



Linking English Academic Writing Anxiety and Postgraduates in Journalism and Communication: A Systematic Literature Review of Past Achievements and Future Suggestions

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Abstract. Increasing globalisation has opened up a broad space for worldwide communication, and English academic writing has become the norm in a globalised educational context. As a way of exploring the world¹, academic writing in English has become increasingly important, but the phenomenon of anxiety in it has not been closely examined. In this essay, taking the Foreign language anxiety (FLA) as an entry point, I will sort a range of literature through a review of existing situations of academic writing anxiety and point out the gap in research. Finally, some possible suggestions for postgraduate in journalism and communication will be presented. As a whole, the essay attempts to open up a conversation that English academic writing anxiety of Chinese postgraduates in journalism and communication should be given wider attention.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety; academic writing; Chinese postgraduate; journalism and communication

1 Introduction

Currently, the concept of L2 academic writing anxiety is increasingly explored in different regions of the world, which implies that it is a valuable research perspective and is also understood and represented in various ways by many scholars. An overview of the extant literature reveals a certain degree of conflation between “second language anxiety in academic writing”, “L2 academic writing anxiety”, and “foreign language anxiety in academic writing” are to some extent conflated. In the other words, there does not appear to be a single specific term that is widely used in academia. In this essay, I will use “L2 academic writing anxiety” to refer to this anxiety. It also reviews the literature related to foreign language anxiety, foreign language anxiety in writing, and L2 academic writing anxiety sequentially.

2 Literature Review of Past Achievements

2.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety is very common in the learning of almost all subjects². According to a definition provided by Spielberger (1983), anxiety is a “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with autonomic arousal of the autonomic nervous system”^{3 4}. Even though from the description of the definition, there appears to be some nature of commonality in this feeling, the anxiety in different types means different things⁵. The academic literature on anxiety has revealed that three types of anxiety are contrasting. One of them is trait anxiety, which is closely linked to the learner’s personality style and is usually permanent, while state anxiety is an anxious response to a particular adverse situation and is usually momentary⁶. The third type is situation-specific anxiety, which is considered anxiety triggered by a specific situation or events^{2 3}. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is just such a type of situation-specific anxiety⁴, it has been in the spotlight since the 1970s. In a series of studies, FLA is generally understood to mean a type of anxiety specific to the process of learning a second language and applying it^{4 7 8}, which is present in many aspects of language learning. It is now well established from some published studies that almost all basic English skills are factors that may influence students’ language learning anxiety^{9 10}.

Historically, L2 speaking anxiety has been the subject of many classic studies^{11 12}. Further, around the early 2000s, a large number of scholarly research have emerged on learners’ anxiety in L2 listening^{13 14 15} and reading^{16 17 18}. Unlike the first three, studies of L2 writing anxiety are small-scale, especially in academic writing. In recent decades, as the importance of English has grown, L2 (English) writing has been increasingly essential, and has attracted considerable attention from scholars interested in anxiety.

Due to space limits, a detailed review of the FLA in speaking, reading, and listening, is beyond the scope of this essay. Hence, I will mostly review some literature on relevant L2 academic writing anxiety and the findings obtained from some empirical studies.

2.2 Foreign Language Anxiety in Writing

Writing are essential language skills that are crucial to students’ academic achievement²⁰. L2 writing can be seen as a communication process to convey information to a reader using a second language. For most students, L2 written expression abilities are more difficult to acquire than L1^{21 22}. Öz et al. (2015) and Raimes (1983) recognise the primacy of skills in L2 writing, including vocabulary, spelling, syntax, and grammar^{23 24}. They argue that whether it is communicated thought, emotion or scheme, skills are always more important than knowledge. This reflects the possibility that if learners improve their L2 writing skills, they may be able to express their idea in writing more easily. This perspective has prompted scepticism from some scholars, such as Ajmal and Irfan (2020), who warn against the exposition that ignores the

importance of knowledge, including disciplinary theories, terminology, and specific expressions in subjects²⁵. Instead, they emphasise that the ingestion of knowledge is a prerequisite for L2 writing. So the absence of any component of theoretical knowledge can be the reason for unsuccessful L2 writing. Furthermore, some scholars consider L2 writing as a cognitive activity, such as Brand (1987), who argues that L2 writing only makes sense in the context of cognition²⁶. A similar view comes from Cheng (2002) who claims that cognition is a core element of L2 writing that refers to deliberate, creative, and complex thinking and feeling²⁷. Apart from being all about knowledge, skills and cognition, L2 writing also emphasizes the role of practice. In Specific, some scholars have built bridges between L2 academic writing and achieving success from the perspective of practice^{28 29 30 31 32 33}. They claim that plenty of practice moderates the challenges of L2 writing for people. Taken together, these perspectives corroborate that L2 writing is a process that mobilises skills, knowledge, and cognition. Learners should not only focus on the writing itself, but should also emphasize the role of practice. Otherwise, learners will risk being trapped in the vicious cycle of anxiety it causes³⁴.

In the field of FLA, various definitions of writing anxiety are found. Thompson (1983) argues that writing anxiety is fear of the writing process, which outweighs the expected benefits of writing ability³⁵. Topuzkanamis (2015) offers a further viewpoint on writing anxiety by arguing that writing anxiety is a person's concern and negative emotion about a competent writing task³⁶. This emphasis on the negative emotion is also evident in Jennifer and Ponniah's (2019) thesis, where they assert that writing anxiety is unpleasant, uneasy and uncomfortable feelings in writing³⁷. Although differences in the definition above still exist, there appears to be some agreement that L2 writing anxiety, refers to a negative barrier in situational aspect, preventing the learner from starting or finishing L2 writing, and even leading to their avoiding.

When it comes to writing anxiety, it is vital to mention the classic scale created by several scholars, mainly Daly and Miller (1975)³⁸ and Cheng (2004)³⁹. Firstly, a pioneering study can be traced back to the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT), which was published by Daly and Miller (1975)³⁸. It is a self-report tool used to measure native speakers' language writing apprehension and consists of 26 items, for example, "I have no fear of my English writing being evaluated," and "My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on my composition". Notwithstanding WAT has been to some extent accepted and used at the time, it has not been able to avoid being caught in a spiral of scepticism. Opposing voices from some scholars have stated that the WAT is not designed for non-native English speakers, so the test is not entirely appropriate in L2 case studies. Because L2 participants may have had difficulties in fully understanding the meaning of some items and thus were given random responses⁴⁰. Moreover, McKain (1991) identified that the WAT's measure of L2 writing anxiety is not sufficiently precise⁴¹. In detail, only 14 of the 26 WAT are feelings projects, of which only 4 are related to anxiety. One possible implication of this is that WAT is ample scope for further development. Cheng (2004) is the quintessential improver of the WAT, creating the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)³⁹. This is a 22-item scale, that measures the extent to which learners feel anxious when writ-

ing in a second language along three dimensions: cognitive, somatic/physiological and behavioural. This more granular category enriches the meaning of writing anxiety and also provides the opportunity for its empirical application in a wider context.

2.3 L2 Academic Writing Anxiety

Academic writing is seen by Coffin et al. (2005) as the heart of higher education. It is used by scholars in several overlapping senses⁴². In broad terms, it can be described as ‘scientific writing’⁴³ or ‘structured research’⁴⁴. Secondly, academic writing is “specific to a domain and particular works in domains”⁴⁵. Overall, academic writing, as an important part of higher education, builds on rules that are distinct from other forms of writing, with the specific conventions, style and tone of writing. With the growing international status of English, English academic writing is regarded as a widespread form of communication globally⁴⁶.

Some scholars have coincidentally found that students in various contexts may suffer from L2 (especially English) academic writing anxiety. The phenomenon and the factors associated with it have sparked the interest of a wider range of scholars. For example, Jordan scholars Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011) explored the relationship between age and academic writing in English⁴⁷. Ewald’s (2007) from Spain and Jebreil et al.’s (2015) from Iran study provides a perspective on the relationship that the language level of the learners and their English academic writing anxiety^{48 49}. In the aspect of gender, Kirmizi & Kirmizi (2015) track the L2 writing anxiety in boys and girls in Turkish higher education⁵⁰. Together these studies provide an insight into that research on multiple contexts has become mainstream in L2 academic writing anxiety research. Additionally, in the search for solutions to L2 academic writing anxiety, many researchers have explored its causes of it. Scholars generally accept that the main source of learners’ L2 academic writing anxiety is second language difficulties^{51 52}. In other words, compared to native English speakers, “students who reported English was not their first language had statistically significantly higher writing anxiety than did their L1 counterparts”⁵³. In addition, scholars have identified several types of role conflict as a contributing factor to L2 students’ academic writing anxiety^{54 55}. Bloom (1981) argued that a discordant teacher-student relationship can lead to student anxiety⁵⁶. He interpretation that students’ L2 writing anxiety peaked when writing about a topic chosen by the supervisor rather than own. Similarly, this view is supported by Casanave (2014, 2019), who writes about his practical experience that apprenticeships are a bond between students and supervisors^{57 58}. This conflict-tinged relationship can lead to anxiety and struggle for postgraduate students writing L2 theses. More recent attention has focused on the broader context that is the Covid-19 pandemic. In this global crisis, lockdown and isolation may drive the challenge that students will face greater anxiety^{59 60}. Finally, peer-reviewing^{61 62} and students’ perfectionism^{63 64}, are also prominent factors causing students’ L2 student writing anxiety. Collectively, considerable empirical studies have recognised that writing anxiety is prevalent in the L2 writing process and to some extent affects the quality of writing tasks completed.

3 Research Rationale

As shown in the previous part, L2 writing anxiety is a universal phenomenon for L2 learners. Before proceeding to carry out the research design, it is important to closely examine the gap in the current research.

A review of the literature revealed recent studies which focus on writing anxiety have been conducted in various contexts. However, Chinese scholars' research on writing anxiety, has mostly centred on undergraduate or younger students, and exploration into postgraduate academic writing anxiety is still understudied. Indeed, as an indicator of academic performance, academic writing is a frequent issue for postgraduate students to confront.

Secondly, the stable position of English in the production of academic knowledge cannot be ignored⁶⁵. While there is considerable debate about the status of English as 'Academic Lingua Franca' (EALF)^{66 67 68}, there is no doubt that for young scholars in developing countries, English is one of the best tools for expressing academic ideas and demonstrating their international academic status⁶⁹. But to date, few studies have investigated Chinese students' academic expression in English in any systematic way, particularly in English academic writing.

4 Future Suggestions

For Chinese postgraduates in journalism and communication, alleviating academic writing anxiety in English is urgent and requires a concerted effort.

From the supervisor's perspective, an applicable practice is to actively develop graduate students' self-confidence and self-awareness in English academic writing. When making pedagogical decisions and judgments, making the postgraduate students aware that anxiety is normal and expected⁷⁰, even if their writing process and performance are less than perfect, can be very rewarding. For the supervisor, some role adjustments should be made. Transform yourself into a guide concerned with student learning, rather than authority figures who assess student performance⁷¹. Because confrontation between supervisors and students is unhelpful for anxiety relief⁷².

For schools, developing a range of English academic writing courses of journalism and communication can develop postgraduate students' academic discourse and critical thinking about the conventions. Based on Holmes et al.'s (2018) research, some students would like some exposure to writing instruction starting early in their postgraduate studies, along with training on how to find and use academic resources⁷³. Additionally, the University could establish a psychological counselling unit on English academic writing anxiety. Through the timely intervention of specialists, the mental health of postgraduate students will be maintained at as normal a level as possible.

For administrators at the school level, it is essential not to severely restrict graduation requirements for postgraduates, for example, some Chinese universities require postgraduates to publish 1 paper in English before being allowed to graduate. If the

rules for graduation were set more humanely, it would go a long way to alleviating the phenomenon of English writing anxiety among postgraduates.

5 Conclusion

In summary, the anxiety of postgraduates in journalism and communication when working on English academic writing is a crucial but always neglected part of FLA. It should be emphasised and accepted by more language practitioners, educators and policymakers. Due to the word limit of this article, it does not show the full details of the research design, but I hope it covers the basic issues that should be highlighted the most. Admittedly, as practitioners of journalism and communication, we should take full account of the emotional anxieties of students at all grade levels, not just the young students and take transformative action.

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