ENHANCED APPROACHES FOR ALLEVIATING WRITING ANXIETY IN ESL LEARNERS

Nurul Hijah Jasman (a)*, Ameiruel Azwan Ab Aziz (b), Nursuhaila Ibrahim (c), Nur Alyani Khairol Anuar (d) Muhamman Irfan Mokhtar (e)

(a) Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor, Pasir Gudang Campus, Johor, Malaysia.
(b) Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor, Alor Gajah Campus, Melaka, Malaysia.
(c) Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor, Pasir Gudang Campus, Johor, Malaysia.
(d) Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor, Pasir Gudang Campus, Johor, Malaysia.
(e) Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor, Pasir Gudang Campus, Johor, Malaysia.

Abstract: There are numerous alternatives for students to deal with writing anxiety, considering that writing is usually regarded as the most difficult ability to learn in an ESL (English as a Second Language) learning setting. This study discovered that the aforementioned apprehension may be effectively reduced through the use of collaborative learning, peer participation, and direct interaction with English instructors. The study included 172 diploma students as subjects, with the goal of determining the most preferred ways to ease their anxiety during ESL writing classes. The study used a descriptive survey methodology, with data collected using a self-administered questionnaire (CSWAS) precisely designed by the researcher. Descriptive statistical analysis, including mean and standard deviation computations, were used to examine the data collected. The findings unambiguously demonstrated that collaborative work with their peers during ESL writing sessions benefits students the most, as evidenced by an outstanding mean score of 4.35 and a standard deviation of .645.

Keywords: ESL, anxiety reduction, writing anxiety, CSWAS

I.   Introduction

Proficiency in academic writing is essential to excel in higher education across several fields of study. Writing academic work is already challenging for individuals who speak the language fluently, and it may be significantly more challenging for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Considering this viewpoint, it is highly probable that learners will face a diverse range of difficulties in writing. Furthermore, learners frequently encounter anxiety when engaging in academic writing due to several factors. The apprehension of making errors or failing to achieve elevated criteria can impede the writing process. It is imperative to employ a range of approaches to mitigate writing anxiety among ESL learners. In addition, implementing various strategies can encourage learners to surmount writing apprehension and enhance their writing proficiency. Thus, this study will discover the important strategies to reduce writing anxiety among diploma engineering students in UiTM.

II.   Problem Statement

In the field of ESL education, learners often struggle with writing anxiety, which impairs their ability to effectively express themselves in written form. Cheng (2004) has identified writing anxiety as a significant obstacle for ESL learners in developing proficient writing skills. This anxiety is characterised by cognitive, somatic, and behavioural dimensions. The complexities of language acquisition, along with cultural differences, contribute to increased levels of anxiety when performing writing tasks. Writing anxiety can hinder the natural development of language and impede ESL learners, particularly those with lower proficiency, from fully expressing their thoughts and ideas in writing (Madeng & Palanakulwong, 2019). Despite the recognition of this problem, there is a significant lack of research on comprehensive and effective strategies for reducing writing anxiety in ESL learners (Qashoa, 2014). In order to alleviate students' writing anxiety in English classes, educators can utilize various strategies, including group work, fostering a sense of community, and creating a non-intimidating learning environment (Kassem, 2017). In light of this identified deficiency, the present study endeavours to examine and suggest improved approaches that are especially designed to mitigate writing anxiety among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The study aims to provide useful insights and practical recommendations for educators and practitioners in ESL settings by examining the distinct problems encountered by this group.

III.   Research Question

This study addresses this research question. What are the strategies employed by the diploma engineering students in UiTM to alleviate writing anxiety in L2 writing classes?

IV.   Purpose of the Study

This study's central aim is to reveal the significant strategies to reduce writing anxiety among the diploma engineering students in UiTM.

V.   Research Methods

5.1 Participant

The sample of this study comprised 172 diploma students from the Faculty of Engineering, UiTM. The reason for selecting this number of participants was the limited number of diploma engineering students studying at UiTM in the third semester of 2022/2023. In this case, it was critical to guarantee that the sample size was representative of the population as well as statistically significant. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) proposed that when the population spans from 150 to 170 students, a study should preferably involve 100 participants. A stratified random sampling technique was used to achieve equitable and impartial selection for this study.

5.2 Instrument

A quantitative research approach was diligently employed for this study. The primary research instrument utilized was the meticulously crafted Causes and Strategies to Alleviate Writing Anxiety Survey (CSWAS), thoughtfully designed by the researcher. This survey was specifically tailored to unveil the underlying triggers that give rise to writing anxiety among L2 learners, as well as to illuminate the strategies these learners employ in order to ameliorate their anxiousness. Nevertheless, for this study only items on strategies to reduce writing anxiety will be administered to the respondents. Comprising a total of 24 items, the CSWAS was meticulously structured, with half of the items, precisely 12, focused on discerning the root causes of writing anxiety, while the remaining 12 items were dedicated to the strategies employed to alleviate this anxiety. Respondents were asked to provide their responses by rating each item on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Notably, the CSWAS was thoughtfully administered to all respondents, following heir three consecutive semesters of English coursework at UiTM, creating an opportune moment for a reflective and comprehensive assessment of their experiences and perspectives.

5.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed with descriptive Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program. The mean scores and standard deviations (SD) for each item in the questionnaire were computed for this study. The goal was to determine which solutions respondents preferred for dealing with writing anxiety.

VI.   Findings

Addressing writing anxiety among L2 learners requires tailored strategies, consistent practice, and a supportive learning environment to gradually reduce anxiety and enhance writing skills.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics concerning the strategies employed to alleviate writing anxiety among the 172 participants included in this study.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the Strategies to Alleviate Writing Anxiety

Item	Description	Mean	SD
13	I feel better when there is less competition in the classroom.	3.52	.964
14	I choose to practise some relaxation techniques when I feel anxious.	3.84	1.067
15	I find writing essays without the pressure of grading to be a more enjoyable experience.	3.88	1.039
16	I appreciate when the lecturers show genuine concern about my anxiety.	3.91	1.262
17	I feel better when I have individual tutoring from the lecturer.	3.49	1.100
18	I am pleased when the test is consistent with what was taught in writing classes.	3.45	1.022
19	I feel relieved if I can discuss successful language learning with my lecturer regularly.	3.94	.962
20	I appreciate it when lecturers assign pair work tasks.	4.35	.645
21	I feel composed and confident when I am well-prepared for writing tests.	3.71	1.058
22	I feel better when participating in peer teaching during lessons.	4.19	.712
23	I perceive collaborative essay writing with my friends to be more pleasant.	4.02	.787
24	I feel more comfortable when I have the freedom to write flawed essays.	3.56	1.004

Table 1 displays the average mean encompassing all twelve components within the CSWAS, which centres on the strategies utilised by participants to alleviate their writing anxiety. The mean ranges from an average of 3.45 to 4.35. Mitigating writing anxiety involves adopting various approaches to alleviate the stress and apprehension associated with writing tasks. The findings illustrating the strategies employed by participants to ease their anxiety while acquiring L2 writing skills are presented in Figure 1 below, ordered from the least favoured to the most favoured strategies.
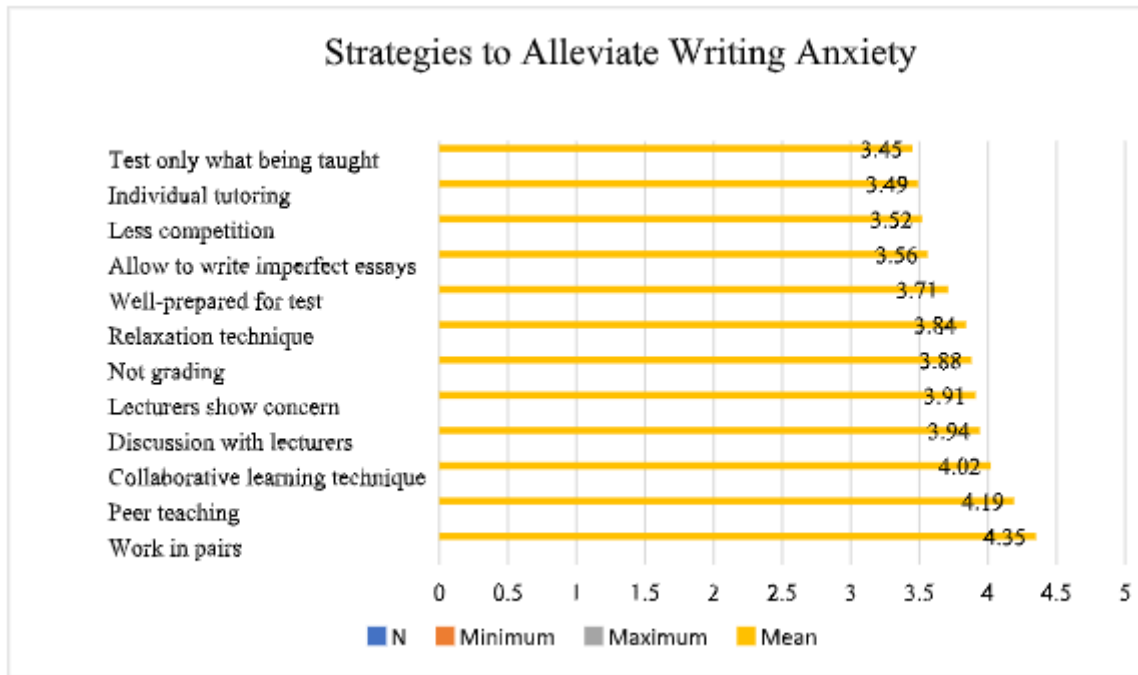

Figure 1: Descriptive statistics of the Strategies to Alleviate Writing Anxiety

As depicted in the aforementioned Figure 1, the top three strategies most preferred by participants to mitigate their unease in L2 writing classes pertain to engaging in L2 tasks within a group context rather than individually, with mean scores of 4.35, 4.19, and 4.02 respectively. This shows that the participants often lean towards choosing group collaboration over individual work when aiming to alleviate feelings of anxiety. This inclination towards group efforts could be attributed to the sense of shared responsibility, the opportunity for peer support, and the collective problem-solving dynamics that group work offers. Engaging in collaborative activities allows students to distribute the workload, share ideas, and gain diverse perspectives, which collectively contribute to reducing the sense of unease that can be associated with individual tasks (Tarkan-Blanco,2021). Additionally, the social interaction and mutual encouragement inherent in group settings can create a more relaxed and supportive learning environment, further aiding in the reduction of anxiety levels among students.

The subsequent pair of favoured methods embraced by participants for addressing their anxiousness in L2 writing classes involved seeking assistance from the lecturers, with mean scores of 3.94 and 3.91 respectively. This demonstrates the necessity for the participants to validate their efforts and be confident that their concerns are valid. Moreover, seeking help from the lecturers provides students with numerous benefits that extend beyond the academic realm. The supportive, knowledgeable, and personalized assistance they receive can significantly reduce anxiety and enhance their overall learning experience (Ratnasari,2020). This substantiates the high ranking of items related to seeking support from the lecturers in this study. The participants also preferred if their essays were not to be graded. Participants may feel less anxious about meeting certain standards or achieving specific grades, allowing them to focus more on the content and the writing process itself. In addition, without the looming concern of evaluation, participants might feel more inclined to express their thoughts and ideas freely. This creative freedom can lead to more authentic and exploratory writing, as they are less restrained by the fear of making mistakes.

Applying relaxation techniques such as taking deep breathing and listening to calming music also managed to assist the participants to deal with their anxiousness (M=3.84). With a score of (M=3.71), the participants also reported to feel less anxious when they adequately prepared for tests. Being well-prepared for tests translates into a sense of control, confidence, and mastery. These factors combine to create a positive emotional state, promoting improved

well-being and reducing the negative impact of test-related anxiety. The participants also found it valuable when the mistakes they made in their essays were not the primary focus of the lecturers (M=3.56). By concentrating on overall improvement rather than just errors, lecturers promote a comprehensive development of writing skills. Thus, participants are more likely to engage in self-improvement rather than solely trying to avoid mistakes.

Nevertheless, among the participants, individual tutoring and solely testing them on familiar topics emerged as the two least preferred strategies for coping, as indicated by mean scores of 3.49 and 3.45 respectively. It is important that the strategies to deal with writing anxiety preferred by the learners to be acknowledged by the lecturers. This could help learners to achieve effective language acquisition, enhance communication skills, build confidence, and succeed in both academic and real-world contexts hence promoting a positive learning experience and prepares learners for meaningful interactions in a globalised society.

VII.   Conclusion

This research explored the complex terrain of writing anxiety among diploma engineering students at UiTM, providing insights into the many approaches used to address this widespread problem. It examined the various strategies used to address this common problem. The findings provided a detailed understanding of students' preferences and tendencies in dealing with writing anxiety in English classes. Group collaboration was found to be the preferred strategy, emphasising the importance of social interaction, shared responsibility, and peer support in reducing anxiety related to individual writing tasks. This finding is similar to previous findings by Jiang (2015); Toyama and Mori (2017); Rashid et al. (2019).

In addition, seeking guidance from instructors played a significant role in reducing writing anxiety, highlighting the importance of personalised mentorship and support in creating a conducive learning environment. The participants also expressed a preference for a grade-free environment, emphasising the significance of creative autonomy and reduced stress in promoting authentic and exploratory writing.

The efficacy of relaxation techniques and comprehensive test preparation in reducing anxiety has been acknowledged, emphasising the significance of emotional well-being and a sense of control during the writing process. Furthermore, the study emphasized the importance of prioritising comprehensive improvement rather than solely focusing on errors. It highlighted the significance of fostering a positive and productive mindset towards the development of writing abilities.

Teachers and schools need to be aware of these effective methods and use them in language classrooms, making sure that they are tailored to the specific problems that English as a Second Language (ESL) students face. As a result, the communication skills, language acquisition, and overall well-being of students are improved. This research offers valuable perspectives for those in the fields of education, academia, and policy-making who have a vested interest in fostering the comprehensive growth of English as a Second Language (ESL) students and improving the language acquisition process.

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