

Writing anxiety among international students in a Thai university

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Sep 14, 2022

Revised May 24, 2023

Accepted Jun 26, 2023

Keywords:

International students

Thai university

Writing anxiety

ABSTRACT

Literature on writing anxiety among undergraduate students in international universities situated in English as a foreign language context remains scarce. In this study, a survey questionnaire was distributed to know the writing anxiety level of students and anxiety level differences based on nationality and locality. A total of 138 students participated using convenience sampling. Afterward, five students, based on their writing anxiety level, were purposely chosen to attend two sorting activities of statements regarding the change in their writing anxiety. Then, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to know the factors of writing anxiety change. Descriptive results from the survey have shown that students in an international university experienced high anxiety in specific situations in writing. Also, varying writing anxiety levels were found based on nationality and locality. Findings from the sorting activity indicated that some writing anxiety-provoking situations have changed over a 2-week time frame due to some factors. Some implications for teaching were recommended to reduce writing anxiety in the classroom.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is related to negative emotional reactions to learning a foreign language [1]. Previous research has shown negative associations between language anxiety and presentation, language anxiety and in-class discussion, language anxiety and final exam, language anxiety and final grade [2]–[4]. Moreover, such results correlate with previous studies where anxiety's effect is pervasive in various contexts [5]–[8]. Scholars could distinguish skill-specific language anxiety, for example, writing [9]. Writing anxiety, by definition, is closely related to the individuals' conscious avoidance of the situations, courses and professions which require written reports. It is also associated with the learners' fear of negative and judgmental evaluations and remarks stemming from their writing [9].

Anxiety can be classified into three, namely: i) Trait anxiety (personality characteristics); ii) State anxiety (provoked particular anxiety-provoking stimulus); and iii) Situation-specific anxiety (aroused in specific situations) [10]. Moreover, Cheng [11] proposed three components of writing anxiety: i) Somatic anxiety; ii) Avoidance behavior; and iii) Cognitive anxiety.

Like FLA, research investigating the link between writing anxiety and writing performance varies in English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) setting. The results generally revealed confusing and inconsistent correlations, from statistically significant and negative correlations to almost no correlation. Despite a scarce number of studies concluding that writing anxiety could be somewhat

helpful or “facilitating” [12], [13], most related past research showed that anxiety negatively affected performance and achievement.

For example, Hassan [14] measured the English writing anxiety levels of 132 third-year college students and compared the findings with their performance in a 40-minute writing task regarding writing quality. He found that low anxious students performed better than their highly anxious peers. That’s to say, English writing quality was negatively affected by the students’ high writing anxiety. Faigley [15] demonstrated that highly anxious students’ notably had shorter and syntactically “immature” and “hesitant” essays compared to their low anxious counterparts. Through an objective test of writing ability, they also noted that high writing anxiety resulted in students’ less command of usage and writing convention issues.

Previous research also indicated that writing anxiety and its adverse effects on performance became more apparent in tasks under time constraints [16]. Cheng [11] employed a timed English essay writing assignment as a token of the participants’ English writing performance to investigate the correlations between writing anxiety types and writing performance. The results demonstrated a significant negative relationship between anxiety and writing performance. Writing anxiety negatively affects writing performance or achievement in several ESL contexts. Jawas [17], for example, reported the sources of second language writing anxiety, speculating that the learning environment seem to have a role in generating writing anxiety. In addition, several researchers have widely documented issues of time restriction, teachers and their negative evaluation, and peer effects resulting from competition and interest in the writing subject [11], [16]–[21].

Sources of anxiety were also identified. A high level of writing anxiety is reflected in preoccupation with performance and high expectations and fear of teacher’s negative feedback, low self-confidence and poor linguistic knowledge as its primary sources [22]. Ariyanti [23] reported fear of writing assignments under time constraints, lack of self-confidence due to insufficient English language proficiency, such as structural rules in English, and an ability to relate and compare theories among experts to support their writing. In Indonesia, a study discovered linguistic difficulties, fear of teachers’ negative comments, insufficient writing practice, and time pressure as the four main factors that caused writing anxiety [24].

Some reported factors of language anxiety were related to the nationality and demographic setting of the students. Regarding nationality, Asians feel more anxious than other nationalities in a Malaysian university and elsewhere [25]–[27]. Some reasons are fear of being in public, shyness, negative evaluation, and speaking inaccurately. However, studies on language-specific-skill anxiety remain lacking, for example, writing anxiety. Several researchers have shown that students from rural areas experienced a higher level of anxiety than those from urban areas [28]–[30]. Some reported causes are limitations of learning resources and infrastructure and teachers’ use of traditional teaching methods.

Several studies have been done on university-level students, but not among international university students in Thailand. Therefore, this study aims to fulfil the research gap left by previous works and set out to conduct a study: i) To investigate the level of writing anxiety of students in an international university in Thailand; ii) To know the differences in writing anxiety levels among students based on nationality and geographical location; and iii) To determine the factors that contribute to their writing anxiety.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted in a small-sized private Christian international university in Thailand, with seven different programs of study, including nursing. Students of this university are from other nations with varying English proficiency and year levels. Around 1,200 students from 32 different countries of origin are enrolled. A 3-stage mixed method design was adopted in this study. In the first stage, the writing anxiety questionnaire was adapted from a measure of second language writing anxiety [11]. It includes three factors: i) Somatic anxiety (i.e., pounding heart); ii) Cognitive anxiety (i.e., afraid of very poor writing performance); and iii) Avoidance behavior (i.e., avoiding writing composition). The reliability was .91, which means high reliability. The data was analyzed to determine the writing anxiety level among the participants to answer questions 1 and 2. The two sorting activities were held with selected students in the second stage based on purposive sampling. The selected students were asked to sort some selected writing anxiety statements from the questionnaire. At least eight to ten writing anxiety statements were sorted; four to five random statements of strongly agree and five random statements of strongly disagree. However, the number of statements depends on their survey response. This stage elicited data to answer question 3. The sorting activities were done two weeks apart so that students may forget the sorted data earlier. In the third stage, an individual semi-structured interview was conducted to determine the factors contributing to their writing anxiety.

2.1. Stage 1: Survey questionnaire

The 4-point Likert scale writing anxiety online survey questionnaire contains 27 items. The link was sent to students through different media channels in a private Christian international university in Thailand.

As a result, 138 first-year and fourth-year students from twelve countries responded voluntarily. There were three Vietnamese, four Cambodians, 55 Thais, 17 Burmese, four Filipinos, 27 Chinese, one Laotian, 13 Malaysians, three Indonesians, two Americans, one Togolese, two Indians, and one Brazilian. The students who met the criteria were selected purposely to join stage 2.

2.2. Stage 2: Sorting activities

At this stage, five students agreed voluntarily. At least four to five statements of high-anxiety writing situations and another set of low-anxiety statements were cut out from the students' survey responses. A board was prepared with numbers 1-4; where 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, and 4=strongly disagree. The cut-out writing anxiety statements were given to the students individually. The student placed each statement under the numbers and provided reasons during the sorting activity. The researchers took notes during the sorting activity.

2.3. Stage 3: Individual semi-structured interviews

The student was asked to explain the sorted statements after the activity. Descriptive statistics was utilized to analyze the writing anxiety level of the students. Thematic coding was used to know the situations that provoke their writing anxiety. Cronbach alpha was calculated to ascertain the reliability of the writing anxiety survey questionnaire. The result was 0.87, with high reliability.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first question, descriptive statistics was used. In Table 1, the highest writing anxiety-provoking item was 5 "*While writing in English, I often worry that I would use expressions or sentence patterns improperly.*" The other high anxiety statements were about fear of getting a low evaluation (Item 10), writing under time pressure (Item 2), choosing to write thoughts in L1 (Item 4), and jumbled thoughts under a time constraint (Item 13). Meanwhile, the item with the lowest mean was 21 "*I worry about what other people would think of my English compositions.*"

Table 1. Writing anxiety

Item	Mean	SD
1. While writing in English, I am nervous.*	2.36	0.90
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time pressure.	2.77	0.93
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried if I know they will be evaluated.	2.68	0.88
4. I often choose not to write down my thoughts in English.	2.72	0.91
5. While writing in English, I often worry that I would use expressions or sentence patterns improperly.	2.96	0.91
6. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.*	2.42	0.92
7. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.	2.52	0.96
8. I worry that my English composition is a lot worse than others.*	2.49	0.96
9. I tremble when I write English compositions under time pressure.	2.64	0.87
10. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	2.81	0.96
11. When I write in English, my ideas or words rarely flow smoothly.*	2.44	0.85
12. I do my best to avoid situations where I have to write in English.*	2.35	0.91
13. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.	2.71	0.87
14. I would not use English to write compositions unless I had no choice.*	2.35	0.96
15. I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint.	2.53	0.91
16. While writing in English, I often worry that the ways I express or organize my ideas do not conform to standard English.	2.70	0.92
17. I'm afraid the other students would make fun of my English composition if they read it.	2.26	1.07
18. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.	2.43	0.92
19. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.	2.37	1.00
20. When I write in English, my mind is usually unclear.*	2.40	0.86
21. I worry about what other people would think of my English compositions.*	2.15	0.90
22. I rarely seek a possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.*	2.57	0.87
23. I usually feel my whole body rigid or tense when I write English compositions.*	2.25	0.88
24. I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	2.50	0.96
25. I usually feel uncomfortable when writing in English.*	2.59	0.88
26. I'm afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor. *	2.57	0.92
27. Whenever possible, I would not use English to write compositions.*	2.25	0.83

*Statements were rephrased negatively

Similar findings were previously reported regarding the top five writing anxiety situations [23], [24]. Such anxiety-provoking situations are worrying since a high level of anxiety negatively affects language performance [1]–[3], [14]. Meanwhile, students in this study may feel less anxious with regard to what others

think of their written outputs (items 17 and 21). This finding could be partly due to the size of the university, where English classes are very small (about 10-15), and each student is expected to receive feedback from peers and teachers frequently. It would be interesting for future studies to explore the class size and extent of the relationship as factors of writing anxiety or language anxiety. Despite their exposure to an international environment where English is used as the medium of communication and instruction, students still prefer to use their first language when writing their thoughts in a writing task (items 4 and 27). In Table 2, the most anxious students were from Vietnam and Cambodia, followed by Thais, Burmese and Filipinos. The least worried were Brazilians, Indians, Togolese and Americans. This is not surprising as similar findings were reported in the literature [25]–[27]. The cultural traits of Asians, such as being shy and their sociolinguistic backgrounds, could be possible variables explaining the higher level of writing anxiety.

Table 2. Differences in writing anxiety based on nationalities

Nationality	Mean score	Standard deviation
Vietnamese	2.67	0.28
Cambodian	2.67	0.32
Thai	2.61	0.07
Burmese	2.60	0.14
Filipino	2.52	0.34
Chinese	2.47	0.08
Laotian	2.41	0.00
Malaysian	2.27	0.15
Indonesian	2.20	0.39
American	2.09	0.53
Togolese	2.04	0.00
Indian	2.00	0.48
Brazilian	1.74	0.00

As presented in Table 3, students from rural areas were more anxious than those from the urban periphery. Again, the results are in parallel with previous studies [28], [29]. Five cases were illustrated in this paper to provide deeper insights into the anxiety experienced by international students in an international university located in an EFL context. The pseudonyms of the participants provided were Bet (Case 1), Lean (Case 2), Irie (Case 3), Olie (Case 4), and Rod (Case 5).

Table 3. Differences in writing anxiety based on geographical location

Rural/Urban	Mean score	Standard deviation
Rural	2.56	0.06
Urban	2.45	0.06

There were four high writing anxiety moments for Bet, including her non-preference to write her thoughts in English (Item 4), difficulty when writing her thoughts in English (Item 11), and uncomfortable when writing in English (Item 25). As seen in Figure 1, Bet's writing anxiety hardly changes except in item 2 "I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time pressure." She said that her self-confidence on that day affected her anxiety.

"Last time I felt down or insecure about it, but today I felt a little higher stage than that I chose. It is also because I realized that I can still write English compositions well under time of pressure. In a nutshell, I think it depends on my confidence level that I feel during the day." (Case 1: Bet)

Figure 2 shows four high writing anxiety moments experienced by Lean such as her non-preference to write her thoughts in English (Item 4), fear of getting a low evaluation (Item 10), difficulty when writing her thoughts in English (Item 11), and uncomfortable when writing in English (Item 25). Figure 1 shows an uptick of anxiety in item 15 "I often feel panic when I write English compositions under a time constraint." Lean explained that time pressure in writing might result in some mistakes. However, like Bet, Lean's writing anxiety moments were stable.

"(My) level of anxiety is changed mostly because I fear that what I write does not conform to the standards of a certain format and that I may miss out or add extra words/errors on accident from writing so quickly. Otherwise, in formal circumstances, I would not worry so much." (Case 2: Lean)

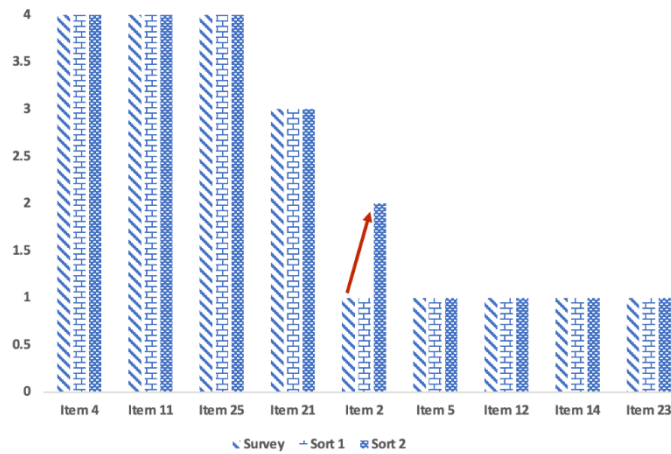


Figure 1. Bet’s high and low-anxiety moments in writing

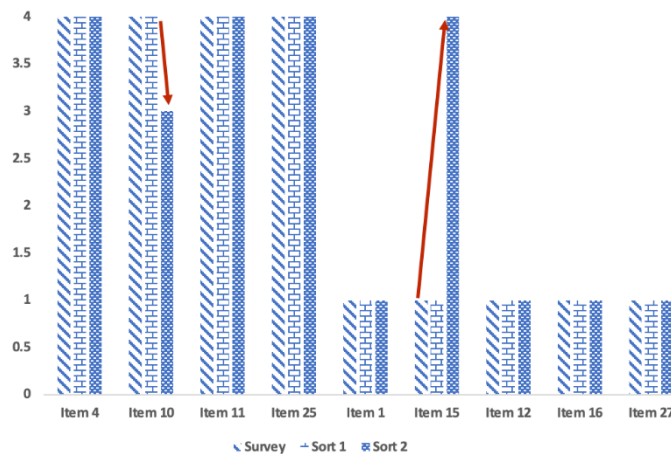


Figure 2. Lean’s high and low-anxiety moments in writing

There were five high writing anxiety moments for Irie, including her physiological effect of a pounding heart (Item 2), worried about the evaluation (Item 3), worried about getting a poor grade (Item 10), worries about non-conformity to standard English (Item 16), and fear of negative thoughts from peers (Item 21). As seen in Figure 3, some of Irie’s writing anxiety moments had increased (items 4 and 23) and decreased (items 3, 11, and 18). In addition, she said that exposure to other activities, such as oral presentations, affected her writing anxiety.

“My level of writing anxiety changed because I have been exposed to oral presentations these past few weeks.” (Case 3: Irie)

Figure 4 shows five high writing anxiety moments experienced by Olie, such as her non-preference to write her thoughts in English (Item 4), worries about misusing expressions or sentence patterns (Item 5), having a ‘blank’ mind when writing in English (Item 7), experiencing physiological effect when under a time constraint (Item 9), and fear of getting low evaluation (Item 10). There was an uptick in anxiety in items 1, 12, 20, and 26. Olie’s low writing anxiety increased over time due to the upcoming exam. Therefore, it can be concluded that test anxiety is a significant factor in writing anxiety.

“I think I’m okay now if I am required to write in English because I have not yet started my exam but still a bit nervous.” (Case 4: Olie)

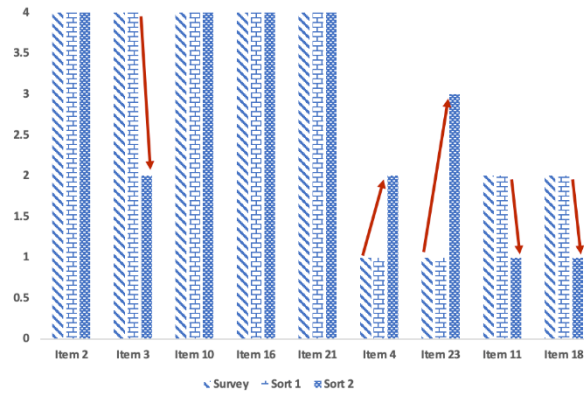


Figure 3. Irie’s high and low-anxiety moments in writing

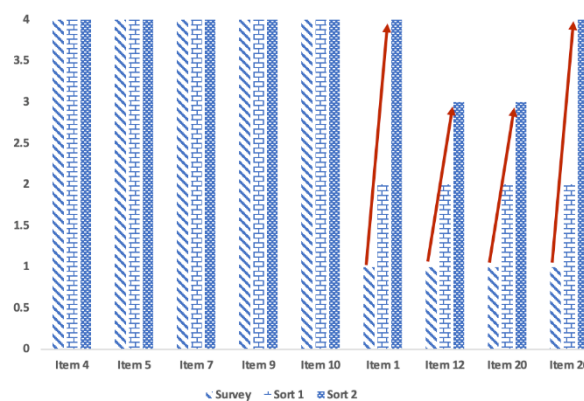


Figure 4. Olie’s high and low-anxiety moments in writing

There were four high writing anxiety moments for Rod, including the physiological effect of a ‘pounding heart’ (Item 2), his non-preference to write his thoughts in English (Item 4), experiencing physiological effects when under a time constraint (Item 9), and having jumbled thoughts when writing under time pressure (Item 13). As seen in Figure 5, Rod’s writing anxiety hardly changes except for a decreased item 2 “I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time pressure.” Rod said that giving more time could help reduce writing anxiety.

“I am comfortable speaking and writing in English, but the only moment I get anxious about it is under time constraints. Unfortunately, time constraints make me nervous, so exam time is a nightmare.” (Case 5: Rod)

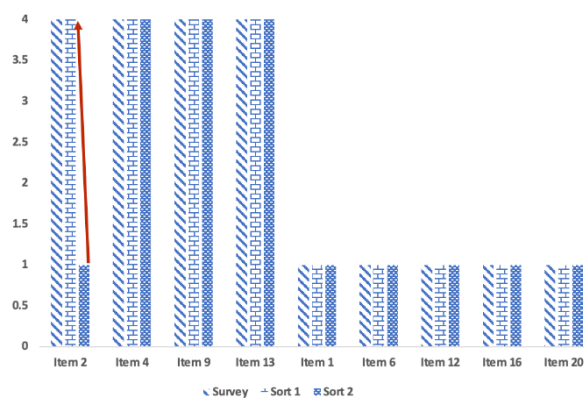


Figure 5. Rod’s high and low-anxiety moments in writing

Based on the cases discussed, item 4 “not writing their thoughts in English” was found dominant. This finding is congruent with the survey results where students prefer their L1 when conceptualizing their ideas in a writing task. Concerning the decreasing and increasing level of writing anxiety in some situations, the factors such as lack of self-confidence and test anxiety are widely reported to provoke anxiety. For example, previous studies have found that low self-confidence is essential to writing and speaking anxiety [9], [22]. Therefore, a student with high confidence would likely become less anxious in a writing task.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper was able to pinpoint specific writing anxiety-provoking situations experienced by students in an international university in Thailand. Moreover, students from Southeast Asia, where English is used as a foreign language, will likely experience a higher level of writing anxiety than their peers from the US and Asia, where English is used as a native or second language. Like other previous studies, students who graduated from peripheral areas feel more anxious than those from urbanized locations. In addition, four factors of writing anxiety were deduced from the five cases: self-confidence, time constraint, exposure to activities, and test anxiety.

Although the findings cannot be generalized due to the limited number of cases presented in this paper, the results could be added as empirical evidence of the growing literature on language-specific anxiety. It can also be noted that students in international settings where English is used as a medium of communication and instruction experience writing anxiety. Moreover, the level of writing anxiety can decrease or increase depending on some variables surrounding the nature of the writing task. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers, for example, to provide ‘enough time’ for students to complete the task as they may have to conceptualize their thoughts in their L1 before writing the task required.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers would like to acknowledge the research grant (RRDC 2022-23) from Asia-Pacific International University, Saraburi, Thailand.




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