

Exploring Writing Anxiety and Its Impact on TOEFL Performance Among Chinese Senior High School Students: Causes, Correlates, and Pedagogical Implications: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between writing anxiety and performance among high school students in China who take the TOEFL writing test, focusing on the factors that lead to anxiety and the influence of demographic variables. The contrast lies in the degree of impact, whereby moderate writing anxiety has a negative correlation to TOEFL scores, whereas higher levels of anxiety was found to hamper the test. Sources of Major Anxiety Inhibitors comprise problematic writing topics, low self-confidence in their language use, time constraints, and previous bad experiences. On the other hand, the effects of evaluation on anxiety received conflicting responses and thus are a source of individual differences and cultural factors. Other demographic variables studied included age, gender, grade, years of English study, and exposure to an English-speaking environment but were studied to have limited impact on the degree of writing anxiety. Therefore, interventions based on anxiety sources rather than demographic factors are needed. Teaching implications include creating supportive learning environments; providing language-building resources and gradually introducing time-constrained tasks to build confidence. These findings contribute to the research on the impact of writing anxiety on TOEFL scores and provide practical avenues for reducing anxiety in preparation for high-stakes exams. Future research should focus on expanding the sample size to encompass diverse regions in China and investigate issues related to the relationship between self-efficacy and writing anxiety and performance, which would lead to a more beneficial understanding of how students could be assisted to enhance TOEFL performance.

Keywords: *Writing Anxiety, TOEFL Scores, Chinese High School Students, Pedagogical Implications.*

Introduction

Writing anxiety related to the English language, is one of the most common problems of learners, which greatly hinders academic performance and standardized testing. Defined as the anxiety related to the writing tasks, writing anxiety varies in intensity and hinders the ability of the students effective writing. This adversely affects their self-confidence and academic results. This is a problem exclusive among Chinese EFL students, as academic writing difficulties impacts their ability to generate systematic, coherent writing in English; a skill that is important in academic and career paths. China is one of the leading countries that sends students abroad for education, and experiences a large number of students applying to universities in English speaking countries such as the United States. Thus, Chinese students need to overcome the issue of writing anxiety which is an essential prerequisite to qualify for admission in Western countries. Before India overtook China in 2023, it had been the largest supplier of international students in the USA for approximately 15 years (Fischer & Bauman, 2023). This fact suggests that the trend for pursuing education in foreign universities justifies for the heightened importance of the TOEFL test in China, making it relevant to address the challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners taking preparation for high stakes examinations. Since scoring the competitive threshold is an essential to meet the stringent cut off marks assigned by global universities, hence preparation of the writing section of the TOEFL is particularly relevant in this context. Given the increasing demand of students to seek higher education abroad, it is vital to understand and manage the writing anxiety in Chinese students.

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Research Problem

Although TOEFL results are important in the admissions process of international universities, few studies have focused on the direct link between writing anxiety and TOEFL writing for Chinese EFL learners. Prior literature has largely examined general writing concerns in the general EFL context or a range of factors that could impact TOEFL performance, including language proficiency and test-taking experience. However, little is known about how writing apprehension affects TOEFL writing scores, meaning that it is difficult to understand how anxiety might affect the student's performance on the test in a way that limits their full writing abilities. While some of the previous investigations highlight factors such as language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and time pressure as potential sources of writing distress, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that combine these factors to explain their contribution on TOEFL performance.

Research Questions

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- To what extent is writing apprehension related to the TOEFL writing performance of Chinese senior high school students?
- What are the major sources of writing anxiety for Chinese high school students preparing to undertake TOEFL?
- What impact does demographic variables such as gender, academic year, age, tenure of English study, and experience in an English-only environment have on writing anxiety?

Significance of the Study

There are several reasons so as to why the correlation between writing anxiety and TOEFL writing performance should be established. First, TOEFL scores decide whether the student will be able to get an education abroad or not, which is why it is essential also to know how writing anxiety could become a barrier to further opportunities for the students. From our study, implications for educators and language instructors may be derived from the findings to design appropriate intervention measures to assist learners with writing anxiety. Strategies for handling Chinese EFL students can assist reduce anxiety and permit students to operate towards the optimum level. Moreover, in comparison with the previous studies focusing on writing apprehension, this study will identify demographic and psychological predictors of writing anxiety to have a deeper understanding of the nature of writing anxiety in different subgroups of students. This could facilitate better conceptual understanding on developing effective strategies for TOEFL preparation as well as explore the impact of writing anxiety on TOEFL performance.

Aim

The purpose of the present mixed methods study is thus to bring together current research on writing apprehension and, in so doing, focus on the TOEFL writing performance of Chinese EFL learners in particular. This investigation will establish the proportion and degrees of writing stress, examine antecedent conditions, and examine culpable elements and how writing anxiety affects performance on the TOEFL writing part. This study aims at providing an empirical analysis of the existing writings on mitigating factors to offer practical suggestions on how best to reduce writing apprehension which might enhance the TOEFL scores and enable students to achieve their dreams.

Literature Review

Writing anxiety is a significant challenge evident in second language learners (L2). It is referred to as one of the most common forms of anxiety that is developed during language acquisition. For instance: Math writing anxiety is a unique variant in this domain that is acquired while explaining mathematical concepts

in second language. This is unlike receptive skills such as listening and reading, writing anxiety majorly involves active production of language. This not only requires precision in grammar and vocabulary but also requires the contextual use of the language. This fact has been supported by Uztosun and Kök (2024) and Liu and Wu (2023), who state that organization, expression and connectedness in ideas is essential in writing skills and demand higher cognitive skills than receptive skills. Thus, interpretation of language can be daunting for learners, as the level of complexity is amplified for learners, leading to higher levels of writing anxiety.

Variations in Writing Anxiety Levels

The academic performance and test success is challenged by the stress induced due to writing anxiety, which can act as a significant barrier for non-native speakers. Writing anxiety was originally introduced by Daly and Miller in the year 1975, and is defined as the apprehension in learners while writing assignments. The literature highlights that the writing anxiety not only varies in between L1 and L2 learners but also in terms of cross-cultural contexts. For instance: Sabri et al. (2019) reports that higher levels of anxiety are experienced in Iraq-English major students while McAllister et al. (2017) detects lower levels of writing anxiety in African American learners. This shows that cultural diversity is related to the educational factors, which results in differentiated writing anxiety among learners. In this context, Alisoy (2024) points out that cultural immersion is essential to understand English as a language, beyond the literal meaning of words. This affects fluency in communication, learning attitudes, vocabulary and grammar in ESL learners. Overall, it is crucial to find strategies that are applicable across diverse cultures so as to improve the performance of students from different regions of the world to perform optimally in competitive examinations such as TOEFL.

Impacts of Writing Anxiety on Achievement

Varied intensity levels of writing anxiety can have both positive and negative impact on learners. Writing anxiety at moderate levels can act as an encouraging element and improve the performance in learners. This suggests that moderate anxiety is a motivating factor that enhances focus and engagement. This fact is supported by (2005) who suggests that writing anxiety can act as a positive driving force at moderate levels, which pushes learners to get deeply involved with the assigned tasks. In contrast high levels of writing anxiety can have a negative impact on the cognitive process of the learners, thus hindering their optimal performance. In this context, Liu and Niu (2015) point out that high writing anxiety in Chinese students drastically reduced their TOEFL scores. At the same time Asmari (2013) mentions of a different cultural context such as writing strategies in Saudi students being significantly impeded due to high writing anxiety. These evidences highlight the ways by excessive levels of anxiety can be harmful for cognitive expertise and disrupt successful writing. However, the relationship between performance and writing anxiety is multidimensional, and not so straightforward. Cultural backgrounds, task difficulty levels and self-efficacy are integral factors that shape the impact of anxiety on writing. For instance: High levels of anxiety have a positive effect on students with backgrounds in migration. This suggests that demographic factors do play an important role in relationship between anxiety and performance. Therefore, various external and individual factors are involved in the interplay between writing anxiety and performance.

Causes of Writing Anxiety

Knowledge of the causes of writing anxiety is a requirement for reducing its influence. Teacher behaviour, such as negative feedback, increases anxiety; on the other hand, positive social relations with instructors decrease it (Kelly et al., 2022; Violanti et al., 2023). Besides, self-doubt, fear of judgment, and lack of practice are common causes of anxiety for L2 writers (Salikin, 2019). In the Chinese EFL context, primary causes of anxiety include linguistic unfamiliarity, task complexity, and negative attitudes toward writing (Liu & Ni, 2015; Song et al., 2023). Modern factors such as mobile dependency also play a significant role in increasing students' apprehension in the direction of writing in China, thereby calling for culturally relevant research.

Demographic Influences on Writing Anxiety

Age and gender are two demographics that might influence writing anxiety, though with mixed findings. Interestingly, some studies report that females show more anxiety in writing tasks, while others indicate a nearly insignificant gender difference (Salikin, 2019; Liu & Ni, 2015). Anxiety might also depend upon the age of students, with younger writers usually having a higher anxiety level in writing tasks, compared to older students with better coping skills (Teimouri et al., 2019). The variables that influence Chinese EFL learners' writing anxiety encompass their educational levels, years spent in cultures where the language is used, and years of studying the English language. These are relatively little-researched areas, hence the gap that this study aims to fill.

Interventions That Reduce Anxiety

A few techniques to reduce writing anxiety have shown mixed results: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has decreased anxiety by giving students preview experience in vocabulary and context before tasks of writing, but may not be sufficiently active in solving structural issues in writing itself (Belgacem & Deymi, 2023). Systematic exercises, like sentence formation tasks (Liu, 2020) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) frameworks (Zhang, 2019), help in improving the coherence and coherency of writing. Moreover, the Writing Mentorship Program (WMP) though costly has been successful in one-to-one coaching. However extensive research is needed to determine if these interventive practices are effective among Chinese EFL students

TOEFL Writing Performance

The TOEFL iBT measures the student's overall proficiency in reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills with a mean overall score of 88 and a writing score of 21.7, which is below the recommended 22 benchmarks for universities such as Johns Hopkins, for the year 2020-2021. While the writing scores have risen a little over the years, challenges in this area are more systemic and remain significant with time. The lower scores can be attributed to the slower pace of writing as compared to reading or listening. This suggests unique challenges to TOEFL test-takers that need to be explored further. For instance: Shirzad (2017) posits that insufficient computer competency which is necessary for the computer-based test can distract students away from the writing process, while they struggle with the technical aspects of the examination format. In addition, Bingol (2022), states that lack of lexical and grammatical structures in application can result in non-aligned concepts that might hinder achievement of higher TOEFL scores. Contrastingly, Barkaoui (2014) states that computer familiarity can actually supplement linguistic and writing competencies, by allowing students to navigate effectively in digital environments for optimum performance. However cultural and contextual issues may potentially impede TOEFL writing when questions are unknown or culturally insurmountable as organizational challenges (Cho et al., 2013). Some students may find it difficult to paraphrase, which gives them inappropriate responses and results in poor scores for not being able to generate meaningful content (S & Nurdini, 2022). In this context other instructional methods might be effective. For example, metalinguistic feedback, have been associated with a potential for enhanced performance by enforcing linguistic self-regulation among students (Soran & Saban, 2022). Therefore, these findings suggest that the performance of TOEFL writing indeed involves cognitive, technical, and cultural factors to be entangled with each other and that tailored interventions, targeting these aspects could lead to the better performance of EFL learners from different backgrounds.

Methodology

Purpose and Participants of the Study

The current study took place in a private tutorial school in Xi'an, Shaanxi, China. The school is designed for students from the international sections of local senior high schools and prepares students for such examinations as TOEFL, SAT. The participants of the study were 53 senior high school students learning English at this school rated between B1 and B2 intermediate levels. Table 3.1 contains details of participants' demographic data. The maturity level of the 53 students studied was as follows: 23 were 17

years old (43.4%), 12 were 16 years old (22.6%), 12 were 18 years old (22.6%), 5 were 19 years old (9.4%), and 1 student was 20 years old (1.9%). The participants were fairly evenly split between male and female with 26 males (49.1%) and 27 females (50.9%). There was also a variation in the grade levels, with 11 children in Grade 1 or 20.8%, 18 children in Grade 2 or 34%, and 24 children in Grade 3 or 45.3%. A majority of the participants 45 out of the 53 (84.9%) had no prior exposure to learning in an English-speaking country while only 8 students (15%) had this exposure. English study time was also not uniform, 20 (37.7%) students had studied English for 6-10 years and 11-17 years. Even fewer students had studied for 0-5 years, 11 students, 20.8% or over 17 years, 2 students, 3.8%.

Research Design

To achieve the study goals and respond to the inquiries associated with the research questions about the connection between writing apprehension and TOEFL scores of Chinese EFL students, the study employed a mixed-methods research design. Both quantitative method of survey using structured questionnaires and qualitative methods by conducting interviews were used in the design. The survey allowed an awareness of the general level of writing apprehension and the interviews gave detailed information on factors influencing anxiety and how it impacts the test. This made it easier to triangulate data and thereby increase the reliability and validity of the study as recommended by Greene et al. (1989) as well as Sandelowski (2003).

Instruments

Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)

Cheng (2004) created the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), which was administered to the participants as the main means of measuring writing apprehension. SLWAI is particularly suited for second-language learners and includes three subscales: somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety and avoidance behaviour. The validity of SLWAI was explained earlier in the study and the test-retest reliability of the measure was tested at 0.85 thus making it a reliable measure to use in assessing learners' writing apprehension. Each subscale was described in statements that measure separate parts of anxiety including more tangible symptoms (somatic anxiety), concern with social judgment and comparison (cognitive anxiety), and an inclination towards avoiding writing (avoidance behaviour).

The SLWAI contained five options, on a Likert scale from 1 'strongly agree' to 5 'strongly disagree', for a total score between 27 (minimal anxiety) and 135 (maximum anxiety). Moreover, the demographic questionnaire added with the SLWAI was supplemented by TOEFL self-reported performance on the most recent writing test and lifetime experience with learning English and exposure to English environments. The last question in the questionnaire was optional to enable participants to express other thoughts they had about their writing apprehension.

Interview Questions

To get more information on the topic the study employed use of semi-structured interviews. This format enabled the use of probes to guide the conversation to investigate participants' responses fully and purposively while still maintaining some structure in terms of the questions that seemed relevant at the time (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The eight interview questions were designed to discuss such issues as the effect of time pressure, the preparation for TOEFL, and the feeling when their writing is criticized. In this study, the interviews were conducted in Chinese because the participants might have felt that they could express themselves most accurately in that language.

Research Procedures

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling in this study. The researcher first emailed former students who qualified for the study (high school students who have already appeared for the TOEFL) and asked them to refer their friends. The questionnaire was completed through a site called

“Wenjuanxing,” which is well-known to students, so it made it easier to gather data. Out of 53 recruited participants, all participants filled and responded to the questionnaire which provided a good enough sample size for quantitative evaluation. After the questionnaire, six students agreed to individual interviews. The interviews, which took around 30 minutes each, were face-to-face for students who lived close to the school, and online for those who lived farther. All interviews conducted with participants were recorded with the participant’s permission to reduce the likelihood of misrepresentation during the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

This research conducted complied with ethical practices. Each participant signed a written consent form and had the rights explained to them such as their right to voluntarism, their right to withdraw at any time, and the right to anonymity. People who took part in the study were given a guarantee that their identity would be concealed and that no information that can identify them, their school or any other closely related information would be published. Information was backed up on a secure password-protected device and participants were permitted to listen to the tape with them if they wished. All personal data will be erased after three years of the first dissemination of the research results.

Data Analysis

Level of Writing Apprehension and TOEFL Writing Score

Data analysis of the quantitative results was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 to determine the level of writing apprehension. The internal reliability of the responses of the SLWAI was analysed through a Cronbach’s Alpha test on the 27 items resulting in a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of 0.995 which validates the internal reliability of the SLWAI for this sample population as an instrument for measuring writing anxiety. Each participant’s responses were summed to yield a total apprehension score, which was then categorized as low, moderate, or high based on score ranges calculated through SPSS:

- Low apprehension: 27-62
- Moderate apprehension: 63-99
- High apprehension: 100-135

Results of TOEFL scores are presented descriptively to compare the scores to determine their distribution and the relationship between TOEFL writing scores and writing apprehension levels was established by the Pearson bivariate correlation test in order to determine significance. In examining the questionnaire data, emphasis was on each of the three dimensions of the SLWAI: somatic, cognitive, and avoidance. To determine the power functioning of the subscale, mean and standard deviation were calculated using the SPSS software to compare two samples to test for the significant differences among the subscales which can assist in the identification of the significant forms of anxiety.

Results

Overview of the Findings

It presents findings from the analysis of questionnaire and interview data. Section 4.2 looks at the levels of writing anxiety of senior high school students in China and how that has related to their performance in a TOEFL writing test. Section 4.3 looks at the causes of writing apprehension using the subscales for somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behaviours, which are provided in the questionnaire, and supported by insights from interviews. Section 4.4: Correlations with demographics: age, gender, grade level, years of study of English, and experience studying in an English-speaking country, as correlated with writing anxiety.

Relationship between Writing Anxiety and TOEFL Writing Scores

This section demonstrates the reliability of the SLWAI. Subsequently, all the participants' levels of writing anxiety and their TOEFL scores are provided along with an analysis concerning the relationship between writing anxiety and TOEFL performance.

Reliability Test

Table 1 As indicated, all responses are valid and Cronbach's Alpha computes at 0.809, meaning it has high internal consistency for the SLWAI, an appropriate measure of writing apprehension (Cheng, 2004).

Table 1. Reliability Test of SLWAI

		N	%
Cases	Valid	53	100.0
	Excluded	0	.0
	Total	53	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.809	.805	27

Writing Apprehension Level

From Table 2, 44 out of 53 participants fall between the score range of 63 to 99, which shows moderate writing apprehension; 8 participants scored above 100, where high anxiety is apparent, while only 1 participant scored below 62, hence low writing apprehension. This therefore means that most of the participants experience moderate writing apprehension.

Table 2. Levels of Writing Apprehension

Level	Number of Participants	Percentage
High Level of Writing Apprehension	8	15%
Moderate Level of Writing Apprehension	44	83%
Low Level of Writing Apprehension	1	2%

Writing TOEFL Scores

Table 3 Presentation of the Participating Students' Scores in the TOEFL Writing Section Score Min Max Full score Range Average SD 13 to 30 23.26 3.606 It indicates that all the participants scored within the intermediate level (ETS, 2023b).

Table 3. Summary of TOEFL Writing Scores of Participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TOEFL Writing Score	53	13	30	23.26	3.606

Relationship between Writing Apprehension and TOEFL Writing Scores

Concerning RQ1, where the relation between writing apprehension and TOEFL writing section scores was investigated, Table 4 shows a Pearson Correlation of $-.355$ between the writing apprehension score and the TOEFL writing score, which shows a moderate negative relationship between the two variables. The two-tailed significance value is $.009$; hence the relationship is significant. The greater the writing anxiety, the more TOEFL writing scores will be going up as tends to. This is in line with the interview findings. Three of the six interviewees—namely, Student A, Student B, and Student C—revealed that writing apprehension negatively impacts their performance in writing. For example, as noted by Student C, "I believe that anxiety indeed negatively impacts my writing performance," thus supporting the quantitative findings.

Table 4. Correlation between Writing Apprehension and TOEFL Writing Scores

	Scores of Writing Apprehension	TOEFL Writing Score
Total Scores of Writing Apprehension	Pearson Correlation	$-.355^{**}$
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.009
	N	53
TOEFL Writing Score	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.009
	N	53

*Reasons behind Writing Apprehension**Somatization Anxiety, Cognitive Anxiety, and Avoidance Behaviour Subscales*

Tables 5-7 (attached in Appendix A) show the means on the somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behaviour subscales of the SLWAI. The somatic anxiety subscale dealt with the physical reaction to anxiety and scored a mean of 3.25. The cognitive anxiety subscale reflected the degree of concern during writing and scored a mean of 3.12. Finally, the avoidance behavior subscale reflected the tendency to avoid writing practice and scored a mean of 3.13. These results indicate a moderate level across all subscales, meaning students did not feel excessively high levels of physical anxiety, drastically excessive worry about writing, or avoidance of TOEFL writing practice.

Interviews

Three main factors that account for writing anxiety as culled from the interviews with six participants included: difficult prompts, lack of adequate confidence in language competencies, time constraints, and historical experiences gone wrong. Writing prompts rated as a top cause of anxiety were described as arduous to think of ideas, particularly for students who encountered unseen topics. In addition, five students emphasized that their anxiety was augmented by other apprehensions regarding their language proficiency such as vocabulary, grammar, or collocations. They feared that they might make a mistake that would decrease the quality of their writing. Four students indicated that time pressure causes stress, because tight times aggravate their anxiety and, thus, clarity in their thought and pleasure in writing are **negatively** affected. Also, two students state that negative experiences with others affect their confidence levels (Results attached in Appendix B).

Mixed results emerged from the evaluation. Students reported that some teacher comments and corrections discouraged them, while others found such feedback useful for improving their writing. This indicates that the relationship between receiving feedback and writing apprehension is nuanced and varies among individuals. Furthermore, no significant relationship was observed between anxiety levels and demographic characteristics such as age, gender, or prior exposure to English-speaking countries. This suggests that these factors have a limited impact on writing apprehension. However, the general findings from the interviews provided valuable insights into specific factors and perceptions influencing students' levels of apprehension while writing.

Discussion and Analysis

Overview

The results of the study are placed within an appropriate context of the factors which might have a bearing on writing apprehension and which in turn may be related to TOEFL writing scores. Sections are divided into: Section 5.2 focuses on how different levels of writing apprehension correlate to performance on the TOEFL test; Section 5.3 discusses what underlying causes may lead to writing apprehension; Section 5.4 analyses demographic differences which may affect writing anxiety; Section 5.5 summarizes pedagogical practices that could help reduce writing apprehension; and Section 5.6 provides a summary of the chapter.

Writing Apprehension and TOEFL Writing Scores

Levels of Writing Apprehension

The result revealed that 83% of the respondents had moderate type of writing apprehension, and 15% had higher apprehensive types. The results contradict previous studies by Sabti et al. (2019) and Liu and Wu (2023), who found that participants in their groups had higher apprehension levels. For example, the two authors found that 54% of first-year university students in Iraq had high writing anxiety because of the relatively high stakes of academic writing in tertiary institutions. This may seem less intimidating to high school students since it does not involve the complexities of collegiate essay writing, in comparison to TOEFL writing. Similarly, writing anxiety levels in Chinese students at the high school level were revealed to be very high in the study by Liu and Wu (2023). For Chinese high school students, the college entrance examination is something of a one-chance-only test, hence much more strenuous than TOEFL tests where one can take the test several times. Conversely, the current study supports the findings of Akhtar et al. (2020), which report moderate levels of apprehension among first-year Malaysian university students. This similarity indicates that normally anxiety tends to decrease for students undertaking fewer demanding tasks or those who appeared multiple times for the exam. However, the moderate levels of apprehension observed in the current study highlight the need for targeted interventions.

Correlation between Apprehension to Write and TOEFL Scores

Consistent with other literature, the moderate negative relationship between writing apprehension and TOEFL score implies that writing apprehension could negatively affect TOEFL performance (Asmari, 2013; Sabti et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2022). Consistent with Daly and Miller's theory, anxious writers do not exercise or practice, leading to poor development and proficiency (1975). Limpo (2018), in her study, did not find a direct relationship between anxiety and the performance achieved in writing; however, she confirmed that apprehension limits fluency in writing, which is crucially an important component of TOEFL because the pressure of time increases apprehension to perform well. High apprehension may thus bar the generation of ideas under pressure, and this accounts for their performances.

Designating Anxiety

Somatic, Cognitive, and Avoidance Anxiety

The findings show no significant difference between somatic, cognitive, and avoidance anxieties; that is, no single predominant anxiety source exists for writing apprehension. This goes contrary to Salikin (2019) and Quvanch and SiNa (2022), who found that cognitive anxiety represents the dominant cause of university students, a finding that could be the result of the fact that those participants were better mature than their high school fellows in this study. Students on campus are less likely to experience somatic symptoms, such as shivering, and more likely to manage their fear, while lower students tend to avoid writing more frequently.

Specific Causes of Writing Anxiety

Language Competence

The study lends credence to the previous studies by Abdel Latif, 2015; Akhtar et al., 2020; Liu & Ni, 2015 that inadequate linguistic proficiency escalates anxiety. Since the subjects are non-native speakers of English, they would fail to articulate their ideas in English, get frustrated and avoid discussing.

Time Pressure

Time pressure in TOEFL writing tasks intensifies anxiety, as pointed out by Akhtar et al. (2020). The grueling speed, for instance, such as the 100 words in 10 minutes task from (ETS, 2023a), may make students "blank out" (Cheng, 2004), and hence write off low quality or freeze up under pressure.

Negative Past Experiences

Negative writing experiences can promote fear, as observed by Akhtar et al. (2020). For instance, the student might not forget their past criticism of their English skills which makes them even more unwilling to write.

Challenging Writing Prompts

Question stimuli not culturally relevant prompt anxiety according to Pimsarn (2013). For instance: The Chinese students inclined towards urban projects might face reluctance and anxiety when TOEFL offers a topic related to rural policy, as the topic might feel irrelevant and out of comprehension. This non-relatedness creates anxiety, as the students cannot generate ideas promptly. Thus, apprehension in writing plays a complex role as per the evaluation based on mixed responses. While four others had positive opinions, three participants expressed negative views on evaluations. This is in contrast with previous studies which usually suggests that evaluation tends to provoke anxiety (Abdel Latif, 2015). Therefore, there is a need to consider cultural and educational backgrounds while investigating the role of assessment.

Demographic Factors of Writing Apprehension

Age

There is no relationship between age (16-20) and writing anxiety as it was mentioned by Qadir et al. (2021) and Quvanch and SiNa's (2022). In this case, the test difficulty tends to be the same for the test TOEFL and it explains why anxiety is usually of the same measure across all age groups, but Teimouri et al. (2019) showed that writing anxiety goes in line with growing demands on the academic level since junior high students have "lighter" tasks than their peers at senior high. Similarly, McAllister et al. (2017) noted a higher level of apprehension for young college students.

Gender

From the present research, there are no variations based on gender, and this is parallel to Quvanch and SiNa (2022) and Qadir et al. (2021), but it is contradictory in comparison to Salikin (2019) and Cakici (2016), who stated that females have a higher anxiety level, and McAllister et al. (2017), who reported a higher level of apprehension in males. These differences may be accounted for by different tools used to measure anxiety and the different ages of participants. Cakici's use of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) measured general anxiety over language and could have picked up on differences that were not writing apprehension per se.

Grade

The levels of writing anxiety did not differ across grades since the format of the TOEFL test was practically consistent across high school grade levels. The levels of language skills would vary between students, but this does not mean the demands of the TOEFL writing requirements would be significantly different for students at various grades.

Overseas Learning Experience

No trend was identified between prior studies in an English-speaking country and writing apprehension. Since foreign studies could help a student master the use of English, brief periods of such experience are likely to have little impact on reducing anxiety. Although the very best students in the ESL group still reported apprehension in writing for TOEFL, overseas study is unlikely to help much.

Years of English Study

This study could not find any correlation between the years of English study and apprehension/ It could be due to the limited class time spent in English, in comparison to other subjects in the curriculum. Students with extended exposure do not necessarily get much more practice and study duration proved an unreliable factor for the reduction in writing anxiety.

Pedagogical Implications

Considering that moderate apprehension can adverse impact on TOEFL writing scores, strategies to reduce writing anxiety can improve student's performance.

Writing Apprehension Curriculum Design

Given the fact that writing apprehension is inversely correlated with TOEFL performance, teachers must consider not only their students' linguistic abilities but also their anxiety. For example, a safe class environment can encourage active participation without fear of condemnation to develop a measure of resistance to anxiety.

Boosting Confidence and Linguistic Ability

To alleviate language deficiency anxiety, teachers can introduce pre-writing activities in the form of reading or listening to the writing activities. For instance, showing students a preliminary video about unhealthy product taxation can provide students with language inputs in relation to the essay topic and, hence will decrease their cognitive load and enhance their confidence.

Alleviating Time Constraint Anxiety

Teachers might give students longer preliminary times and gradually tighten them when students become more comfortable. Furthermore, practice with single-sentence timed writing tasks before increasing to paragraphs and full essays acclimates students to the time constraints of TOEFL writing.

Mitigating Negative Effects

Teachers can provide differentiated support to students who have had unhelpful writing experiences. For instance, by developing the linguistic confidence of students, educators may help students feel reassured about past criticisms that could still be a source of anxiety for them.

Exposing to Different Writing Prompts

Providing students with an opportunity to be exposed to culturally diverse or challenging topics can give comfort in unusual situations. Teachers can provide different prompts that can aid students in exploring possibly difficult topics. Since writing anxiety is a complex phenomenon, targeting appropriate teaching approaches can help students overcome their anxiety while potentially improving their scores. Anxiety-reducing measures in the curriculum may provide students with a better opportunity to reach their desired outcomes on the TOEFL tests.

Conclusion

The paper discussed writing anxiety in Chinese senior-high school students, the correlations between writing apprehension and TOEFL writing results, sources of writing anxiety, and its relationships with demographic variables like age, gender, grade level, years studied English, and previous years spent in English-proficient countries. The findings reflect an understudied student population: Chinese students educated in international sections of Chinese high schools who will presumably be international students. Most students reported moderate writing apprehension, while the percentage reporting high anxiety was relatively low. This paper adds to the literature on the topic by providing an insight into the experiences of this group of students, which have been somewhat neglected in the past research.

The writing anxiety had a moderately negative correlation with the TOEFL writing scores, a finding that is consistent with previous studies on the relationship between anxiety and writing performance. Higher anxiety students avoided writing, did not develop ideas, and blanked out on tests, all of which negatively affected performance. General motivators that increased writing anxiety included coercive prompts, inadequate or poor language proficiency, time pressures, and personal experience. For instance, prompts that were not within the knowledge domains of the students led to avoidance behaviour, and time pressures heightened nervousness, degrading the quality of potential work. Another possible reason for anxiety is based on previous criticism of student language abilities. Interestingly, the impact on anxiety was mixed: the evaluation did not have the overwhelmingly negative impact reported by earlier studies. This finding underlines the utility of taking into account cultural and educational backgrounds when evaluating the relation between evaluation and writing anxiety.

Among demographic factors, age, gender, grade, English study length, and prior exposure to English-speaking countries had no relationship with writing anxiety, thereby clarifying any discrepancies in prior research. This absence of relationships offers new insights into writing apprehension, thereby suggesting that common demographic variables may be less influential than previously assumed. This resolves the conflicting findings by reaffirming previous conclusions, and highlights the under-explored factors such as the influence of evaluation and demographic neutrality. It is implied hereby that teachers should care for mitigating the students' writing anxiety rather than thinking of their lack of participation, possibly attributed to a nonconductive environment. Teachers can minimize the anxiety effect on test scores by creating a tension-free environment and providing preparation materials along with exercises to boost confidence within the stipulated time frame. Rather than demographic differences, possibly the better way to minimize anxiety is by addressing the underlying cause of writing apprehension.

The study has some limitations mainly relating to sample size, which should be expanded to other cities like Beijing and Shanghai so that regional differences in writing apprehension can be incorporated. Thirdly, self-efficacy the belief level of students about their writing- was not included and was seen as relevant to be included in future work. Since low confidence was associated with the perception of high writing anxiety due to linguistic inadequacy and time pressure, investigating self-efficacy could strengthen the

understanding of the role of self-efficacy in both writing apprehension and performance under the TOEFL test. Increasing the sample size and including self-efficacy in further research would allow for more information to be gleaned regarding writing apprehension by different types of student populations in China.

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Appendix A

Table 5. The Means of the Somatic Anxiety Subscale

Somatic Anxiety			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint.	53	3.83	1.172
7. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.	53	2.85	1.081
9. I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure.	53	3.42	1.117
13. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.	53	3.55	1.011
15. I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint.	53	3.45	1.153
18. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.	53	3.02	1.168
23. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.	53	2.62	1.06
SUM		22.74	
Mean		3.25	

Table 6. The Means of the Cognitive Anxiety Subscale

Cognitive Anxiety			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. While writing in English, I am not nervous at all.	53	2.89	1.187
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.	53	3.47	1.12

8. I do not worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others’.	53	3.06	1.216
10. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	53	3.4	1.198
17. I am afraid that the other students would deride my English composition if they read it.	53	2.79	1.261
21. I do not worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.	53	2.94	1.027
24. I am afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	53	2.94	1.183
26. I am not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.	53	3.26	1.022
5. While writing in English, I often worry that I would use expressions and sentence patterns improperly.	53	3.75	1.054
16. While writing in English, I often worry that the ways I express and organize my ideas do not conform to the norm of English writing.	53	3.6	0.968
20. When I write in English, my mind is usually very clear.	53	2.77	0.974
25. I usually feel comfortable and at ease when writing in English.	53	2.91	1.061
11. When I write in English, my ideas and words usually flow smoothly.	53	2.72	1.063
SUM		40.5	
Mean		3.12	

Table 7. The Means of the Avoidance Behavior Subscale

Avoidance Behavior			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation

4. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.	53	3.13	1.161
6. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.	53	3.04	1.176
12. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.	53	2.94	1.064
14. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write compositions.	53	3.15	1.133
19. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.	53	3.11	1.05
22. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.	53	3.32	0.996
27. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions.	53	3.25	1.036
SUM		21.94	
Mean		3.13	

Table 4.8 Two-sample T-tests Between Somatic Anxiety Subscale and Cognitive

Anxiety Subscale

	<i>Somatic Anxiety</i>	<i>Cognitive Anxiety</i>
Mean	3.25	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.45658	
t Critical two-tail	0.76088	

Table 4.9 Two-sample T-tests Between Cognitive Anxiety Subscale and Avoidance

Behavior Subscale

	<i>Cognitive Anxiety</i>	<i>Avoidance Behavior</i>
Mean	3.12	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.890466	
t Critical two-tail	-0.13968	

Table 4.10 Two-sample T-tests Between Somatic Anxiety Subscale and Avoidance

Behavior Subscale

	<i>Somatic Anxiety</i>	<i>Avoidance Behavior</i>
Mean	3.25	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.511862	
t Critical two-tail	0.676	

Appendix B

Table 4.11 Correlation Between Age and Writing Apprehension

		Total Scores of Writing Apprehension	Age
Total Scores of Writing Apprehension	Pearson Correlation	1	.169
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.225
	N	53	53
Age	Pearson Correlation	.169	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.225	
	N	53	53

Table 4.12 Correlation Between Gender and Writing Apprehension

		Total Scores of Writing Apprehension	Gender
Total Scores of Writing Apprehension	Pearson Correlation	1	.159
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.257
	N	53	53
Gender	Pearson Correlation	.159	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.257	
	N	53	53

4.4.3 Grade

With $r(53) = 0.116$, $p = 0.41$, there is no linear relationship between grade and writing apprehension (see Table 4.13). This demonstrates that writing anxiety does not change with the change of grades.

Table 4.13 Correlation Between Grade and Writing Apprehension