Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Writing Anxiety in English Academic Writing in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of Taiwanese undergraduate students regarding writing anxiety in academic English writing. A total of 120 students participated in the study. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a Writing Anxiety Perception Questionnaire and qualitative interviews to examine anxiety levels and explore students' coping strategies. The questionnaire assessed three forms of anxiety: avoidance behavior, physical anxiety, and cognitive anxiety. The findings revealed that writing anxiety ranged from mild to severe, with physical and cognitive anxiety being the most prevalent. Students reported that the primary causes of their anxiety were physical symptoms such as nervousness and the fear of receiving poor grades. Qualitative interviews identified several coping strategies, including clarifying assignment criteria, breaking tasks into smaller goals, and drawing on prior experiences. Additionally, structured writing techniques such as brainstorming and outlining, along with feedback from peers and teachers, were found to help reduce anxiety and improve writing outcomes. The results emphasize the importance of addressing writing anxiety in educational settings to support student success. Educators can assist students by teaching effective writing techniques, creating a positive learning environment, and providing regular feedback. Specialized interventions for both local and international students are recommended to further reduce anxiety and improve writing proficiency, ultimately enhancing academic performance.

Keywords: *Perceptions of Writing Anxiety, Undergraduate Students, English Academic Writing*

Introduction

In today's globalized world, English has become the dominant medium for academic communication, particularly in the fields of research, education, and professional development. The significance of English academic writing cannot be overstated, as it is the primary means by which scholars present their ideas, engage with the global academic community, and contribute to their respective fields (Hsieh & Chuang, 2022). For non-native speakers, mastering academic writing in English is an essential skill that not only enables them to succeed academically but also enhances their career prospects in an increasingly competitive global job market (Lin & Ho, 2009). In Taiwan, as in many other countries, the demand for proficient English writers has grown, driven by the country's integration into the global economy and international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (ETS, 2015). Despite the increased focus on English language instruction at the university level, Taiwanese students often face considerable challenges in mastering the complexities of academic writing in English (Wu & Lin, 2016).

Writing in English, particularly in academic contexts, requires a high level of proficiency, not only in grammar and vocabulary but also in organizing ideas, formulating arguments, and maintaining coherence throughout the paper. This can be an overwhelming task for students, especially those with limited exposure to English outside of formal education (Choi, 2013). In Taiwan, many students face additional pressures due to the proper educational system, which places a strong emphasis on examination success. This often results in students focusing on rote learning and examination preparation rather than developing practical writing skills (Lin & Ho, 2009). Moreover, academic writing is often seen as one of the most challenging tasks in foreign language acquisition, as it involves the integration of complex cognitive and linguistic skills. This makes academic writing particularly difficult for Taiwanese undergraduates, many of whom lack the necessary language proficiency and confidence to tackle writing assignments with ease (Yildiz, 2019).

Among the various obstacles students encounter, writing anxiety is a significant barrier that affects their academic performance and overall well-being. Writing anxiety is a form of psychological distress that occurs when individuals face writing tasks that feel overwhelming or insurmountable (Kara & Abdulrahman, 2022). This anxiety can manifest as fear of failure, avoidance behaviors, procrastination, and a general lack of confidence in one's writing abilities (Cheng, 2002). Students who experience writing anxiety often struggle to produce quality

work, as their emotional response to the writing task interferes with their cognitive processing, resulting in lower levels of academic achievement (Ekmekçi, 2018). In the case of Taiwanese undergraduate students, this anxiety can be exacerbated by the pressure to meet the high expectations of educators, peers, and family members, as well as the stress of competing in a highly demanding academic environment (Lin & Ho, 2009).

While research on writing anxiety has long existed, most studies focus on its effects on writing performance, with less emphasis on understanding students' perceptions of their own anxiety. Taiwanese students, in particular, face unique challenges in this regard. Research has shown that students' perceptions of their own language skills, their fear of evaluation, and their past experiences with writing assignments can all contribute to the development of writing anxiety Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004). These perceptions may influence how students approach academic writing tasks, potentially leading to avoidance behaviors and a lack of engagement with the writing process altogether. Numerous studies have been conducted to overcome anxiety. Therefore, understanding Taiwanese undergraduates' perceptions of writing anxiety is crucial to developing more effective strategies to alleviate this anxiety and improve writing outcomes.

This study seeks to investigate undergraduates' student perceptions of writing anxiety in English academic writing, focusing on how they perceive and respond to the challenges associated with academic writing in English. By examining students' emotional and psychological responses to writing tasks, this research aims to uncover the underlying factors that contribute to writing anxiety and explore how these perceptions influence their academic performance. Understanding students' perceptions is essential for designing targeted interventions that not only address the root causes of writing anxiety but also foster a supportive and encouraging learning environment stated by Moos and Moos (1978). The findings from this research are expected to provide valuable insights into the nature of writing anxiety among Taiwanese students, particularly in relation to their academic writing in English.

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on writing anxiety by highlighting the unique challenges faced by Taiwanese undergraduates and offering practical recommendations for educators and policymakers. By improving our understanding of students' perceptions and experiences with writing anxiety, this research will help inform the development of more effective teaching methods, curriculum designs, and support systems that can alleviate writing anxiety and improve students' academic writing skills (Marwan, 2016).

The goal is to help students gain the confidence and skills necessary to succeed in English academic writing and to navigate the challenges of higher education more effectively.

Given the critical need to identify the key factors contributing to writing anxiety and its effects on students' writing performance, this study will explore the perceptions of undergraduate students in Taiwan as they engage in academic writing tasks. The research questions formulated for this study are: 1) What are the main factors contributing to writing anxiety among undergraduate students in Taiwan? 2) In what ways does writing anxiety impact the writing performance of undergraduate students in Taiwan?

Research Method
Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to explore the perceptions of Taiwanese undergraduate students regarding writing anxiety in English academic writing. According to Mehdi and Candlin (2014), combining methods offers a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Time and Place of Research

The research combined descriptive quantitative methods (through a Likert-scale questionnaire) and qualitative inquiry (via semi-structured interviews). The quantitative component measured the levels and types of writing anxiety, while the qualitative component explored students' coping strategies and attitudes toward academic writing in more depth.

Population and Sample

The research involved 10 undergraduate students enrolled in English academic writing courses at a Taiwanese university. Participants were drawn from diverse academic disciplines, including business administration, computer science, education, future design, and information systems. The sample also included two exchange students from Ganesha University of Education (Indonesia), offering additional cultural perspectives. To ensure a range of experiences, participants were categorized by academic year:

a) Freshmen: Beginning their first semester of English academic writing.

b) Sophomores: With one year of academic writing experience.

c) Juniors: With two years of writing instruction.

d) Seniors: With three years of experience.

All participants were required to be currently enrolled in an English academic writing course, with sophomores and above having completed at least one year of writing instruction. To gather a diverse yet targeted sample, the study used a snowball sampling method, beginning with a few initial participants who then recommended peers who fit the criteria.

Although the sample consisted of only ten students, the purpose of this qualitative component was not to produce broadly generalizable results. Instead, it sought to provide rich, in-depth insights into how students experience and manage writing anxiety. The limited sample size is acknowledged as a constraint, particularly in terms of statistical representation, but it allowed for a more personal and detailed exploration of each participant's perspective. Future research involving larger and more varied populations is encouraged to build on these findings and explore potential patterns at scale.

Procedure

The procedures of this research, as follows:

a) Permission was obtained from lecturers to distribute questionnaires during or outside class sessions.

b) Participants were briefed on the study and assured that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, with no impact on academic grades.

c) Each participant completed the Writing Anxiety Perception Questionnaire in about 10 minutes.

d) Completed questionnaires were submitted directly to the researcher.

e) Selected students were then invited for semi-structured interviews to explore their anxiety and coping strategies in more detail.

Data collection technique

Quantitative data was collected using the Writing Anxiety Perception Questionnaire, adapted from Cheng (2004). The 22-item instrument measured: 1) Cognitive anxiety 2)

Somatic anxiety 3) Avoidance behavior. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). It was modified for clarity and cultural relevance to Taiwanese and international students. Qualitative data was gathered through interviews based on questions adapted from Leki (1995), focusing on how students cope with writing anxiety and handle academic assignments.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data from the questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and frequency) in Microsoft Excel. The Likert scale employed reversed scoring, where lower scores indicated higher anxiety. The interpretation of mean scores was as follows:

Table 1. Interpretation of mean scores

Very High Anxiety	1.00 – 1.79
High Anxiety	1.80 – 2.59
Moderate Anxiety	2.60 – 3.39
Low Anxiety	3.40 – 4.19
Very Low Anxiety	4.20 – 5.00

Qualitative data from open-ended responses and interviews was analyzed through thematic coding, identifying recurring themes related to anxiety sources and coping strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

The analysis of data collected from the Writing Anxiety Perception Questionnaire and interview responses provides valuable insights into writing anxiety experienced by Taiwanese undergraduate students in English academic writing. The results, based on a 5-point Likert scale, indicated moderate to high levels of anxiety among participants. Mean scores ranged from 2.3 to 3.9, with cognitive anxiety (fear of negative evaluation) and somatic anxiety (nervousness) being the most prevalent forms.

Table 2. Mean Scores and Interpretations of Writing Anxiety Dimensions

Theme	Mean Score	Interpretation
Cognitive Anxiety	3.2	Moderate
Somatic Anxiety	3.1	Moderate
Avoidance Behavior	2.9	Moderate

The high mean scores for cognitive anxiety, ranging from 3.0 to 3.6, suggest that fear of negative evaluation is a major source of writing anxiety. Many students expressed concerns about making mistakes or being judged negatively for their writing. Similarly, somatic anxiety, including physical symptoms like nervousness, had moderate mean scores (3.1–3.4), which hindered students' ability to focus. Avoidance behavior, characterized by procrastination or task avoidance due to anxiety, also showed moderate mean scores (3.0–3.3).

Following the quantitative analysis, qualitative interviews identified several coping strategies employed by students to manage their writing anxiety. Students often sought clarification from professors or peers to ensure they fully understood assignment expectations. One participant explained:

"Whenever I feel unsure about the assignment, I ask my professor or check with my classmates to confirm the details, which helps me feel more confident starting my work."

Students broke tasks into smaller steps, set clear goals, and minimized distractions to maintain focus. One student shared:

"I set a timer and work in short bursts to stay focused, and I turn off my phone to avoid distractions.".

Reflecting on past successes helped students feel more confident: *"I remind myself of past assignments where I succeeded despite feeling anxious. It helps me trust my abilities and reduces my fear of failure,"* stated one participant.

International students often drew on their cultural knowledge to make their writing more personal and authentic, which helped alleviate the pressure of writing in a second language. Constructive feedback was crucial for refining work and boosting confidence. Many students emphasized the value of feedback, with one respondent noting:

"I really value feedback because it helps me improve and feel that I'm on the right track."

Techniques like brainstorming, outlining, and drafting were frequently used to reduce anxiety and organize thoughts:

"I always start by outlining my ideas. It helps me stay organized and reduces the stress of staring at a blank page," explained one student.

While many students adhered strictly to assignment guidelines, some resisted when they felt their approach better represented their ideas. One participant stated:

"If I have a creative approach to an assignment, I prefer to present it in my own way, even if it doesn't strictly follow the guidelines."

Creating schedules and prioritizing tasks were key strategies for managing overlapping deadlines and reducing stress. One student shared:

"I make a list of tasks and break them down into smaller goals. This helps me stay on top of everything and avoid last-minute panic."

The interviews revealed that students employ a mix of cognitive, emotional, and practical strategies to cope with writing anxiety. These strategies demonstrate students' proactive approach to managing anxiety, clarifying expectations, staying focused, and managing time effectively.

The findings from both the questionnaire and interviews provide valuable insights into the nature of writing anxiety and the coping strategies employed by Taiwanese undergraduates. The results suggest that writing anxiety is prevalent among students and significantly impacts their academic performance. The coping strategies identified in the interviews show that students actively seek ways to manage their anxiety and improve their writing outcomes.

The high levels of cognitive anxiety (fear of negative evaluation) and somatic anxiety (physical symptoms such as nervousness) found in this study align with earlier research linking anxiety to poor writing performance (Cheng, 2002; Ekmekçi, 2018). Cognitive anxiety, particularly the fear of judgment, appears to be a major stressor for students. This anxiety often leads to procrastination, avoidance, and decreased writing performance, as students are too focused on the fear of failure to effectively organize their thoughts. These findings suggest that interventions should focus on reducing cognitive anxiety by fostering a positive and supportive learning environment where students feel less judged and more capable (Cheng, 2004; Leki, 1995).

The physical symptoms of somatic anxiety, such as nervousness, also hinder students' ability to concentrate and write effectively. These findings support previous research on the

physiological manifestations of anxiety and its negative impact on academic performance (Woodrow, 2005). Addressing somatic anxiety through relaxation exercises or mindfulness could help students manage physical discomfort and reduce anxiety during writing tasks.

The trend that seniors exhibited lower levels of anxiety compared to freshmen suggests that experience plays a key role in reducing writing anxiety. As students' progress through their academic careers, they become more familiar with the writing process and more confident in their abilities. This supports the idea that writing proficiency improves with experience, which, in turn, reduces anxiety (Leki, 1995). Many students reported using past writing experiences as a coping mechanism, indicating that familiarity with the task reduces uncertainty and anxiety.

The coping strategies identified in the interviews reflect a proactive approach to managing writing anxiety. Clarifying assignment requirements, focusing on specific goals, and using past writing experiences were commonly mentioned as effective strategies. These approaches allow students to reduce uncertainty and anxiety before starting a writing task, making them feel more in control of the process. Moreover, feedback from teachers and peers emerged as a critical element in improving writing skills and boosting students' confidence. Constructive feedback not only helps students refine their writing but also encourages them to take risks and overcome their fear of judgment (Leki, 1995).

Writing techniques, such as brainstorming and outlining, were also frequently mentioned as effective strategies. These techniques provided students with a clear framework for organizing their ideas, which reduced anxiety and improved writing outcomes. This suggests that teaching students explicit writing strategies can help them manage anxiety and approach writing tasks with greater confidence (Leki, 1995).

The differences in writing anxiety between local Taiwanese students and international students highlight the role of cultural and linguistic factors in shaping students' experiences. Local students were more concerned with meeting academic expectations, while international students faced additional challenges related to writing in a second language. Interventions should therefore be tailored to address both the linguistic difficulties of international students and the societal pressures faced by local students. For international students, language support services, writing centers, and peer mentoring could alleviate anxiety related to writing in a second language (Wu & Lin, 2016). Local students, on the other hand, may benefit from strategies that address societal pressures and expectations.

The findings suggest that educators should implement strategies to reduce writing anxiety and support students in developing their writing skills. Key approaches include creating a supportive classroom environment, providing regular feedback, and offering writing workshops. Additionally, teaching stress management techniques and promoting a growth mindset can help students view writing as a process rather than a final product. By addressing both the cognitive and somatic aspects of anxiety, educators can help students feel more confident in their writing abilities, which will likely lead to improved academic performance (Lin & Ho, 2009; Cheng, 2002)

Conclusion

Undergraduate students' views of writing anxiety in academic English writing were examined in this study. The results showed that avoidance behavior, bodily anxiety, and cognitive anxiety ranged from moderate to severe, indicating that writing anxiety is a major issue for many students. Physical sensations, including uneasiness and fear of receiving a poor grade, were shown to be the main causes of anxiety, which made it difficult for students to focus and complete their writing assignments successfully. Clarifying assignment criteria, dividing assignments into smaller, more attainable goals, and drawing on prior writing experiences are just a few of the coping mechanisms that students use, as shown by the qualitative interviews. It was discovered that these techniques improved pupils' writing results and decreased anxiety. Furthermore, the use of structured writing strategies like brainstorming and outlining, as well as feedback from peers and professors, was crucial in helping students feel less stressed and more confident.

The importance of managing writing anxiety in educational settings is highlighted by this study. Teachers can assist students in controlling their anxiety and enhancing their writing abilities by fostering a positive learning environment, providing frequent feedback, and imparting useful writing techniques. Additionally, specialized therapies for both domestic and foreign students may help reduce writing anxiety even more, improving their writing skills and general academic achievement. According to the study's findings, more work should be put into putting writing anxiety-reduction techniques into practice so that students are better prepared to complete academic writing assignments.

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