



***Gender-Based Differences in the Algerian EFL Learners' Writing
Case study of EFL Students at the Department of English, Bejaia .Anxiety
University***

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Abstract:

Because EFL writing is challenging and difficult, most EFL learners fail to meet the communicative and the linguistic expectations of the instructors. Researchers have proven that foreign language anxiety is always associated with productive skills such as writing. Therefore, the present study aims at deepening the understanding of writing anxiety through approaching its link with the learners' gender. In pursuance of this aim, exploratory design was adopted. 29 EFL students at the University of Bejaia participated in the study. Data were collected from a second language writing anxiety inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004). The findings reveal that EFL learners at Bejaia University have a moderate level of writing anxiety. Besides, there is no statistically significant difference in writing anxiety between males and females.

Keywords: *Anxiety; anxiety inventory; gender; second/foreign language anxiety; writing anxiety*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The requirements of today's globalized and interconnected world demand from people to develop their communication skills. Being a means of communication, writing becomes an indispensable skill mainly in nowadays digitalization and internet development. Therefore, the importance of writing has been worldwide recognized, and educators are in a constant search for the appropriate instructional techniques and strategies to effectively teach this necessary but a, generally argued, hard and difficult task (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989). The difficulty of this productive skill is attributed to a variety of reasons such as its development requires the coordination of experiential, cognitive, linguistic, affective as well as psycho-motor capacities (Westwood, 2008). Another reason might be the fact that learners begin first by learning to listen, read and speak before starting to write. Accordingly, the complexity of writing as a task tends to increase the number of obstacles and puzzlement that learners encounter. This puzzlement may hinder and demotivate the learners and result in forming negative conceptions .about writing as well

Foreign language anxiety is a well-documented and widely researched area in language learning and teaching. It is used to describe the feeling of tension and apprehension associated with foreign language learning contexts, including language skill-specific anxiety. A growing body of research indicates that foreign language anxiety affects language learning. However, whether its impact is positive or negative remains controversial. Decades ago, scholars have recognized that some people like writing more than others. However, it is only recently that they have investigated the causes and consequences of this tension labelled writing anxiety. From the previous studies, it is obvious that the relationship between anxiety and foreign language writing is complex. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find the Algerian EFL learners' gender differences with regard to second language writing anxiety.

1. Review of the Related Literature

1.1.EFL Writing and its Related Concepts

Recently, the importance of writing has internationally been recognized and it was considered as one of the most crucial skills in foreign language learning. To this end, it became the cornerstone of many research works. Simply, writing can be defined as the graphic representation of abstract ideas on paper (Widdowson, 1978). Yet, this definition tends to underestimate the complexity of this task. So researchers go further to define it as a sophisticated cognitive activity in which the writer needs to control several variables at the same time (Nunan, 1989). This indicates how writing is complex as it is linked to cognition and as it .requires the coordination of several abilities

The teaching of writing in EFL contexts has witnessed various changes and developments since its recognition as a very important skill. Up to the end of the 1960s, writing was a neglected area in language teaching and the primacy was given to speaking (Harmer, 2001). With the dominance of behaviourism and structuralism at that time, writing was taught through the process of imitation and the focus was predominantly put on the formal surface and the structural aspects of the language (Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor, 2006). In other words, the teacher provides the learners with models of texts that they will imitate. In addition, teachers' attention was directed to the final product and its correctness. Yet, it was admitted that learners were able to write accurate and error-free pieces of writing but they lack good command of writing different texts in different contexts and for different purposes. By the end of the 1960s, another movement appeared to reshape the teaching of writing. With the innatist theory, importance was given to the mind and its cognitive functions. Therefore, writing was recognised as a cognitive task, and attention was directed to the different stages the writer goes through to accomplish a final written. Nevertheless, through the focus on the cognitive processes of writing, its social nature was neglected. Again, in the 1980s, another movement appeared. It gave credit to the social nature of writing with an emphasis on the socially recognized ways of conveying messages (Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor, 2006). Yet, this movement has also been criticized because learners' creativity was discouraged as they were taught to reproduce .particular genres of texts

It is worth mentioning that the complexity of writing leads to learners facing several challenges and problems. Writing is effortful in that the writer needs to focus on only on conveying ideas but also on the accurate spelling of the words, following strictly the grammatical rules. He also needs to contextualize his words according to the audience and the purpose of his/her text. Therefore, problems in grammar, spelling and vocabulary usage are most often faced (Nation, 2007). In addition to the linguistic-based problems, learners encounter psychological challenges such as writing anxiety

1.2. Writing Anxiety in the EFL Context

Indeed, it is undeniable that the majority of L2 learners would have experienced anxiety or apprehension while L2 learning more often than not. Gardner (1985) sustains that highly anxious learners seem to be less successful in learning a second language than the more relaxed learners. In the same vein, Dornyei (2005) claims that “[...] in an anxiety-provoking climate our L2 knowledge deteriorates”. This means that anxiety is one of the variables that hinders the learning process. For this reason, anxiety has been prominent in L2 research for decades. Spielberger (1983, as cited in Zheng, 2008, p.) defines anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system”. In simpler words, anxiety is the psychological state of discomfort, nervousity and worry. As far as foreign language anxiety is concerned, it is defined by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986, p.31) as “a distinct complex of self-perception beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process”. That is to say, foreign language anxiety is a situation-specific construct associated with the context of the foreign language classroom.

Researchers and practitioners have long recognized that the composing process affects individuals in varied manners and to varying degrees (Daly and Wilson, 1983). During the 1970s, research studies came to distinguish the negative effect of this process in the form of anxiety that was specifically associated with writing (Cheng, Horwitz and Shallert, 1999). Thus, in 1975, Daly and Miller coined the word “writing apprehension” to refer to writing anxiety.

Notably, most of the studies on foreign language anxiety focused on speaking and listening advocating that oral skills are more anxiety-provoking for foreign language learners (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Richmond and Dickson (1985) state that it is only recently that writing anxiety has been a topic of substantial research; however, it is far away from being the centre of thorough research and away from being effectively addressed (Salovey and Haar, 1990).

According to Daly (1978), writing apprehension is the kind of anxiety associated with writing mainly in situations involving evaluation. Besides, Vielhaber (1983) adds that writing anxiety is the fear that pertains as one is trying to translate his ideas into words. That is to say, writing anxiety is the tension felt in written communication.

Based on the relevant literature, anxiety has a consistently negative effect on L2 performance. In this sense, the results of MacIntyre's (1995) study reveal that anxious learners have lower levels of achievement in L2 learning. More specifically, writing anxiety is also found to impede L2 learning.

Among the potential sources of writing anxiety, Vielhaber (1983) identifies the fear of self-exposure: Learners who have experienced failure in writing tend to be reluctant and avoid writing on the belief that they cannot write, and they do not expose themselves to failure again. Another factor might be the lack of practice. While more writing does not necessarily lead to better writing, it can, at least, reduce the writer's apprehension. Another source is the basic differences between speaking and writing. Unlike writing, in speaking there is no possibility of editing or reworking words. Though this editing leads to writing good quality texts, it may cause anxiety and inhibition among learners. This is because some learners find it challenging to produce and edit at the same time.

As far as the correlation between writing anxiety and other individual differences is concerned, Daly (1985) maintains that to construct a solid framework of writing anxiety and to have a clear understanding of this concept, it is important to specify its relationship with and link to other personality variables. In one study, Miller and Daly (1975) investigated the relationship between writing anxiety and general anxiety. The results of the study indicated that there is no significant correlation between the two variables; however, Thompson's (1983, as cited in Miller and Daly, 1975) results reveal a positive and significant correlation between them. In another study, Daly and Miller (1975) explored sex differences in the measurement of writing anxiety. They found that women are slightly less anxious about writing than men, they hypothesized that males would be more anxious about writing than females because they generally receive fewer rewards for their writing.

Cheng (2004, p. 316) made a distinction between three main types of writing anxiety: Somatic, cognitive and behaviour avoidance. Somatic Anxiety refers to one's perception of the physiological effects of the anxiety experience, as reflected in an increase in the state of unpleasant feelings, such as nervousness and tension. Cognitive Anxiety refers to the cognitive aspect of anxiety experience, including negative expectations, preoccupation with performance and concern about others' perception. Avoidance Behaviour refers to the behavioural aspect of the anxiety characterized by the avoidance of writing.

To the knowledge of the researcher, the construct of writing anxiety has not been tackled in the Algerian context. To this end, the present paper aims at shedding greater light on this variable by exploring its link to EFL learners' gender.

II. The Study

1.1. Research Questions

To carry out this study, the following research questions are addressed:

- ✓ To what extent do EFL learners at Bejaia University experience writing anxiety, and which type is dominant?
- ✓ Is there any difference in the writing anxiety level of the Algerian EFL males and females?

1.2. Research Hypothesis

- ✓ We hypothesize that EFL learners at Bejaia University experience a moderate writing anxiety.
- ✓ We hypothesize that EFL females at Bejaia University experience a significantly higher level of writing apprehension than do males.

1.3. Sample and Population

The population of this study is EFL learners enrolled in the department of English at the University of Bejaia. Our sample consists of 29 learners chosen randomly to participate in this study.

1.4. Data Collection Instrument

In an attempt to investigate second language writing anxiety with a focus on gender differences, obtain an answer to the research questions, and provide the readers with ample, tangible and reliable data, we have sought knowledgeable to focus on an exploratory design which based on quantitative methods of data collection. Data were collected using a close-ended questionnaire (see appendix 1). It involves two sections: the first section concerns the general information of our participants. It comprises three questions: Q1: learners' gender, Q2: learners' age and Q3: learners' years of studying English at the university. The second section sought to discover the learners' level and types of writing anxiety. It comprises 22 items adopted from Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). It involves 22 items answered on five-

point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= uncertain, 4= agree and 5= strongly agree). 7 items (1- 4- 7- 17- 18- 21- and 22) are negative and they require reverse scoring. That is, 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3=undecided, 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree. The mean scores were categorized as stated by Zhang (2011): a mean score above 65 is considered as a high level of anxiety, a mean score lower than 50 as a low level of anxiety, and a mean score between 50 and 65 is considered as a moderate level of anxiety.

1.5.Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 25.0) was employed to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were used to compute the percentages, the means, and the standard deviations to determine the levels of writing anxiety with a focus on gender. Additionally, the independent samples t-test was used to check whether the difference is significant or not.

III. Results and Discussion

The main results of the current study are reported in the following section.

1.1.General Information

This section provides information about our participants. The students' age is ranged between 18 and 34. Most of them (72.4%) are between 18 and 22. 13.8 % of them are between 23 and 26. 10.3% of them are between 27 and 30. And finally, 3.4% of them are between 31 and 34. As far as the gender of our participants is concerned. 51.7% of them are females and 48.3% of them are males this may be related to the fact that females prefer to study languages more than males. Concerning our participants' years of study at university, most of them (48.3%) had studied for four years. 20.7% had studied for two years. 13.8% had studied for three years.6.9% had studied for one year. 6.9% had studied for five years. And finally, 3.4% of them had studied for six years.

1.2.Levels of Writing Anxiety

Table (1): Descriptive Statistics of the Overall SLWAI

Anxiety Level	Number	Percentage	Overall Mean	Standard Deviation
Low	3	10.3	58.96	11.09
Moderate	20	69		
High	6	20.7		

Table (1) illustrates our participants' overall writing anxiety. As it can be noticed, the results of SLWAI showed that our participants have a moderate level of anxiety (M= 58.96). Following Zhang (2011) categorization, a mean score between 50 and 65 represents moderate anxiety. Furthermore, 20 students representing 69% were found to have a moderate anxiety, 6 participants representing 20.7% have a high level of anxiety and finally, 3 students representing 10.3% have a low level of anxiety. This might reinforce the conclusion that there is a moderate foreign language writing anxiety among EFL learners at the University of Bejaia. This can be due to the learners having studied at the university for many years (most of them studied 4 years).

1.3.Types of Writing Anxiety

Table (2): Descriptive Statistics of the Types of Writing Anxiety

Writing Anxiety Types	Mean	Standard Deviation
Somatic Anxiety	20.34	4.47
Avoidance Behavior	17	3.6
Cognitive Anxiety	22.34	5.42

Table (2) illustrates the types of writing anxiety experienced by our participants. As it can be noticed, the most experienced type is cognitive anxiety (M= 22.34), followed by somatic anxiety (M= 20.34) and finally, avoidance behaviour is the least type experienced (M= 17).

Table (3): Types of Writing Anxiety Based on Gender

Gender	Anxiety Types	Mean	Standard Deviation
Females	Somatic Anxiety	21.66	4.41
	Avoidance Behavior	16.66	4.20
	Cognitive Anxiety	22.93	6.37
Males	Somatic Anxiety	18.92	4.23
	Avoidance Behavior	17.28	2.92
	Cognitive Anxiety	21.71	4.33

Table (3) displays gender differences in terms of the types of writing anxiety. We have noticed that females mostly experience cognitive anxiety (M= 22.93), followed by somatic anxiety (M= 21.66). Avoidance behaviour is the least experienced (M= 16.66). Regarding males, as it is shown in the above table, cognitive anxiety is also the most experienced (M= 21.71) followed by somatic experience (M= 18.92) and finally avoidance behaviour (M= 17.2). This reflects that there is no difference between males and females in terms of the type of anxiety experienced.

Table (4): Overall Writing Anxiety Scores based on Gender

Gender	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Females	15	60.60	12.02
Males	14	57.21	10.13

Table (4) displays our participants' overall writing anxiety based on gender. The mean scores of anxiety for males were 57.21 with a standard deviation of 10.13. The mean scores for female

were 60.60 with a standard deviation of 12.02. This implies that females experience a slightly greater amount of writing anxiety than males. To check whether the difference is statistically significant or not, an independent t-test and descriptive statistics were computed. The results of using independent sample T-tests are shown in table 3 below.

Table (5): Independent Samples t-Test for Equality of Means

t-Test for Equality of Means								
Writing Anxiety	T	Df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Standard Error Difference	95% confidence interval of the Difference		
						Lower	Upper	
Equal of Variance	.81	27	.42	3.38	4.14	-5.12	11.89	
Equal of Variance not	.82	26.74	.41	3.38	4.12	-5.07	1.84	

The results of the independent sample test as shown in table (5) reveal that there is no statistically significant difference of writing anxiety of females and males: $t(27) = .816$; $p = .42 > 0.05$.

IV. Discussion

The primary aim of the present study is to determine whether there is a significant difference between males and females with regard to writing anxiety. It also aims at finding out the types and levels of foreign language writing anxiety of the Algerian EFL learners. The participants of the current study were 29 EFL learners enrolled in the department of English at the University of Bejaia. 14 males and 15 females.

In an answer to the first research question (what are the types and level of anxiety experienced by EFL learners at Bejaia University), the results of the present study reveal that 69% (n=20) of the participants have moderate anxiety. This is in line with most of the studies which conclude that EFL students experience moderate to high anxiety levels (Aljafen, 2013; Anggrainn, 2016).

To this end, our first hypothesis has been confirmed.

Regarding the types of anxiety, the participants of this study have mainly cognitive anxiety (M= 22.34), in this respect, the results of this study are in line with Zhang (2011) who advocated that cognitive anxiety became the major type of the writing anxiety experienced by students. This result unveiled the fact that EFL learners at Bejaia University go through high pressures of tests and evaluation in EFL writing. This supports Cheng's (2004) conclusion that cognitive anxiety is closely related to test anxiety. Females scored in cognitive anxiety higher (M= 22.93) than males (21.71), this shows that females have concerns about other's perceptions, have negative expectations and worries more than males. The other type of writing anxiety that rated high scores was somatic anxiety (M= 20.34). Females scored higher (M= 21.66) than males (M= 18.92), this reflects the fact that some physiological symptoms such as nervousness, tension and

pounding heart can be noticed more in females than in males. Avoidance behaviour is the type that rated low scores ($M= 16.96$). Males scored higher ($M= 17.28$) than females ($M= 16.66$).

This illustrates that males procrastinate, withdraw or even avoid writing.

As far as the second research question is concerned, the results indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between males and females though females were found to be slightly more anxious than males. In this respect, the results of the current study are in sharp contrast with a previous study of Daly and Miller (1975) that advocated that males are more anxious than females. Accordingly, our second hypothesis has been infirmed.

V. Conclusion

Previous investigations have proven that writing anxiety is one of the influential factors that may impede writing performance. Therefore, understanding this affective variable, its sources and how it is linked to other variables contribute to finding adequate solutions to reduce it for better writing performance. Furthermore, since it is only recently that systematic investigations of people's feelings about writing have been conducted, there is a need to thoroughly explore those feelings, mainly what it has become to be known as writing anxiety. Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, in the Algerian context, the construct of writing anxiety has not been studied. This is why in the course of this study, we aimed at exploring writing anxiety based on gender differences. The results of the current study have demonstrated that EFL students enrolled at Bejaia University have moderate writing anxiety. We have also concluded that females in our context are slightly more anxious than males; however, the independent sample t-test revealed that the difference in the females' and males' writing anxiety is not statistically significant.

VI. Recommendation and suggestions for future research

Based on the results of the present investigation, we highly recommend the following:

- ✓ This study took the first step toward the direction of understanding the nature of writing anxiety; however, further research is desirable to gain a better understanding of what this variable is and how it functions in foreign language learning.
- ✓ A close study of the situational features of writing anxiety might shed more light on its components leading to a more refined theoretical basis.
- ✓ Teachers should be aware of the existence of writing anxiety and its impact on the learners' performance in order to find ways to reduce it.
- ✓ Additional research should be conducted to determine the kind of classroom activities and instructional techniques that may reduce learners' writing anxiety and help improve their performance.
- ✓ Conducting more studies about writing anxiety and suggest solutions in the Algerian EFL context.

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Appendix

Students Questionnaire

Dear students,

In our research work, we are investigating the relationship between gender and EFL learners' writing anxiety. Your anonymous contribution throughout this questionnaire will certainly be of great help to gather the needed data to accomplish our research. As students of English, you are kindly invited to answer as thoughtfully and honestly as possible these questions. Thank you for your cooperation!

Section I: General Information

- 1- What is your gender? A. Female
B. Male
- 2- What is your age? A. 18-22
B. 23-26
C. 27-30
D. 31-34
- 3- How long have you been studying English at university?

Section II: Writing Anxiety

Please read the following statement and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement. 1= strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3= undecided; 4= agree; 5= strongly agree.

1. While writing in English I am not nervous at all.
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under a time constraint.
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.
4. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.
5. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.

6. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.
7. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others.
8. I tremble or respire when I write English compositions under time pressure.
9. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.
10. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.
11. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under a time constraint.
12. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write compositions.
13. I often feel panic when I write English under time pressure.
14. I'm afraid that other students would deride my English composition if they read it.
15. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.
16. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.
17. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.
18. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.
19. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.
20. I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.
21. I'm not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.
22. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions