

Writing Anxiety in the Midst of the Pandemic

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Abstract: In the midst of the pandemic, students grapple with the different challenges of accomplishing their academic requirements while adjusting to the unfamiliar territory of fully online distance learning. Students know that having good writing skills is important as they are evaluated on how they clearly express their knowledge and understanding of the lessons. The ability to produce good written outputs especially among tertiary students is expected based on the assumption that they have learned the basic structures of a good paragraph in grade school and high school. On the contrary, ESL writers are often anxious and insecure with their writing skills. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory explains that students with high writing self-efficacy perform better than those who have little confidence about their writing abilities. Students who are experiencing writing anxiety might not be able to produce high-marked outputs. This study aims to identify the different levels of writing anxiety experienced by the Purposive Communication students as they accomplish their writing output. The study utilized the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (Cheng, 2004) where it measures three categories of writing anxiety, namely, somatic, cognitive and avoidance behavior. The participants of the study were ninety-five (95) Purposive Communication undergraduate students of De La Salle University-Manila. Results showed that as a group, the participants experienced moderate to slightly moderate levels of writing anxiety. Among the three categories of writing anxiety, results showed that participants scored a moderate level of writing anxiety in the cognitive category.

Key Words: writing anxiety; ESL tertiary students; online distance learning; self-efficacy

1. INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the pandemic, students grapple with the different challenges of accomplishing their academic requirements while adjusting to the unfamiliar territory of full online distance learning. Among the academic demands is the ability to communicate clearly by writing effectively. Similar to other language skills, writing also involves both cognitive and affective processes (Gustilo, 2010). As learners go through the stages of thinking, planning and formulating ideas, they also go through different emotional experiences like feelings of excitement and confidence or anxiety and doubt. These cognitive and emotional aspects have either positive or negative effects on how learners write (Horwitz, 1996). Translating their idea into written outputs requires a certain level of proficiency in constructing meaningful sentences with appropriate word choice, grammar, context and mechanics. The process becomes more challenging when a learner has to compose longer writing outputs like essays,

literature reviews, article critiques, and other academic genres like research writing.

Students know that having good writing skills is important as they are evaluated on how they clearly express their knowledge and understanding of the lessons. Troyka (1987) defined writing as "a way of communicating a message to a reader for a purpose. The purposes of writing are to express one's self, to provide information for one's reader, and to create a literary work (p.3)." This perspective provides information that writing is a social activity and highlights the role of an audience. Since writing is a social activity, students are expected to produce written outputs that display certain features to be easily understood by the target readers. Despite its importance, ESL learners find this skill challenging and very complex process. The ability to produce good written outputs especially among college students is expected based on the assumption that they have learned the basic structures of a good paragraph in grade school and high school. On the contrary, ESL writers are often anxious and insecure with their

writing skills since they feel inadequate in expressing and organizing their ideas in writing (Strauss, 2017).

To understand students' writing anxiety, Bandura's (1997) social-cognitive theory explains that students learn by observing others and processing these desired behaviors in the context of what is acceptable in their environment. In writing, this is observed when students learn from their models like written outputs of their teachers and peers. The theory also explains that when students are engaged in a task they value, they process their experiences which help them gain motivation in their writing. Some studies use Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-efficacy in the domain of writing (Bruning et al., 2013; Sanders-Reio et al., 2014). Bandura's social-cognitive theory explains that self-belief plays a role in a learner's performance. Self-efficacy is the belief that one has the ability to accomplish a given task. This refers to the confidence that one can strategize and plan a course of action when facing difficulty. And so, a learner's writing self-efficacy is her/his belief that s/he can finish a writing task because s/he has a certain degree of confidence that s/he has the skills and competence to do so. When one doubts his/her writing skills, he/she would avoid or delay accomplishing his task. While learners who have a stronger sense of belief that they have the ability, the necessary skills to write also have a stronger motivation to strategize and overcome problems encountered in writing.

This study is anchored on Bandura's (1997) writing self-efficacy where learners have a certain level of confidence or anxiety that propels or hinders them to accomplish the different writing tasks in their Purposive Communication class.

Writing anxiety of students is a critical factor that will influence their future careers. If these writing anxieties are not addressed, the possibility of not clearly communicating their ideas in their chosen fields is highly feasible (Daly et al. 1988, as cited in Atay & Kurt, 2006). Among the different tools available in measuring writing anxiety, different studies utilized the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SWLAI by Cheng, 2004) a self-report survey (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017). The tool is composed of different items representing the three categories of writing anxiety, namely: somatic, cognitive, and avoidance behavior.

The purpose of this study is to identify the different levels of writing anxiety experienced by the Purposive Communication students as they accomplish their writing output.

2. METHOD

The study was conducted at the De La Salle University-Manila. There were 102 invited participants but only 95 gave their consent to be part of the study, 22% were female and 78% male with an average age of 18.40. The majority of the participants or 68% spoke Filipino as their first language, 27% spoke English, and the remaining 4% spoke Hokkien or Bisaya. Participants were from four different freshman classes, one class from the College of Education, two classes from the College of Computer Studies, and one class from the College of Engineering.

In answering the research question, a self-report survey, Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SWLAI), was adapted and modified from Cheng's study (2004) on second language learners' perceptions of their writing anxiety. The present study utilized this instrument since the goal was to examine the self-efficacy of students toward writing. SWLAI has been considered a valid and reliable tool among ESL/EFL writers. Cheng's instrument (2004) is composed of 22 items expressing different experiences of anxiety toward writing. These items are categorized as somatic (Items 2, 8, 13, 15, and 19), cognitive (Items 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 17, 20, and 21), and avoidance experiences (Items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, and 22).

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Since the context of the study was at the onset of the pandemic, physical symptoms related to Covid-19 and the anxiety level of Filipino students in online learning were reportedly to be significantly high (Cleofas & Rocha, 2021). Compounded with the task of writing, an activity not easily accomplished in isolation, the study investigated the experiences of the participants.

There are four levels of writing anxiety namely, high level of writing anxiety (4.00-3.25), moderate level of writing anxiety (3.24-2.50), slightly moderate level of writing anxiety (2.49-1.75), and low level of writing anxiety (1.74-1.00).

Table 1. Levels of Writing Anxiety

	N	%
Slightly Moderate	55	57.9%
Moderate	19	20.0%
Low	18	18.9%
High	3	3.2%

Table 1 shows that out of the four levels of writing anxiety seventy-four or 77.9% of participants experienced moderate to slightly moderate writing anxiety. The result of this study is similar to the study of Atay and Kurt (2006) which showed that participants experienced an average or moderate level of writing anxiety. Their level of writing anxiety could mean that despite their writing classes in high school, they still experienced moderate to slightly moderate level of writing anxiety. As Bandura (1997) explained students' writing self-efficacy is when students have a certain level of confidence or anxiety that propels or hinders them to accomplish the different writing tasks in their writing classes.

Table 2. Mean Score of the Three Categories

	Somatic	Cognitive	Avoidance
Mean	2.10	2.50	1.74
N	95	95	95

Table 2 shows that among the three categories of writing anxiety, cognitive has a mean of 2.50 or moderate level of writing anxiety. The result of this study is similar to Jennifer and Ponniah (2017) which also reported that cognitive anxiety scored highest than somatic and avoidance behavior categories. The present study utilized SLWAI (Cheng, 2004) where items were categorized as somatic (Items 2, 8, 13, 15, and 19), cognitive (Items 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 17, 20, and 21), and avoidance experiences (Items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, and 22). Bandura's (1997) social-cognitive theory explains that self-belief or self-doubt plays a role in a learner's performance. This means that participants of this study expressed a certain level of self-doubts about their writing self-efficacy.

Table 3. Items with Moderate Level of Anxiety Items

	N	Mean	Sub-category
Item 18	95	2.98	Avoidance
Item 9	95	2.88	Cognitive
Item 21	95	2.87	Cognitive
Item 17	95	2.68	Cognitive
Item 3	95	2.63	Cognitive

Based on the closer examination of the SLWAI, the following items yielded moderate level of writing anxiety among the participants. Out of the 3 subcategories, four of these items (Items 3, 9, 17, and 21) are from cognitive category and one item from avoidance category of writing anxiety.

Item 18 refers to how students avoid writing activities, while items 9, 21, and 3 refers to how students are anxious when they know their written outputs would be evaluated.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study aims to identify if the ninety-five students experienced writing anxiety during their Purposive Communication class. Based on SLWAI that measured their writing anxiety in English, seventy-four or 77.9% participants experienced moderate to slightly moderate levels of writing anxiety. With the closer examination of the 3 different subcategories of writing anxiety, results showed that participants experienced moderate level of writing anxiety in the cognitive category. Cognitive anxiety would refer to how ESL writers think when they know that their outputs might receive low scores or be evaluated negatively by their peers or teachers.

These writing anxieties were further amplified by the current set-up of distance learning. From the traditional face to face interaction of students in a writing class where students received feedback from peers and scheduled consultation from their teacher, students were positioned in an unexpected environment or perhaps what we now call the new normal. Though peer feedback and teacher consultation could still be possible like Google Docs in the absence of face to face interaction. However, the prolonged quarantine might have resulted in other possible different sources of anxiety that the participants experienced.

As a response, teachers should respond by careful planning on how to alleviate the challenges encountered by the students during the pandemic. In addition, since the instrument used is a self-report questionnaire, it could still be utilized by writing teachers as a diagnostic tool so they could plan appropriate topics and activities that would allow students to manage and overcome their writing anxieties especially during the online distance learning platform. One of the goal of the study is to

support the argument that students with writing anxiety might not fully reached their potential their actual ability to write effectively and receive high-marked outputs. Writing teachers must consider this issue to equip students to become effective writers as they communicate and become prepared in their future fields. Lastly, future studies may also examine if the actual scores correlate with the anxiety level of the students.

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