ESL writing anxiety, and also an important factor hindering the improvement of English writing level. The progress of English writing is a long and slow process. The frustration of L2 writing learners comes from the gap between their high expectations and their writing progress. At the same time, the negative evaluation from teachers and students will also affect their judgment of their writing ability, because they can't see the progress and are depressed, so they lack continuous self-motivation and persistent learning motivation (2012:124). Writing anxious students tend to have more difficulty in stating writing goals and organizing ideas, producing shorter and fewer words, making many errors in the composition, and using inappropriate grammatical and rhetorical conventions and lexical variety (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015; Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015; Silva, 1993). Based on the research it can be seen that there are two major sources of L2 writing anxiety.

First, writing anxiety comes from students themselves. Students with high writing anxiety usually have problems such as language difficulties in words and grammar, etc. Also, they have no writing habits and lack self-confidence. They seldom practice writing very often, and are not used to writing and expressing themselves in writing.

Second, writing anxiety happens in the writing process. The process is hard for students with writing anxiety who have difficulty in stating writing goals and organizing ideas, arranging ideas for essay content development. Types of essay assignments and time-restricted assignments can induce writing anxiety. In writing process the review feedback from peers and teachers, the task characteristics and the output mode make contributions to writing anxiety.

III. CONCLUSION

The sources of ESL writing anxiety are various. L2 language writing anxiety and its impact have been concerned for many years. It is important for L2 writing teachers to be aware of the prevalence of L2 writing anxiety and its possible negative impact on the writing process and writing performance so that they can effectively adopt positive strategies to help students reduce their writing anxiety.

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