



A Study of Chinese Students' Learning Anxiety on IELTS Writing Test

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Abstract. As a widely accepted and used standard for assessing English language proficiency around the world, IELTS plays an important role in applying for foreign universities or immigration. Through in-depth interviews with four Chinese students, this study found that they commonly exhibited symptoms of learning anxiety such as in-somnia, poor concentration and concern about examiner marking. The study also explored the main factors contributing to learning anxiety, including examiner marking, language proficiency, and time pressure. The findings of this study provide insights into understanding and supporting Chinese students' learning anxiety in relation to the IELTS writing test.

Keywords: learning anxiety; IELTS writing test; language proficiency; time pressure; examiner marking.

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of English language learning anxiety, especially in the context of high-stakes tests such as IELTS, has been the subject of much research. This anxiety can manifest itself in various forms, including test anxiety, writing anxiety and speaking anxiety, and it can significantly affect students' performance and overall learning outcomes. Research has shown that learning anxiety plays an important role in the language learning and testing process, especially in writing.

2 Literature review

Effiong, in his doctoral dissertation, surveyed English learners at four Japanese universities and found that foreign language classroom anxiety was influenced by factors such as teaching environment, teacher style, and peer relationships[1]. Williams and Andrade's study, which focused on English language learners at a Japanese university, noted that the causes of foreign language learning anxiety included language learning challenges, social anxiety, and worries about exams[2]. Chen and Chang's study showed that anxiety is positively correlated with learning difficulties, i.e., the higher the level of anxiety, the greater the learning difficulty is likely to be[3]. It can be concluded that foreign language learning anxiety is affected by a variety of factors such as

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teaching environment, motivation, social factors, individual personality and learning difficulty. It is important for teachers to understand and pay attention to learners' anxiety in foreign language teaching.

Current academic research on language anxiety of test takers in the context of writing examinations is relatively limited, especially when it comes to writing anxiety in large-scale examinations. However, considering the importance of writing in language learning and the far-reaching impact of large-scale exams on students' future learning and career development, an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon of anxiety in writing exams seems necessary.

3 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore in depth Chinese students' learning anxiety when taking the IELTS writing test, and the research questions are: (1) For the IELTS writing test, do Chinese students feel anxious due to the influence of their language level? (2) For the IELTS writing test, do Chinese students feel anxious due to time constraints? (3) For the IELTS writing test, do Chinese students feel anxious because they worry about the examiner's marking?

4 Research design

This study used the personal interview method as the primary research method to gain insight into Chinese students' learning anxiety when taking the IELTS writing test. The personal interview method can provide detailed individual experiences and perspectives to help the researcher gain in-depth understanding and insight.

4.1 Participants

The participants will consist of four Chinese students who have taken the IELTS writing test, all of whom took the IELTS test for the purpose of applying to universities outside China. The selection of the sample will be based on the following criteria: (1) Experience in taking the IELTS writing test. (2) Experience of learning anxiety during preparation and testing. (3) Coming from different schools and backgrounds to increase the diversity of the sample [4]. Sample selection will be done through convenience sampling methods to ensure a representative and diverse sample. Candidate information is shown as Table 1.

Table 1. Candidate information

| Anonymity | Gender | Age | IELTS writing score | Major |
|-----------|--------|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| A | Female | 24 | 6.0(2021),6.5(2022) | Education |
| B | Male | 25 | 5.0(2022),5.5(2022) | Electronic engineering |
| C | Female | 24 | 6.0(2022) | Economics |
| D | Male | 23 | 4.5(2021),5.0(2022),5.5(2022) | Computer |

4.2 Instrument

The research will be conducted through face-to-face personal interviews. The personal interviews will be conducted by the researcher in a semi-structured manner to ensure that all aspects of the research questions are covered. During the interview, the researcher will ask open-ended questions as guided by the research questions, encouraging participants to describe in detail their experiences of learning anxiety, opinions and suggestions when preparing for and taking the IELTS writing test. The interview questions will consist of four main sections; the first section is about anxiety arising from English language proficiency, the second section is about anxiety due to time constraints, the third section addresses test scoring anxiety, and the fourth section is about solutions. Each interview is expected to last about 15-20 minutes.

4.3 Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews will be recorded and transcribed in a verbatim manner and analyzed for qualitative data analysis. The researcher will analyse the data using a 'content analysis approach'[4], coding and summarizing the interview data to identify emerging themes, patterns and key ideas. By comparing and integrating commonalities and differences between participants, a synthesized understanding of the manifestations of learning anxiety, the factors that produce it, and the ways in which it can be mitigated was derived.

4.4 Research Ethics

Prior to conducting personal interviews, the researcher will provide participants with details of the purpose and process of the study and obtain their informed consent. Participants' privacy and confidentiality will be strictly protected and all data will be anonymized and used only for research purposes. The study will comply with ethical principles and the regulations of the research organization.

5 Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Language proficiency and test anxiety

During the interviews, all four participants indicated that they would feel very nervous about the test, and thus their performance, in response to the question of whether their language level would lead to nervousness about the test and thus affect their performance. By coding their responses into pre-test and emotions, a total of 19 interview records categorized as pre-test and 24 records categorized as emotions were counted. According to the statistics (as shown in Table 2), the participants agreed that the language level creates anxiety for them, which leads to the performance being affected.

Table 2. Focus coding of the first part of the interview

| Code | Interview record (selected) |
|----------|--|
| Pre-exam | I would constantly consult dictionaries and grammar books, trying to find more suitable words and expressions. |
| | I spend a lot of time doing mock writing exercises. |
| | I often spend too much time on one sentence or paragraph. |
| | I will practice writing constantly. |
| | When I practice, I often revise the sentence repeatedly, trying to find the most appropriate expression. |
| Emotion | Anxiety usually starts a few days before the test and gradually increases as the test day approaches... |
| | I get nervous. |
| | I worry about whether I can write fluently and logically |
| | I find it difficult to concentrate and easily distracted |
| | The mind is filled with worries about grammar and vocabulary... |
| | Makes me feel a little cramped and helpless while writing. |

The results of the study showed that four students reported a close relationship between language proficiency and test anxiety when taking the IELTS writing test, which had a significant impact on learning anxiety.

First, students' English language proficiency was a significant source of anxiety during preparation for and taking the test. Non-native English-speaking students were often anxious about deficiencies in vocabulary, grammatical mastery, and expressive skills, and worried that they would have difficulty accurately communicating their thoughts. Secondly, language proficiency also influences students' concerns about examiner marking. Students were concerned about their ability to meet the marking criteria and express ideas in an appropriate manner, which in turn affected their performance in the examination. On the other hand, language proficiency was also associated with time constraints, which increased learning anxiety. Students often feel that they do not have enough time in the exam, especially when thinking and organizing their thoughts. This may be related to the speed of their language expression.

Taken together, language proficiency played an important mediating role in Chinese students' participation in the IELTS writing test, influencing their level of learning anxiety and test performance.

5.2 Time pressure and test anxiety

In response to the question of whether time constraints cause anxiety, all four students agreed that they do. As shown in Table 3, the coding was divided into behaviors (22 records in total) and thoughts (20 records in total).

Table 3. Focus coding for the second part of the interview

| Code | Interview record (selected) |
|---------------|--|
| Behav- ior | Not yet conceived, eager to start writing... |
| | I have defects in language expression and logical structure. |
| | I can get caught up in over-thinking and spend too much time on one paragraph, which can interfere with the completion of subsequent paragraphs. |
| | The rush to complete each paragraph resulted in a lack of fluency and coherence. |
| Feel- ing | Worrying about time causes me to be a little edgy in the early stages of writing... |
| | Every now and then I check the countdown to the test... |
| | It makes me a little nervous and upset. |

The results of the study indicated the same strong relationship between time constraints and test anxiety in the IELTS writing test. Four students who participated in the survey expressed experiences of anxiety arising from time constraints. Time constraints triggered a spike in anxiety in the first few minutes after the start of the test, which was usually accompanied by feelings of nervousness and uneasiness. The four students generally felt that it was a challenge to complete the writing task within the limited time available, which led to feelings of anxiety. They often felt time pressure during the writing process, leading to a rush to get their point across in a short period of time. However, over time, some students adjusted to the time constraints and their anxiety reduced, leading to more focused and fluent writing.

5.3 Examiner marking and test anxiety

The four participants were consistent in their comments about examiner marking and test anxiety in stating that the source of anxiety did not come from worrying about how the examiner would mark themselves. As shown in Table 4, coding was divided into standardization (15 items in total) and attention (18 items in total).

Table 4. Focus coding in the second part of the interview

| Code | Interview record (selected) |
|----------------------|---|
| Standardiza- tion | I believe that the examiners will mark according to the grading criteria. |
| | Trust that your efforts and performance will be evaluated objectively. |
| | The marking criteria are fair and transparent and are the same for every candidate. |
| Attention | I will concentrate on fully demonstrating my writing ability. |
| | My goal is to get my point across clearly. |
| | I will focus on the quality of the content and logical coherence. |
| | I will focus on the content of my writing and strive to express my ideas and arguments clearly. |

Through the study, there was a less strong relationship between examiner marking and test anxiety in the IELTS writing test. Participants in the survey generally reported that they did not pay much attention to the examiner's marking process, but were more

concerned with expressing their opinions and thoughts. Test anxiety was mainly focused on aspects such as preparation of writing content and time management, and was less related to the expectation of examiner marking. Examiners were more concerned with how to fully demonstrate their writing ability within the limited time available and how to organize their ideas and arguments in a structured manner. Thus, although examiner marking is part of the examination, it does not seem to play a significant role in influencing the anxiety experience of the survey participants.

6 Conclusion

This study explored Chinese students' learning anxiety when taking the IELTS writing test, discussing the links between language proficiency, time pressure and examiner marking and test anxiety respectively. The results showed that the first two were both sources of anxiety for test takers during the test, while examiner scoring had little or no association with it.

Finally, according to the study, it was concluded that teachers' help and guidance as well as more practice were effective in helping them to reduce writing test anxiety and improve their self-confidence. This is consistent with previous research findings that teacher support and the use of effective teaching strategies can significantly reduce students' anxiety and improve their performance [5]. The study also provided practical suggestions and support strategies based on participants' responses, such as strengthening counseling services, organizing mock exams and writing instruction sessions, and encouraging students to participate in verbal communication activities, in the hope that these strategies would reduce anxiety, improve students' performance and coping skills, and promote their academic achievement and psychological well-being.

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