Writing Anxiety: A Case Study on Students' Reasons for Anxiety in Writing Classes

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was twofold. First, the present study set out to investigate the learners' attitudes towards academic writing courses that they have to take as part of their curriculum, whether they experience second language writing anxiety and what reasons they report for their anxiety and failure in academic writing courses. Second, the study aimed to develop a self-report measure of second language writing anxiety reasons.

In the first part of the study, 150 first year students took part. In the eighth week of 14-week semester, the participants were asked to write at least two paragraphs explaining and describing their attitudes and state their reasons of failure and the reasons of anxiety in writing courses. The student paragraphs were analyzed and their reasons were itemized and a Likert-type response format was adopted.

The scale was administered twice to the first year students the following year. The scale was first administered in the 5th week of 14-week semester and it was administered three weeks later for a second time in order to examine the test-retest reliability. In order to evaluate the validity another measurement instrument which was modified from English Writing Apprehension Test developed by Daly and Miller (1975) was used. The four factors corresponded to the writing itself and writing course, writing skill, teacher and coursebook. To determine the internal consistency Cronbach's coefficient alfa was calculated.

The results of the study are categorized into four. These are reasons related to how learners feel towards writing activity, writing as a skill, teacher and coursebook. Those learners who were asked to write paragraphs and those who answered the writing anxiety reasons scale claimed that they have writing anxiety and may fail because they do not have writing habit and they occasionally wrote in their previous experience and they are not used to writing and express themselves in writing because in their previous education they were familiar taking tests. Learners thought that they lack necessary strategies like organizing ideas, gathering information, combining ideas. Moreover, they thought that their English is not enough to express themselves clearly.

Keywords: *second language writing anxiety; second language writing anxiety reasons inventory.*

(This study is a revised version of the study presented at ACAH 2010 The Asian Conference on Arts and Humanities, June 18-21 2010, Osaka, Japan)

Introduction

Anxiety is one of the factors that affects the process of learning. Zhang (2001) and Hilleson (1996) have stated that when students perform activities that require productive skills, they experience considerable amount of anxiety. As a productive skill, writing has been viewed as a demanding process. According to the research, writing anxiety occurs because of language complexity in general and complexity of writing as a skill in particular (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000). The notion of success in writing is associated with self-expression, smooth flow of ideas, meeting outsider expectations, growing confidence and enjoyment of L2 academic writing and L2 students are known to have problems coping with this (Baştürkmen & Lewis, 2002).

There is a relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance. The issue to be addressed in writing anxiety is whether anxiety is a cause or a result of poor performance. In order to explain this controversy the deficit model claims that a learner fails to perform well due to insufficiently developed skill. According to Naveh-Benjamin (1991) the deficit model is based on the argument that anxious learners display low performance due to deficiency in the acquisition stage, that is, they are deficient; therefore; they are more anxious. In support of this, Sparks, Ganschow and Javorsky (2000) claim that students' cognitive-linguistic disability causes poor performance and this in turn causes anxiety.

On the other hand, in support of interference model, Horwitz (2000) claims that anxiety can interfere with learning and the deficit model may be true to some extent but not for all cases of anxiety. The interference model claims that the anxious learners' low performance is due to their difficulties in retrieving information.

The effects of writing anxiety on writing quality seem to center on several variables. According to Kean, Gylnn and Britton (1987) the effect of writing anxiety is most likely to be manifested when the apprehensive writer composes under time pressure. The vast majority of investigations have indicated that writing anxiety is negatively associated with the quality of the message encoded (Burgoon and Hale, 1983) and with individuals' actual writing behavior. Faigly, Daly and Witte (1981), for example, found that the effects of writing anxiety on writing quality can be observed when writers write about narrative and descriptive topics that require disclosure of personal feelings, experiences and attitudes. Writing anxiety has been found to influence willingness to write or to take advanced writing courses (Daly and Miller, 1975). There has been an effect on individuals' career choices and academic decisions (Daly and Shamo, 1978; Daly, Vangelisti and Witte, 1988).

Moreover, research has demonstrated that teacher plays an important role and affects students' attitudes toward writing (Palmquist and Young, 1992). In L1 setting Claypool (1980) assessed how secondary school teachers' writing anxiety was related to the frequency with which they assigned writing tasks. She found a negative correlation between teachers' writing anxiety and the number of writing assignments they gave. Daly, Vangelisti and Witte (1988) found that teachers' writing anxiety affected the way they evaluated students' written products.

Karakaya and Ülper (2011) investigated what variables explain anxiety levels of students to what extent and, whether writing anxiety levels of prospective teachers significantly varied in terms of various variables. They found that in terms of personal traits, out-of-school writing practice, in-class writing activities by 1-8 grade teachers, amount of time spent watching television, and gender were significant predictive variables and those variables explained only 9.5% of writing anxiety.

However, most studies on writing anxiety have been conducted in the first language. In the second language literature, studies have reported mixed and confusing results about the effects of second

language writing performance (Wu, 1992; Masny and Foxall, 1992), interest in taking advanced L2 writing courses (Masny and Foxall, 1992), and perceived L2 writing demands in the students' majors (Gungle and Taylor, 1989).

In an L2 writing anxiety study, Hassan (2001) gathered 182 third year students enrolled in the English Department in Egypt. He prepared and administered an English Writing Apprehension Questionnaire (EWAQ) and a Foreign Language Self-Esteem Scale (FLSES) to measure writing anxiety and self-esteem respectively. He also asked participants to complete a 40-minute composition to examine writing quantity and quality. Raters trained by the researcher evaluated the compositions for quality, and word count was tallied to examine quantity. The results show that a significant negative relationship exists between writing apprehension and self-esteem. Moreover, low apprehensive students wrote better quality compositions than high apprehensive students. "Low Apprehensive students had higher self-esteem than High Apprehensive students and vice versa" (p. 22); and "Low Self-Esteem students obtained significantly higher writing apprehension scores than their High Self-Esteem counterparts…This means that the Low Self-Esteem group was more apprehensive/anxious than the High Self-Esteem group" (p. 24).

He also concluded that students with low self-esteem and with low apprehension scored less than their counterparts on the writing quantity task (p. 25). Hassan suggested that reducing student writing anxiety by changing the context of foreign language learning is the most important task for teachers to try to achieve (p. 27). Moreover, he suggested that teacher evaluation should be reduced and supplemented with peer or self-evaluation when applicable; students should be involved in more communicative writing tasks (pp. 28-29).

In another study Cheng (2002) investigated the relationships among students' perceptions of their second language writing anxiety and learner differences and among second language writing anxiety and other forms of language anxiety. The participants were 165 English majors in Taiwan. They were administered a second language writing anxiety scale expanded from Daly-Miller WAT (1975), an adapted form of foreign language classroom anxiety scale developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), two first language anxiety scales developed by the researcher and a background information questionnaire. Cheng found that second language writing anxiety is distinct from first language writing anxiety and female students showed significantly higher levels of second language writing anxiety than male students but no significant difference was found among different level students although second language writing anxiety appeared to increase with increased time of study.

The previous research has focused on the effect of writing anxiety on writing, the teacher's role on students' attitudes toward writing, variables that explain anxiety levels, however; most of these studies have been conducted in the first language. In the field of second language writing, there seems to be a need for studies on writing anxiety and reasons of writing anxiety. Moreover, there is a need for a scale to identify learners' reasons for second language writing anxiety. In order to fill the gap in the field, the purpose of the present study was two fold. First, the present study set out to investigate the learners' attitudes towards academic writing courses that they have to take as part of their curriculum in Education Faculty, whether they experience second language writing anxiety and what reasons they report for their anxiety and failure in academic writing courses. Second, this study aimed to develop a self-report measure of second language writing anxiety reasons.

Method

Participants and Procedures

In the first part of the study, 150 first year students studying at Anadolu University, English Language Teaching Department took part in 2009 spring semester. The participants had passed the exam which was given by Preparation School to determine the students who will study in the Preparation School. The participants had an academic writing course in the fall semester and they were aged between 19-21.

In the eighth week of 14-week semester, the participants were asked to write at least two paragraphs explaining and describing their attitudes and how they feel towards writing and state their reasons of failure and the reasons of anxiety in writing courses. The study was conducted in the eight week of the semester because until week eight learners had experienced writing paragraphs and essays and had their mid-term grades. Then the student paragraphs were collected and analyzed. Their reasons were itemized and while itemizing the following were considered: Sentence would not be too long and confusing, and expressed through accurate grammar to make meaning clear. In order to avoid bias, the items were written in sentences which were not containing subjective expressions.

Then by using these items a Likert-type response format was adopted consisting of a 5-choice response scale corresponding to 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (no strong feelings), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). Then the scale was given to two teachers to review the appropriateness of the categories and items. These two teachers were chosen because one was teaching scale development course in the Educational Sciences Institute and the other was teaching writing to first year students.

All items were rated as appropriate indicators of reasons of second language writing anxiety.

Scale Development and validation procedures

The second language writing anxiety reasons scale was administered twice to the first year students the following year, in 2010 fall semester. These were the students who passed the examination given by Preparatory School and studying in Education Faculty English Language Teaching Department. The scale was first administered in the 5th week of 14-week semester and in order to examine the test-retest reliability of the scale it was administered three weeks later for a second time.

A newly developed measure needs to be evaluated in terms of validity taking various sources of evidence into account. In order to evaluate the validity of the Second Language Writing Anxiety Reasons Inventory developed by the researcher, another measurement instrument was used. It was modified from English Writing Apprehension Test which was developed by Daly and Miller (1975). This modified version was used to evaluate the new measure because it had ESL version and it was tested for validity and reliability.

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Results

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Factor Analysis

The Principle Axis Factoring method of extraction was conducted to examine the factor structure of second language writing anxiety reasons inventory. Two separate analyses were performed on responses from the first and the second administrations. For both analyses, a variety of criteria were used to determine the number of common factors to retain including the eigenvalue>1 criterion, the scree test, and the amount of common variance. Table 1 shows the factor loadings from the rotated pattern matrix for the two analyses.

Table1. Oblimin rotated factor pattern of the two analyses on the L2 writing anxiety reasons items

	First administration Factor				Second administration Factor			
	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV
1. I have difficulty in writing because I did not take writing course before.			.76			.78		
12. I have difficulty in this course because I do not have writing habit.			.76			.71		
23. I have difficulty in writing because I am used to taking tests.			.75			.74		
31. I am not successful because I do not study regularly for writing course.			.72			.77		
15. Writing is a skill, only skilled people can write good pieces.			.71			.70		
22. I can not express what I think.			.70			.72		
17. I can not improve my English because I do not read enough.			.69					
28. I do not like writing.			.68			.70		
11. I do not like writing class.			.68			.65		
27. I can not write because I lack vocabulary			.71			.67		
4. I can not express myself in English because I lack grammar knowledge.			.70			.73		
10. I have difficulty in finding topics to write.			.69			.70		
3. When there is a topic, I do not know what to write about that topic.			.69			.69		
14. I do not know how to begin writing.			.67			.68		
19. I can not organize what I want to write.			.66					
21. I can not combine ideas to each other when I write			.65			.65		
16. I can not organize my ideas to write.			.65			.68		
24. I organize my ideas in Turkish while writing, therefore; I can not express them in English.			.64			.64		
29. I can not generate ideas, so I am not creative.			.61			.60		
2. The teacher does not teach the subject clearly.			.76			.64		
20. I get bored because the teacher is boring.			.76			.67		
5. The teacher does not answer students' questions.			.71			.68		
7. The teacher does not give feedback to student writing.			.69			.70		
18. The teacher's passes on the new subject very fast.			.67			.69		
25. The teacher does not give enough examples.			.67			.68		
26. The teacher does not direct students to write well.			.66			.68		
9. The teacher does not encourage students to write better.			.65			.65		
8. The coursebook is boring.			.72			.70		
6. The coursebook does not contain enough examples.			.71			.70		
30. The examples in the coursebook			.70			.71		

are not exploratory		
13. There are not enough exercises in the coursebook.	.69	.70

Loadings less than .48 in absolute value were blanked out. The four factors corresponded to the writing itself and writing course, writing skill, teacher and coursebook. The result provides validity evidence regarding the internal structure of the 31-item inventory and lends support to construct validity.

To determine the internal consistency of the second language writing anxiety reasons inventory, Cronbach's coefficient alfa was calculated and reliability estimate was .91 for both of the two administrations. Some of the items were excluded and the result of Cronbach's coefficient alfa was around .91 for each calculation. This showed that it was not possible to obtain an improvement in the overall alfa by omitting any of the items. Then two administration scores were correlated and the resulting test-retest estimate was .80. These results indicated that second language writing anxiety reasons inventory has high internal consistency and respectable temporal stability.

For the convergent and discriminant validity of the second language writing anxiety reasons inventory, correlation analysis was administered between second language writing anxiety reasons inventory and Daly-Miller WAT second language version. The result was .66 showing that second language writing anxiety reasons inventory has convergent and discriminant construct validity.

Conclusion

First of all, the present case study set out to investigate second language learners' reasons of anxiety in the academic writing courses. Students were asked to write two paragraphs stating their reasons of anxiety and failure in the writing courses. The reasons were identified by the paragraphs written by the students. Then these statements were itemized and changed into a 5-point Likert type inventory. Factor analysis techniques were employed to help select items to construct subscales that reflect four reason categories: how learners feel towards writing activity, writing as a skill, teacher and the coursebook. Further correlational procedures were employed to examine whether the developed second language writing anxiety reasons inventory has good consistency reliability, test-retest reliability, convergent and discriminant validity. Taken together, the results have provided preliminary evidence for the reliability and construct validity of the second language writing anxiety reasons inventory.

Previous research has focused on the writing anxiety and considerable progress has been made in improving measurement instruments of second language anxiety and second language writing anxiety scales. By introducing reasons of second language writing anxiety scale, the present study intends to help writing teachers identify their learners' reasons of failure in writing classes and help their learners in overcoming this anxiety.

The results of the study showed that the results are categorized into four. These are reasons related to writing itself, writing as a skill, teacher and coursebook. The learners claimed that they have writing anxiety and may fail because they do not have writing habit and they occasionally wrote in their previous experience and they are not used to writing and express themselves in writing because in their previous education they are familiar taking tests.

When writing as a skill is considered, learners thought that they lack necessary strategies like organizing ideas, gathering information, combining ideas. Moreover they thought that their English is not enough to express themselves clearly.

As a third category, learners stated that the teacher does not encourage, does not give feedback and is not interested in students' writing problems. The teacher's teaching style may cause trouble as well like not giving examples or not teaching in an interesting way.

Fourth, the coursebook may become a reason for failure when it does not have enough examples and exercises and does not explain enough for the students.

Thus, when confronted with writing anxious learners in writing classes, the writing teacher may consider the categories and take precautions to prevent from writing anxiety.

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Appendix

The results of this study will be used to help write better and make writing class more effective. Therefore, please indicate how much you agree with the following statements by choosing 1 2 3 4 5.

1. strongly disagree
2. disagree
3. no strong feelings
4. agree
5. strongly agree
Thank you for your participation.

1. I have difficulty in writing because I did not take writing course before.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The teacher does not teach the subject clearly.	1	2	3	4	5
3. When there is a topic, I do not know what to write about that topic.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I can not express myself in English because I lack grammar knowledge.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The teacher does not answer students' questions.	1	2	3	4	5
6. The coursebook does not contain enough examples.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The teacher does not give feedback to student writing.	1	2	3	4	5

8. The coursebook is boring.	1	2	3	4	5
9. The teacher does not encourage students to write better.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I have difficulty in finding topics to write.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I do not like writing class.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I have difficulty in this course because I do not have writing habit	1	2	3	4	5
13. There are not enough exercises in the coursebook.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I do not know how to begin writing.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Writing is a skill, only skilled people can write good pieces.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I can not organize my ideas to write.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I can not improve my English because I do not read enough.	1	2	3	4	5
18. The teacher's passes on the new subject very fast.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I can not organize what I want to write.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I get bored because the teacher is boring.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I can not combine ideas to each other when I write	1	2	3	4	5
22. I can not express what I think.	1	2	3	4	5
23. I have difficulty in writing because I am used to taking tests	1	2	3	4	5
24. I organize my ideas in Turkish while writing, therefore; I can not express them in English.	1	2	3	4	5
25. The teacher does not give enough examples.	1	2	3	4	5
26. The teacher does not direct students to write well.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I can not write because I lack vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5
28. I do not like writing.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I can not generate ideas, so I am not creative.	1	2	3	4	5
30. The examples in the coursebook are not exploratory	1	2	3	4	5
31. I am not successful because I do not study regularly for writing course.	1	2	3	4	5