

The Relationship between Writing Anxiety and Writing Strategies among Chinese College Students

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Abstract: As an output skill, English writing is an important indication of the learners' comprehensive language competence. However, a substantial portion of Chinese college students are not proficient in English writing. This study tried to investigate the overall situations of Chinese college students' writing anxiety and writing strategies and explore the relationship between them. This quantitative descriptive study used two questionnaires as the instrument. A total of 385 freshmen and sophomores from Chuzhou University in central China were involved in the survey. This study found that participants experienced a medium level of writing anxiety with avoidance behavior anxiety as the main type. The study also found that participants frequently used writing strategies and the most used ones were affective and cognitive strategy. In addition, a significant correlation was observed between writing anxiety and writing strategy use. The findings of this study provide enlightenment for improving English writing instruction in Chinese context.

Keywords: Foreign Language Writing; Writing Anxiety; Writing Strategy; Writing Performance.

1. Introduction

At present, English has become one of the most crucial information carriers in many fields of human life, such as science, culture, politics and transportation. Hence, Chinese people have more and more opportunities to communicate with foreigners in English and a large number of talented English professionals skilled in intercultural communication are needed. For Chinese, written English has become the predominant medium of communicating with foreigners. As an output process, English writing is an essential part of English learning, which requires the comprehensive use of language knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar, rhetorical strategies and writing conventions. Many Chinese college students have suffered from difficulties in English writing and their inferior English writing skills negatively influence their English performance in academic research, social interactions and future career [1]. The challenges in English writing that they encounter have been attributed to some psychological factors, which include anxiety, self-efficacy, motivation and confidence [2].

In brief, it is very important and imperative to discuss how to enhance Chinese college students' English writing performance. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the levels and types of writing anxiety along with writing strategies so as to help them have a better control of writing anxiety and employ writing strategies more frequently and efficiently.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Writing Anxiety

As a psychological concept, anxiety is generally referred as a state of apprehension or fear caused by the emergence of something threatening. Anxiety can also be understood as experiences about uneasiness, self-doubt, frustration or worry. Anxiety can motivate or impede cognitive actions, so it can exert both positive and negative influence on learning. At present, scholars have not reached a consensus on the specific

definition of writing anxiety. People are all vulnerable to anxiety that is just a kind of natural and normal reaction to some sources of stress [3].

Generally speaking, there are three main types of anxiety, including situation-specific anxiety, trait anxiety and state anxiety [4]. The situation-specific anxiety is related with students' language learning anxiety. Trait anxiety is regarded as relevant to stable personality characteristics, because it has a more enduring predisposition for anxiousness. State anxiety is a kind of transitory anxiety, which refers to the emotional response to the specific anxiety stimuli, such as an important examination. Language learning anxiety may manifest itself, when learners fail to exchange complicated message in the foreign language, when they fail to apply the lexical and grammatical knowledge in testing situations, when they performed poorly in class activities. A feeling of tension and apprehension often occurs when a learner is expected to perform well in foreign language. Anxiety interfering with foreign language learning and performance originates from the inherent inauthenticity which is connected with learners' language communicative competence and negative affective response to language learning [5]. Anxiety is also one of the main inducing factors affecting learners' foreign language learning behaviors and learning effects. Language learning anxiety involves the following aspects, namely, worry and apprehension, excessive concern about failure and what others think, self-evaluation, avoidance of the target language, and excessive studying [2].

During the process of writing, students may encounter some linguistic or psychological barriers that could lead to anxiety. Writing anxiety is a psychological construct which is directly connected with personal inclination or tendency to avoid writing accompanied by evaluation [6]. Writing anxiety generally exerts disadvantageous effects on foreign language learner's writing process. Hence, it is very necessary to attain an accurate measure of anxiety in Chinese English learner's writing process and figure out the influence of writing anxiety on writing strategy and performance.

Writing anxiety can also be understood as a kind of anxiety

generated in the process of learning or training writing skills, which may be caused by some personal defects or poor performance. These anxiety behaviors often provoke impediments and difficulties in writing, such as the avoidance of writing tasks, lack of confidence and conceiving anxiety in writing. Writing in a foreign language is a complex activity which requires that writers should have control over some prerequisite knowledge and composing skills [7]. This most popular instrument to measure writing anxiety is *Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory* (SLWAI) developed in 2004, in which writing anxiety were classified into three types, namely somatic anxiety, behavior avoidance anxiety and cognitive anxiety [8]. Somatic anxiety refers to physical symptoms caused by anxiety or apprehension such as body stiffness, trembling, perspiring, uncomfortable breathing and thought blocking. Avoidance behavior anxiety refers to the activities related to avoiding situations in which someone has to write. Cognitive anxiety mainly refers to the cognitive aspects of anxiety experience, namely negative expectations, preoccupation with performance and concern about others' perception.

2.2. Writing Strategy

In the field of second language acquisition, studies on language learning strategies commenced in the middle of 1970s. With the development of linguistics, strategy has become a frequently used term in the field of language acquisition. Strategy can refer to technique, tactic, method and art. It is generally acknowledged that learning strategy is a very important variable to explain individual differences in learning outcome.

As an important factor affecting language learners' writing performance, writing strategy mainly refers to a series of effective activities adopted for organizing writing and cultivating writing skills. Writing strategy was once defined as "actions or behaviors consciously carried out by writers to make their writing more efficient" [9]. That is to say, writing strategy is an important branch of learning strategy, by which learners can write more effectively. Writing strategy also refers to the intended thinking and action of learners in a series of writing processes from the idea of composition, the collection of material, the writing of the draft, to revision and evaluation of works [10]. It includes thinking activities such as understanding, organizing and evaluating new information, as well as the action plan adopted to raise the performance of using knowledge.

According to different criteria, there are different types of classification of writing strategies. In terms of writing stages, writing strategies can be classified into pre-writing (planning), while-writing (problem-solving) and post-writing (corrective feedback). Writing strategies can also be classified into five categories, such as cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, effort regulation strategy, affective strategy and social strategy [11]. In recent years, this way of categorizing writing strategies has become very popular in many surveys. Cognitive strategies refer to some mental methods for language input and output, such as receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, recognizing and using patterns. Effort regulation strategy can reflect how learners maintain their concentration and efforts for the development of writing skills, especially when they feel unconfident and bored with writing tasks. Metacognitive strategies are often used by writers to control the writing process consciously. Writers can employ social or affective strategies to interact

with others for clarifying some questions and regulating emotion, self-efficacy, motivation, and attitude in the process of writing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The quantitative method was employed to describe the status quo of writing anxiety and writing strategies among Chinese college students and determine the relationship between these two variables. This descriptive research includes describing, recording, analyzing and interpreting participants' responses. Pearson correlation analysis was utilized to explore the relationship between two variables and examine to what degree the correlation existed between them without manipulating them deliberately. In this survey, participants were required to answer two questionnaires which consisted of forty-seven questions that were measured on a 4-point Likert scale. The data obtained from the questionnaires was input, counted and analyzed by Statistic Package for the Social Science (SPSS) 27.0.

3.2. Participants

Participants in this study were non-English majors who were randomly selected from Chuzhou University located in central China. Participants were freshmen and sophomores from three different majors, such as liberal arts, science and engineering. The number of participants calculated using Raosoft online sample size calculator was 377. A total of 407 target respondents participated the survey and submitted their answers through Wen Juan Xing platform, in which 385 valid questionnaires were obtained for data analysis.

3.3. Instrument

This study used standardized questionnaires validated by experts to get a clear and reliable picture of the present situations of writing anxiety and writing strategies among Chinese college students. There is a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging 1 to 4 wherein 4 stands as "strongly agree" and 1 as "strongly disagree" asking about the levels and types of writing anxiety and writing strategies. The questionnaires were determined on the basis of the objectives and variables in this study and the review of related literature. Accordingly, a pilot study was conducted to examine the structure of these two scales prior to the formal experiments. Cronbach Alpha coefficients of the subscales were acceptable, ranging from 0.738 to 0.926 and larger than 0.70. Therefore, instruments can suit the need of the study well.

The first questionnaire was adopted from a study called *Students' Writing Anxiety and Its Correlation with Writing Performance* [11]. The writing anxiety questionnaire has a total of 20 items, which consists of three dimensions, such as somatic anxiety, avoidance behavior anxiety and cognitive anxiety. The second questionnaire was adopted from an article *Assessing and Validating a Writing Strategy Scale for Undergraduate Students* with a total of 27 items [12]. This writing strategy scale was constructed by synthesizing the advantages of five available questionnaires. This writing strategy scale consists of five dimensions, which are cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, effort regulation strategy, affective strategy and social strategy. A few modifications were made to the expressions of several items so as to specifically focus on writing strategies in the context of China. In order to make participant have a better understanding and

provide genuine answers, the questionnaires were expressed in both Chinese and English.

3.4. Data Gathering Procedures

All the questionnaires were handed out online, with the help of a very popular statistic website in China named www.wjx.cn. Upon validation by experts, questionnaires were distributed to target participants. The researcher put the electronic questionnaires onto the website and then a code was generated automatically, which participants scanned to participate in the survey. Only those volunteers who were very willing to participate and cooperate with the survey were required to answer the questionnaires. Firstly, the researcher introduced the basic situations of the questionnaires and the matters that participants needed to pay attention to. Secondly, explained the instructions to ensure that they were familiar. Thirdly, uniformly distributed the questionnaires on the QQ platform and WeChat platform to make it completed within the specified time. In order to eliminate the alertness of questionnaires, this questionnaire survey was made in an anonymous manner. After respondents submitted the answers, they obtained the reward in the form of a token so as to ensure the quantity and quality of the feedback.

3.5. Data Analysis

Firstly, descriptive statistics was made to examine the levels and types of writing anxiety and writing strategies, including frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and ranking, which were computed to evaluate participants' responses to items. To interpret the Likert scale, the range of verbal interpretation was as follows: Strongly Agree ranging from 3.50-4.00; Agree ranging from 2.50-3.49; Disagree ranging from 1.50-2.49; Strongly Disagree ranging from 1.00-1.49. Secondly, Pearson correlation test was performed to examine the correlation between writing anxiety and writing strategies.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

This study aimed to explore the relationship between writing anxiety and writing strategies among Chinese college students. As shown in Table 1, descriptive analysis indicated that students experienced a medium level of writing anxiety. They experienced avoidance behavior anxiety most, followed by somatic anxiety and cognitive anxiety.

Table 1. Students' writing anxiety levels

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. somatic anxiety	2.62	Agree	2
2. avoidance behavior anxiety	2.72	Agree	1
3. cognitive anxiety	2.59	Agree	3
Composite Mean	2.64	Agree	

Legend: 3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49=Agree; 1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

As can be seen from Table 1, the composite mean of respondents' overall writing anxiety was 2.64, indicating that respondents experienced anxious feeling towards English writing. They evaluated the highest mean in the dimension of avoidance behavior anxiety (M=2.72), which was followed

by the dimension of somatic anxiety (M=2.62) and cognitive behavior (M=2.59). Hence, the conclusion was reached that their writing anxiety was typically represented by avoiding occasions requiring English writing. In addition, they also underwent anxiety in the other two dimensions. However, negative physiological effects, such as frustration, stress and nervousness aroused by English writing were not very typical (M=2.62). Although a weighted mean of the dimension of cognitive anxiety was 2.59, showing that they also underwent cognitive anxiety in English writing, which were mainly caused by subjective cognitive deviation.

Many people find writing difficult even in their native languages, let alone in a foreign language. Considered as one of the difficult and complicated skills, writing always leads to anxiety to foreign language learners, who may experience regular occurrence of anxiety if their negative experiences with foreign language persist. Thus, students may most likely become nervous and form a self-derogatory cognition that leads to cognitive interference and produces performance deficits. Moreover, poor performance and negative emotional reactions would also reinforce the expectation of anxiety and failure. Such a perceived threat may result in further anxiety. Reversely, favorable experiences and increased achievement would reduce anxiety. Gains in proficiency would also reduce levels of foreign language anxiety.

Table 2. Students' use of writing strategies

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. metacognitive strategy	2.75	Agree	4
2. effort regulation strategy	2.76	Agree	3
3. cognitive strategy	2.84	Agree	2
4. social strategy	2.64	Agree	5
5. affective strategy	2.85	Agree	1
Composite Mean	2.77	Agree	

Legend: 3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49=Agree; 1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree

Table 2 presents the overall situations of participants' English writing strategies in terms of metacognitive strategy, effort regulation strategy, cognitive strategy, social strategy and affective strategy. The composite means of 2.77 suggested respondents' agreement on all the above indicators, indicating that they employed writing strategies at a medium frequency during the process of accomplishing English writing tasks. Writing strategy was helpful to make English compositions consistent in content and form to better transfer information and express feelings. The acquisition of writing strategies was a process of conversing basic skills into internal thought, not a simple transition from consciousness to unconsciousness. It was correlated to English writing awareness and behaviors, with the purpose of enhancing the efficiency and quality of English writing.

Among these five dimensions, affective strategy shared the highest rank, with a composite mean of 2.85, indicating that participants utilized affective strategies most frequently in English writing. The dimension of affective strategy is composed of four indicators, involving self-rewarding, self-confidence, self-relaxation and self-encouragement. The use

of affective strategy can reflect how students coped with their emotions and attitudes towards writing tasks, showing some distinguishable behaviors of regulating writers' motivation and emotional state, such as keeping positive emotional states during writing and conducting actions to make themselves feel relaxed, confident and encouraged. For some writers, rejection and negative feedback from peers and teachers cause emotional challenge. Some writers lower their anxiety and encourage themselves by correctly using affective strategies, such as breathing deeply, taking a short break during while-writing activities, making positive statements, rewarding themselves after completing writing tasks [13]. When writers are faced with criticism and failure, they use these affective strategies which can stimulate them to think and focus better. Therefore, it is very useful and necessary for them to adopt appropriate affective strategies to give resiliency to the ups and downs of writing.

The dimension of cognitive strategy obtained a weighted mean of 2.84, indicating that participants used cognitive strategy at a medium level. Cognitive strategies refer to writers' mental processes which affect how writers regulate thoughts and organize contents to achieve writing goals and cope with challenges [14]. At the same time, cognitive strategies can enable students to process, transform, and create information so as to successfully perform complex writing tasks by the effective use of language and active engagement in the process of acquiring knowledge. Cognitive strategies can also reflect writers' learning behaviors about understanding and processing writing materials, such as acquiring the basic linguistic rules and the flexible use of them, applying personal experience and knowledge in writing, choosing cohesive and coherent devices for organizing texts, generating and summarizing ideas.

In some cases, cognitive strategy and metacognitive strategy work together in the process of writing. The major difference between them is that the former is utilized for promoting the development of writing skills and the latter for monitoring and controlling writing. Actually, cognitive and metacognitive strategies are dependent on each other. They function simultaneously in the process of performing writing tasks.

Additionally, effort regulation strategy obtained a weighted mean of 2.76, a little lower than the average score, indicating that the frequency of utilizing effort regulation strategy was still at a medium level. In the current study, effort regulation strategy mainly focuses on how foreign language learners maintain their concentration and devotion for developing writing skill, especially when the writing tasks are uninteresting and dull. To be honest, there is not a specific definition of effort regulation and this category of writing strategy was newly mentioned in 2017. Effort regulation mainly refers to students' self-efforts put into the process of English writing. For a long time, writing task plays an important part in kinds of English proficiency tests for Chinese college students. Comprehensive knowledge and multiple skills are requisite to complete a good writing composition. Moreover, they are very clear of the significance of English writing. In the future, they need to utilize effort regulation strategies more and better.

Then, it was followed by metacognitive strategy with a composite mean of 2.75, which was rated as agreement. It was found that respondents often utilized metacognitive strategy to accomplish English writing tasks and aimed to perform better. Among all the five subscales of writing strategy, the

frequency of using meta-cognitive strategy was at a low level. The behaviors concerning this category requires that students have already developed good learning habits and have strong principles to avoid external interferences. The eight items within this subscale are mainly concerned with students' mental activities such as planning as well as self-monitoring, self-checking, self-modification and self-evaluation.

4.2. Correlation

After analyzing students' anxiety levels and usage of strategies, correlation analysis was conducted to reveal the relationship between anxiety and strategies. The results of correlation analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Relationship between anxiety and strategies

somatic anxiety	rho-value	p-value	interpretation
metacognitive strategy	-.132**	0.009	significant
effort regulation	-.243**	<.001	highly
cognitive strategy	-.107*	0.036	significant
social strategy	-.177**	<.001	highly
affective strategy	-0.026	0.606	not
avoidance behavior anxiety			
metacognitive strategy	0.042	0.416	not
effort regulation	-.102*	0.045	significant
cognitive strategy	0.023	0.654	not
social strategy	0.022	0.670	not
affective strategy	.120*	0.019	significant
cognitive anxiety			
metacognitive strategy	-.178**	<.001	highly
effort regulation	-.208**	<.001	highly
cognitive strategy	-0.09	0.078	not
social strategy	-0.046	0.369	not
affective strategy	0.031	0.545	not

Based on the results, there were significant relationships between somatic anxiety and writing strategies except for affective strategy. Additionally, there existed significant correlation between avoidance behavior anxiety and effort regulation and affective strategy. Finally, cognitive anxiety significantly correlated with metacognitive strategy and effort regulation strategy. This result showed that the more anxious students felt in writing English compositions, the lower the frequency of using writing strategy was.

To be specific, there was a close negative correlation between students' somatic anxiety in English writing and writing strategies they utilized in four dimensions ($P < 0.01$). Among them, it had the highest correlation with effort regulation strategy ($r = -0.243$, $P < 0.01$), followed by social strategy ($r = -0.177$, $P < 0.01$), then metacognitive strategy ($r = -0.132$, $P < 0.05$) and finally cognitive strategy ($r = -0.107$, $P < 0.05$). This result showed that when students suffered from somatic anxiety mostly in writing English compositions, the frequency of utilizing effort regulation strategy and social strategy was at the lowest level and that of utilizing cognitive strategy and metacognitive strategy also at the lower level.

There was a correlation between avoidance behavior

anxiety and writing strategies in two dimensions ($P < 0.01$). Among them, it had the highest negative correlation with effort regulation strategy ($r = -0.102$, $P < 0.05$), and it had the highest positive correlation with affective strategy ($r = 0.120$, $P < 0.05$). This showed that when students underwent more avoidance behavior anxiety, the frequency of using effort regulation was at a lower level, but the frequency of using affective strategy was at a higher level.

There was also a close negative correlation between students' cognitive anxiety in English writing and writing strategies that they used in two dimensions ($P < 0.01$). Among them, it had the highest correlation with effort regulation strategy ($r = -0.208$, $P < 0.01$), followed by metacognitive strategy ($r = -0.178$, $P < 0.01$). This result showed that when students suffered from cognitive anxiety mostly in writing English compositions, the frequency of using effort regulation strategy and cognitive strategy was at the lowest level.

Writing anxiety is an apprehensive and pessimistic feeling, caused by not being ready to write or not being good enough to write [7]. However, such kind of feeling does not pervasively couple with a person's writing life, because it is naturally situational. Many foreign language learners are more likely to undergo the anxiety in particular contexts caused by difficult or boring writing tasks. Some students may experience higher anxiety in front of writing tasks, which can be recognized from their writing behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes. Writing anxiety is more or less like symptoms, which should not be considered as the signal of failure in writing. In other word, it can be said that when the symptoms are treated properly, the satisfactory writing outcomes can be achieved [15].

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussions, non-English students in Chuzhou University experienced a medium level of writing anxiety with avoidance behavior anxiety as the most dominant one. It was found that students positively used strategies in English writing and the most used strategies were affective strategy and cognitive strategy. The least used writing strategy was social strategy. Correlation analysis showed that there was a negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing strategies. Therefore, it is very necessary to take effective measures to help students reduce writing anxiety reasonably and employ writing strategies more frequently and flexibly. As for teachers, they may investigate the overall situations of students' writing anxiety and writing strategies through questionnaires and interviews at the beginning of each school year. Before selecting writing textbooks and assigning writing tasks, teachers may take the overall situations of the levels and types of writing anxiety and writing strategies among students into full consideration and make the optimal design. As for school administration, professional training may be conducted to cultivate teachers' ability in psychological counseling, so that teachers can better

understand students' mental health and help them overcome mental disorders. Consequently, students gradually become more proficient in controlling writing anxiety and enhancing writing confidence and engagement.

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