

## The Effect of Writing Anxiety in College English Teaching and Its Countermeasures

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**Abstract:** The relevant research findings of English writing anxiety are reviewed in the perspectives of the writing anxiety scale development, the relationship between writing anxiety and writing ability, and the strategies of reducing writing anxiety in this paper. Then the targeted measures of reducing college English writing anxiety such as guiding students to effectively adopt the positive self-regulation strategies of alleviating writing anxiety, actively creating a good writing atmosphere, flexibly adopting a variety of teaching modes and methods and making full use of the modern network education technology are proposed to provide references for improving the time-consuming and inefficient situation of college English writing teaching so as to improve students' writing confidence and ability.

### 1. Introduction

The writing skill is one of the core skills in college English teaching and always students' weak skill in college English learning in China. The main reason is that college English writing involves the psychological and cognitive process which is very complex and affected by many factors. The foreign language (FL) teaching has been changed from "teacher-centered teaching" to "student-centered teaching" and the effect of affective factors on the language teaching has been paid more and more attention to with the development of humanistic psychology since the 1970s. Anxiety, as an important affective factor of affecting the language acquisition, has gradually become an important part of the FL learning research at home and abroad and the negative effect of anxiety in the FL writing teaching has been proved obviously significant. Therefore, how to reduce the negative effect of writing anxiety on the FL writing quality has become the research focus of scholars both at home and abroad, and the remarkable progress has been made in the research of FL writing anxiety in the latest years.

### 2. Relevant Concepts on Writing Anxiety

Anxiety refers to the individual's emotional state of nervousness and fear caused by the frustrated self-esteem and confidence or the increased sense of failure and guilt due to the expectation of failing to achieve goals or the threat of being unable to overcome obstacles<sup>[1]</sup>. Under many circumstances, anxiety leads to the feeling of tension and fear which in turn wastes energy and attention and affects the language learning efficacy so as to form a vicious circle for the language learning by reacting on and enhancing anxiety<sup>[2]</sup>. The concept of FL anxiety was firstly proposed by Horwitz *et. al.* (1986) and defined as a unique complex of self-perception, belief, emotion and behavior resulting from the FL learning process and classroom learning process, and FL anxiety consisted of communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation<sup>[3]</sup>. Writing anxiety was firstly put forward by Daly & Miller (1975) and defined as the anxious mentality and behavior of FL learners in the writing process<sup>[4]</sup>. Writing anxiety hinders the progress of the writing process and leads to writing difficulties. It is learners' painful and negative emotional experience in writing activities and lowers their expectation of writing success<sup>[5]</sup>. The early writing anxiety

researches are mainly focused on native language learners, while FL writing usually brings more experience of anxiety than native language writing and learners hold more negative attitude towards FL writing<sup>[6]</sup>. Consequently, FL writing anxiety, as a specific form of FL anxiety, has gradually become the research focus of scholars both at home and abroad.

### **3. Overview of the Relevant FL Writing Anxiety Researches**

The FL writing anxiety researches both at home and abroad mainly involve the development of writing anxiety scales, the correlation between writing anxiety and writing ability and the strategies and methods of reducing writing anxiety.

#### **3.1 Development of Writing Anxiety Scales**

Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) was developed for native language writing learners by Daly & Wilson (1975)<sup>[7]</sup>. Krashen (1982) points out that FL writing learners usually experience more anxiety than native language writing learners and FL writing anxiety is a kind of special language learning anxiety that is especially related to the FL writing output<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, WAT is unable to detect some core characteristics of FL writing anxiety<sup>[5]</sup> and its construct validity has been questioned by some researchers pointing out that WAT measures the writing-related emotional factors other than anxiety<sup>[8]</sup> and it is more appropriate to measure learners' confidence in their own writing ability<sup>[9]</sup>.

Cheng *et al.* (1999) points out that FL writing anxiety is a unique kind of language learning anxiety closely related to the process of FL writing and an exclusive measurement tool is required for the FL writing characteristics<sup>[10]</sup>. As a result, Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) is developed by Cheng (2004) especially for measuring the second language (L2) and FL writing anxiety<sup>[11]</sup>. SLWAI involves the factors including somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety and avoidance behavior and has been proved to be a good scale with high reliability and validity. Guo & Qin (2010) believes that SLWAI is designed for the English majors in Taiwan whose learning background is different from that of the non-English majors in the Chinese mainland and finds out that the influencing factors of writing anxiety involves classroom teaching anxiety, conceiving anxiety, avoidance behavior and lack of confidence for the non-English majors in the Chinese mainland by conducting an exploratory factor analysis after investigating the English writing anxiety of 453 non-English majors with SLWAI<sup>[5]</sup>.

Bai (2017) points out that WAT especially designed for native language writing learners is ineffective in measuring FL learners' anxiety in a specific writing context as it consists of relatively few items about affective factors, especially anxiety factors, while SLWAI is not completely applicable to the English teaching context of the Chinese mainland since its items and components do not cover the anxiety characteristics and inducing factors of FL writing and the language environment, education background and English level of writing learners are different<sup>[12]</sup>. Considering the drawbacks of those scales, Bai (2017) designs English Writing Anxiety Inducing Factor Scale (EWAIIFS) involving the individual inducing factors (expression competence, language competence and discourse competence) and the writing-process inducing factors (evaluation feedback, written text characteristics and output modes) based on the theories of language test and evaluation, theories of writing evaluation and concepts of FL learning anxiety and FL anxiety. The reliability and validity tests show that EWAIIFS can be used as a tool to investigate the status quo and inducing factors of college English learners' writing anxiety in China. However, EWAIIFS has been seldom used in the empirical investigation of English writing anxiety as it has been put forward in the latest years, so its reliability and validity need to be retested by more scholars in more empirical researches.

#### **3.2 Researches on the Correlation between Writing Anxiety and Writing Ability**

The foreign scholars believe that writing anxiety is different from the other psychological tension and it can reduce learners' learning desire and result in the failure of the writing process. Meanwhile, there is a negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing performance and the writing

performance of the students with high anxiety is often worse than that of those with low anxiety<sup>[3]</sup>. The domestic scholars have also done a lot of researches on writing anxiety in the college English teaching practice and confirmed the research findings of the foreign scholars. It has been proved that writing anxiety is very common among college English students in China and writing anxiety is negatively correlated with writing performance and hinders the improvement of English writing ability. Guo & Qin (2010) finds out that English writing anxiety is very common and negatively correlated with writing performance among college students in China, and students' self-evaluation of English writing ability and overall language ability has a significant effect on English writing anxiety<sup>[5]</sup>. Specifically speaking, English writing anxiety affects students' writing performance to a certain extent. The higher anxiety brings about the worse writing performance and *vice versa*. Zhou & Tang (2010) figures out that there is a negative correlation between FL writing anxiety and writing quality and the negative correlation is related to the use of mother language in the writing process<sup>[13]</sup>. Li (2015) proves that students' high cognitive anxiety takes up their cognitive resources and hinders their writing process with the result of the poor writing quality while high somatic anxiety causes students to have more avoidance behaviors and reduce their opportunities of English writing practices so as to weaken their mastery experience<sup>[14]</sup>.

### 3.3 Researches on the Strategies of Reducing Writing Anxiety

FL writing anxiety is a kind of debilitating anxiety and an obstacle for the improvement of students' writing quality and performance to some extent. How to improve learners' writing ability and performance by reducing FL writing anxiety has become the research focus of FL writing anxiety. The domestic scholars mainly study the strategies and methods of reducing English writing anxiety from the perspective of the writing teaching modes and methods, writing practice methods, learning methods, composition review modes, etc. according to the characteristics of English learners in China. Zhang (2005) points out that the process approach aims at stimulating students' positive emotions and eliminating negative emotions in the English writing process so as to help students effectively overcome such writing psychological barriers as writing anxiety<sup>[15]</sup>. The process approach highlights students' dominant roles in the English learning process to help them experience the whole writing process, enable them to experience the writing fun in the classroom interactive activities, constantly enhance their writing autonomy and stimulate their positive emotions so as to eliminate writing anxiety. Guo (2016) finds out that the AAWP English teaching model can effectively reduce students' writing anxiety, especially comprehensive anxiety, somatic anxiety, confidence anxiety and evaluation anxiety<sup>[16]</sup>. Zhong & Fan (2018) finds out that the CLIL model has significant effect on the writing anxiety of the students with different English writing levels and more effect on the middle- and low-level students<sup>[17]</sup>. Guo (2011) finds out that the Length Approach can effectively reduce students' English writing anxiety, especially their evaluation anxiety, conceiving anxiety, somatic anxiety and avoidance behavior by offering the encouraging evaluation, giving itemized quantitative scores by the centesimal system and providing abundant opportunities of the language output practice so as to inhibit the negative effect of English writing anxiety on students' writing process and performance and promote the improvement of their writing ability<sup>[18]</sup>. Besides, the Length Approach can not only improve students' cognitive ability and writing ability, but it can also help them reduce writing anxiety by making them overcome the fear of English writing, especially the fear of writing long compositions, form the habit of expressing ideas in English, improve their English writing interest and enhance their confidence and learning motivation. Wu & Gu(2011) finds out that cooperative learning can significantly reduce the comprehensive anxiety, somatic anxiety and evaluation anxiety of non-English majors<sup>[19]</sup>. The appropriate application of such cooperative learning methods as learning together, academic controversy, cooperative integrated reading and composition, think-pair-share, teams-assisted individualization can significantly reduce students' English writing anxiety. Wu(2011) finds out that peer review can effectively reduce comprehensive writing anxiety, somatic anxiety and avoidance behavior in the English writing process and significantly alleviate cognitive anxiety<sup>[20]</sup>. The peer review activities enable students to play a variety of roles in the English writing process, which can

create a positive learning atmosphere, stimulate students' English writing interest and reduce their psychological pressure and anxiety. Furthermore, those activities can effectively reduce English writing anxiety by promoting the emotional communication and enhancing the understanding and trust between students.

#### **4. Analysis of Writing Anxiety Countermeasures**

Learners with high anxiety like FL writing much less than those with low anxiety and they usually dislike or even hate FL writing which is generally loved by those with low anxiety<sup>[13]</sup>. Consequently, it is necessary to improve students' writing interest and internal motivation and enhance their writing confidence and self-efficacy so as to reduce their anxiety in the college English writing process and help them improve their English writing ability by taking such measures as guiding them to effectively adopt the positive self-regulation strategies of alleviating writing anxiety, actively creating a good writing atmosphere and flexibly using various teaching modes and methods, making full use of the modern network education technology, etc.

##### **4.1 Guiding Students to Effectively Adopt Positive Self-regulation Strategies**

Horwitz *et al.* (1986) points out that educators and FL teachers can reduce students' anxiety by helping them figure out and master the positive self-regulation strategies to alleviate anxiety and creating a more relaxing learning environment<sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, college English teachers should not only reduce students' anxiety by the classroom teaching intervention, but they should also guide students to learn how to control and overcome their anxiety in the daily English learning with their own efforts<sup>[21]</sup>. Ma & Dong (2017) finds out that the self-regulation strategies of alleviating English writing anxiety include action strategy, conception strategy, avoidance strategy and affective strategy and proposes that college students should be guided to effectively adopt the positive self-regulation strategies through the targeted writing tasks, pre-writing conception training and individualized encouragement<sup>[22]</sup>. Specifically speaking, the targeted and oriented writing tasks in combination with the content of the relevant teaching, reading and video materials should be designed to help students accumulate writing materials to overcome language barriers and guide students to adopt positive action strategies so as to help them gradually develop the habit of actively looking for writing materials and internalize English writing into their own autonomous behaviors. The pre-writing conception training can be implemented with such methods as mind mapping, brainstorming, critical reading, etc. to guide students to take flexible conceiving strategies. The individualized encouragement and guidance can be offered to students, especially to the students with high anxiety in English writing by exploring and appreciating the good points and taking tolerant attitude towards the language errors in their English writing so as to guide students to distract their attention from the fear and anxiety of the language errors or writing failures, make them use less or even no negative avoidance strategies by alleviating their writing anxiety and accomplish their writing tasks more actively.

##### **4.2 Actively Creating a Good Writing Atmosphere**

Creating a good atmosphere of college English writing is conducive to alleviating writing anxiety by reducing students' communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in the learning process of English writing. Consequently, college English teachers should stimulate students' internal motivation to communicate in English and overcome communication apprehension by cultivating their intrinsic interest in foreign languages and cultures, creating the writing opportunities with real communicative significance, enhancing their confidence and self-efficacy, helping them establish the internal incentive mechanism, stimulating their strong desire to communicate in English and changing their "I-have-to-write" conception into the "I-want-to-write" conception. Although the college English tests such as CET-4 and CET-6 inevitably cause some writing anxiety at the macro level, college English teachers should try to minimize the negative effect of test anxiety at the micro level by weakening the evaluation function of writing scores in the grading of daily performance, reducing time-limited writing tasks and

setting writing tasks in line with the real communication context so as to arouse students' motivation and impulse to solve the problems which could be faced with in a real communicative situation and encourage them to freely express their views and thoughts. In addition, college English teachers should eliminate the negative effect caused by fear of negative evaluation by means of changing the traditional mode of correcting errors and grading compositions into the mode of giving priority to encouragement in which the excellent sentence patterns and good points in students' compositions are pointed out and appreciated and the positive emotional feedbacks are offered to students by highlighting those bright points.

#### **4.3 Flexibly Using Various Teaching Modes and Methods**

College English teachers should help students enhance their positive self-concept and confidence to reduce or eliminate writing anxiety from the psychological source by adopting specific teaching modes and activities. As a result, college English teachers should stimulate students' intrinsic interest and internal motivation in English writing and enhance their writing confidence and self-efficacy to improve their English writing ability by changing the traditional product approach and the linear model of teachers' composition assignment in class, students' composition writing after class and teachers' evaluation of compositions into the various teaching modes and methods with different teaching activities of English writing and encouraging and guiding students to adopt different writing methods such as the Length Approach and the cooperative learning method in English writing. When evaluating students' compositions, college English teachers should adhere to the principle of giving priority to encouragement and taking error corrections as supplements by the methods of students' mutual evaluation, group evaluation and tripartite evaluation so that teachers and students can play multiple roles in the writing teaching and learning process to create a positive learning atmosphere, stimulate writing interest, reduce psychological pressure and anxiety and improve writing ability among students.

#### **4.4 Making Full Use of the Modern Network Education Technology**

Under the background of the continuous reduction of the teaching hours in the college English classroom, the modern network education technology plays a supporting role in the reform of college English teaching<sup>[23]</sup>. College English teachers should stimulate students' intrinsic interest in learning English writing and improve the teaching effect and quality by integrating the network information technology and FL courses to establish a network ecological environment suitable for the FL teaching. College English teachers should also protect students' self-esteem, reduce their fear of negative evaluation and cultivate a good relationship between teachers and students in the network multimedia teaching by giving full play to the advantages of the modern network education technology in combination with the content of the teaching, reading and video materials to create a relaxing, harmonious and real communicative environment for students and make them fully enjoy the fun of English communication. Moreover, college English teachers can easily implement the diversified comprehensive evaluation combining formative evaluation and summative evaluation in the network multimedia teaching so as to enhance students' confidence and self-efficacy, cultivate their autonomous learning habits and ability and reduce their anxiety in English writing.

### **5. Conclusion**

Writing anxiety is very common among college English students in China and it severely hinders their enthusiasm and creativity in English writing. Therefore, college English teachers should effectively reduce students' writing anxiety so as to stimulate their intrinsic interest and internal motivation, enhance their writing confidence and self-efficacy and improve their writing ability by taking such measures as guiding students to effectively adopt the positive self-regulation strategies of alleviating writing anxiety, actively creating a good writing atmosphere and flexibly using various teaching modes and methods, making full use of the modern network education technology, etc. in the teaching activities.

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