



Analysing English Writing Anxiety Among Junior High School Students

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Abstract. English composition has caused heavy pressure on Chinese junior high school students. Those who have not been fully exposed to systematic English writing training are more likely to encounter anxiety. However, this is also a learning opportunity for students to improve their English proficiency. Therefore, how to reduce their English writing anxiety is worth studying. There was relatively little research on analyzing the causes and solutions to the English writing anxiety among this group. Causes are divided into internal and external ones. The internal causes range from students' self-efficacy and writing ability to writing strategies. External factors include teachers' teaching methods, feedback approaches, and the educational environment. To tackle these problems, students can cultivate their interests in English writing and apply self-regulating strategies. Teachers can help learners with specific strategies and create a comfortable classroom atmosphere. With theoretical and practical significance, this study may not only make up for the deficiency of related literature to a certain extent, but also guide students and teachers for better education.

Keywords: English writing anxiety · Causes · Solutions · Junior high school students

1 Introduction

English is one of the three core subjects of middle school students in China. English writing, which accounts for a large proportion of English proficiency assessments, has become more challenging after the curriculum reform. Therefore, how to improve English writing ability has become a heated topic among related people.

However, English writing has long been regarded as a challenge by students. When they are required to write in English, they will encounter problems. Then some negative emotions such as concern and fear would occur, which are called English writing anxiety. Junior high school is a critical stage for students to cultivate their English ability. Nevertheless, these students have not been exposed to English writing for a long time, and their writing level is relatively lower than the teachers' expectations. As a result, their English writing anxiety needs more attention.

The research on writing anxiety has some related studies. To summarize, some scholars put forward the concept of writing anxiety, its influencing factors, and the impact of

anxiety on language acquisition. Chinese scholars mainly focus on the English writing anxiety of different student groups and anxiety classification [1]. While providing a good reference for this paper, a research gap found that studies seldom focus on English writing anxiety among junior high school students, most of which target college students. Therefore, this paper aims to fill in this gap and probe more into this less-noticed group.

Consequently, according to the predecessors' classical theories, this paper analyzes the causes and strategies of junior high school students' English writing anxiety. It may provide theoretical guidance for effectively relieving anxiety and promoting students' English writing competence.

For further implication, this study may assist students in reducing their English writing apprehension by clarifying its causes. Teachers may also improve their teaching approach to help learners relieve their anxiety based on the given strategies in the following section.

2 Analyzing Junior High School Students' English Writing Anxiety

2.1 Basic Concepts and Theories

2.1.1 Definitions of Anxiety and English Writing Anxiety

Based on cognitive theory, Spielberger indicates that anxiety is an unpleasant emotional state which features nervousness and upset in the mind [2]. Similarly, Horwitz points out that anxiety is a sense of concern aroused by the autonomic nervous system and usually appears with passive moods [3]. Although the definition of anxiety has not been fully reached a consensus, there are still some similarities. It is universally acknowledged that anxiety is a negative emotion of worry and nervousness.

English writing anxiety has become a heated research topic since the 1980s. Daly and Miller first propose writing apprehension and regard it as a worrying behavior during writing, such as avoiding writing and fearing readers' comments [4]. Then Krashen argues that foreign language writing anxiety is a concentrated learning apprehension of non-native language output in writing [5]. Some Chinese scholars reckon this term a challenge in writing unfamiliar languages, which can be detrimental to students' compositions.

To sum up, foreign language writing anxiety is a passive emotion that will affect writing ability. As English is the second language exposed to most junior high school students in China, English writing anxiety is analyzed in this paper, which substitutes for foreign language anxiety.

2.1.2 Relevant Theories of Krashen

In the theory of Affective Filter Hypothesis of Second Language Acquisition, Krashen indicates that numerous input of accessible language does not necessarily improve language acquisition, as it is also affected by the learners' emotional factors. Anxiety, confidence, and motivation are three leading causes, also called the filters. If the learners have strong filters, their language acquisition will be hindered [5]. As an emotional factor, anxiety plays a vital role in English writing. Feeling too anxious will impede students'

interest and ability to compose. Therefore, research about the causes and solutions of this issue is of great value.

2.2 Causes of Junior High School Students' English Writing Anxiety

Based on Cheng's Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory, this anxiety has three parts: physical anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance anxiety [6]. These are determined by the previous terrible writing experience, the fear of negative evaluation, and the learners' characters [6]. According to Guo and Qin, these four factors can be regarded as elements of English writing anxiety: classroom anxiety, conception anxiety, behavior avoidance, and lack of confidence [7]. These have similar factors to the former theory.

2.2.1 Previous Findings of English Writing Anxiety

Daly and Miller argue that passive attitudes towards English writing give rise to anxiety [4]. Oxford points out that the causes of language anxiety range from test results and writing tasks to learners' esteem [8]. Some Chinese researchers show that this problem closely relates to writing skills, teaching methods, and evaluation criteria. The reasons can be divided into two main aspects. One is the internal causes, referring to students' self-efficacy, writing ability, and writing strategy. The other is external causes, consisting of teacher feedback and the educational environment.

2.2.2 The Relationship Between Students' Self-efficacy and Writing Anxiety

Bandura proposes that self-efficacy is a sense of competence in believing oneself can achieve goals [9]. Higher self-efficacy leads to firm motivation to address problems. Pajares, Johnson, and Usher put forward the term writing self-efficacy, which directly influences students' interest, devotion, and writing practice [10]. These factors are what affect the level of writing anxiety. If a person is eager to practice English writing actively, the avoidance behavior will be reduced, and confidence will increase with the progress. Thus the person will believe that the writing task is easy to be completed and mitigate anxiety.

2.2.3 The Relationship Between Writing Ability and Writing Anxiety

The lack of English writing ability is a vital factor that causes anxiety. Some Chinese scholars show that writing barriers include language system and content barriers, mainly referring to grammar and their viewpoints [11]. If students are not good at these two aspects, they will become anxious that they cannot finish writing in time or make many mistakes under the pressure of exams. Extending to their usual writing practice, students may also feel uneasy.

2.2.4 The Relationship Between Writing Strategy and Writing Anxiety

Whalen and Menard point out that a second foreign language proficiency level could not necessarily determine writing ability, as writing strategy plays a significant role in this process [12].

Writing strategy consists of three parts: planning before writing, monitoring during writing, and adjusting after writing. The preparation stage is the critical factor influencing anxiety. Suppose a person makes a reasonable writing plan in advance, with the structure and keywords of the article. In that case, writing efficiency can be effectively promoted. Thus, the person can alleviate anxiety caused by time pressure and task difficulty.

The above are three main factors of the internal causes, playing a decisive role in the emergence of English writing anxiety.

2.2.5 The Influence of Teaching Methods on Students' Writing Anxiety

At present, the teaching methods of English composition in most Chinese junior high schools need to be modified, based on the Input Hypothesis of Krashen. Practical input has several features. Firstly, it should be accessible to learners [5]. Suppose teachers only ask students to recite excellent sentences mechanically but do not analyze the connotations and techniques. In that case, it will not make students understand what leads to an outstanding article. Next, the input must be engaging, which will motivate learners to explore initially [5]. However, many teachers only show model essays and ask students to copy them. This monotonous way will reduce learners' interest, thereby resulting in their fear of writing. Then, teachers should encourage students to have sufficient reading input [5]. It is not enough to learn only a few compositions in class. Learners should read extensively to cultivate their linguistic intuition. Otherwise, writing anxiety will arise due to a lack of confidence and ability.

2.2.6 The Influence of Teacher Feedback on Students' Writing Anxiety

Teacher feedback includes form feedback and content feedback, which is proposed by Richards and Lockhart [13]. The former only focus on students' writing accuracy, while the latter involves more comments like praise and criticism [13]. However, many Chinese English teachers are prone to use form feedback. The way of merely marking revisions in the article will make learners worry about their writing ability, thus causing anxiety. Apart from that, this evaluation method is confined chiefly to teachers. It has not been fully developed among students in some Chinese junior high schools.

2.2.7 The Influence of Educational Environment on Students' English Writing Anxiety

Based on humanistic education, Maslow firstly points out that the educational environment significantly impacts study [1]. Creating a comfortable and careful atmosphere can stimulate meaningful learning and improve efficiency [1].

However, in China, exam-oriented education is widely practiced. For a considerable population, educational resources are relatively scarce. In order to ensure teaching fairness as much as possible, China implements a strict examination system to select talents. Coupled with China's socialist system, education inevitably becomes standardized and mass-produced. Therefore, students are taught almost uniform materials, and their personalized learning needs are hard to meet. Test scores have become the most crucial criterion for better studies, forcing students to master the answer templates to get high

marks. In such an educational environment, learners are prone to under severe pressure, especially when they need to write English compositions.

2.3 The Solutions to Junior High School Students' English Writing Anxiety

2.3.1 Solutions for Students

In terms of students, they can try to cultivate their interest in English writing and apply self-regulation strategies.

Developing an interest in writing is a practical approach to reducing anxiety. As the desire to explore English writing increases, they will have more motivation and courage to face the potentially terrible experience. Firstly, they can take a positive attitude towards writing, not regard it as an arduous task. Next, students can form the habit of writing English essays. When they have any inspiration, they can quickly write it down in simple English sentences. After that, they can polish this expression to explore more charm of English writing.

When anxiety arises, students can adopt some self-regulation strategies to alleviate it. Some Chinese scholars divide this into action, conception, emotion, and avoidance strategies. Action strategy refers to taking practical behaviours to improve English writing ability, thus reducing anxiety. Students can read various articles to accumulate more excellent expressions in their spare time. The conception strategy is to brainstorm for broader writing views, summarize main points with mind maps, and then list outlines. Emotion strategy refers to students motivating themselves to create better articles. For example, diverting attention properly and praising oneself after writing are fantastic choices. Finally, avoidance strategy means students escaping from writing assignments and evaluations. This method is inadvisable as it will make students feel more anxious about the possibly awful consequences [11].

2.3.2 Strategies That Teachers Can Apply to Education

Some practical strategies are beneficial for mitigating students' English writing anxiety. Following the Affective filtering Hypothesis from Krashen, emotion is the key factor affecting second language acquisition [5].

Primarily, teachers can take advantage of the emotional strategy. The first step is to arouse learners' interest in English writing and ease their concern towards the composition tasks. Hence, free writing topics and flexible requirements should be set. If students felt less pressure about the assignment, more inspiration would spark and lead to better compositions. In addition, teachers need to offer more engaging activities to let students feel that writing is delightful and meaningful. That means using English as a convenient tool in daily life, not as a subject merely. For instance, instructors can ask students to translate Chinese poetry into English, write English letters to friends and create English newspapers to spread the class culture. After feeling a sense of accomplishment, students will improve their writing self-efficacy and alleviate their anxiety as much as possible.

Next, teaching strategy is what teachers need to update. There are several pedagogies that domestic scholars explore to enhance English education. Two mainstream ways were popular in China during the early years: focusing on results or processes.

Based on the behaviorism theory, the result-oriented teaching method emphasizes that writing is a process of stimulation, reaction, and consolidation. This method is more suitable for writing articles with fixed patterns and apparent text structure. Its disadvantage is that teachers lack understanding of the writing process, so they cannot give targeted guidance to students [14].

The process-oriented method started in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to communication theory, writing is a process of discovery and creation through language, paying attention to conception, data collection, writing, revision, and finalization. Its merits are embodied in the student-centered cooperation practices and teachers' timely guidance. However, this method also has some shortcomings. Most articles are adopted the same writing process, making students likely to get bored and thus muddle through their tasks, which is time-consuming and laborious [15].

Many researchers then put forward the task-based writing teaching method, which combines the advantages of the former two approaches. This relatively new pedagogy emphasizes the importance of students' mutual learning, enlightening composition teaching deeply [16]. The core of this method is to let students stimulate actual intersection tasks with the targeted language points. More attention will be paid to the implication but not the language pattern so that meaningful learning will occur. Three processes are included: preparation, writing, and evaluation.

In preparation, teachers should provide plenty of relevant and attractive inputs to students, which is also the way of scaffolding teaching. For instance, teachers can assign students some articles related to the writing theme, assist them to sum up the views, analyze the structure and learn from the language. Then a brief interpretation can be given to the whole class to inspire more ideas.

Next, teachers can divide students into several groups in the writing process. After finishing the composition within a few minutes, heated discussions are welcomed in groups to exchange opinions and select model essays. After that, some students will report their results on behalf of their groups. In this way, every student has the opportunity to participate in the discussion, and therefore they will gradually mitigate the fear of English writing.

The final step is evaluation, including self-reflection, peer review, and teacher feedback. After writing, students should revise their compositions, reflect on their shortcomings and try to correct them. This process is a dialogue between students and their inner worlds, which can let them gradually discover the enchantment of writing and enhance their motivations. Peer review can help students learn from each other and make progress together. It also strengthens their sense of responsibility for writing, thus alleviating avoidance and anxiety. Finally, teachers' effective feedback assists in proof-reading professionally and building up students' confidence. This instructional design is based on the constructivism theory, which does not let students acquire knowledge through the teacher's imparting. However, it makes them realize the meaning of construction through interpersonal cooperation activities. It is conducive to students' initiative and creativity in a friendly environment, minimizing their strangeness and anxiety about English writing.

However, the task-based writing teaching method also has limitations. For instance, group cooperation may weaken learners' independent thinking. As a result, teachers should strengthen supervision when organizing activities [16].

2.3.3 Create a Better Educational Environment

Under the background of exam-oriented education in China, students are under heavy test pressure, and their thoughts are bound. Therefore, they will easily feel anxious.

In order to mitigate students' anxiety, a more relaxing and comfortable educational environment needs to be created. It is not feasible to alter China's education system, but teachers can spare no effort to create a cozy classroom atmosphere. They have to transfer their role from a leader to a guide and attach importance to students' feelings [17]. For example, teachers can let students write non-proposition compositions to arouse more flexible thoughts in the early exercises. Instructors can also give timely positive comments to motivate students, thus letting them make progress in a joyful way.

3 Conclusion

At present, junior high school students are generally anxious about English writing, which is harmful to their English ability in this critical period. This paper analyzes their writing anxiety's chief causes and solutions based on the previous studies' overview. The causes include students' poor self-efficacy, relatively low writing abilities, and inadequate effective writing strategies. Moreover, teachers' improper pedagogies, feedback methods, and the uncomfortable educational environment also result in anxiety. The following approaches can be adopted to address these problems. Students can take the initiative to build their interest in English writing and master self-regulation strategies. Using the task-based writing method and peer review, teachers can upgrade their skills to help students. Besides, providing learners with a comfortable classroom atmosphere is also what teachers can carry out. With the above findings, this paper may provide theoretical guidance and practical application to relieve students' English writing anxiety and promote their English ability. It is conducive to learners' self-study and teachers' instruction.

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