

Beyond Language Deficiency: A Qualitative Exploration of Writing Anxiety among Malaysian Diploma Engineering Students

*Nurul Hijah Jasman¹, Ameiruel Azwan Ab Aziz¹

¹Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA

Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Writing in a second language (L2) is a cognitively demanding activity that requires learners to generate and organise ideas while simultaneously managing linguistic, rhetorical and audience-related demands. These demands may be accompanied by writing anxiety, particularly when learners perceive their linguistic resources as inadequate or anticipate negative evaluation. Although previous research has identified linguistic difficulties, fear of evaluation, low confidence and task-related pressures as potential sources of L2 writing anxiety, less attention has been given to how these factors are experienced as interconnected processes by students in discipline-specific higher education contexts. This study qualitatively explores the factors contributing to writing anxiety among Malaysian diploma engineering students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 semester three diploma engineering students enrolled in an academic English course at a Malaysian public university. The interview data were analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The qualitative findings were interpreted using Cheng's (2004) three dimensions of writing anxiety: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety and avoidance behaviour. Linguistic difficulties, particularly grammatical problems and limited vocabulary, were prominent sources of cognitive anxiety. However, participants' narratives demonstrated that anxiety extended beyond language proficiency to include performance pressure, fear of negative evaluation, negative self-perceptions, difficulty generating and developing ideas, social judgement, difficult topics and time constraints. Importantly, the findings suggest an interconnected experiential pattern in which linguistic and cognitive difficulties may be accompanied by frustration and self-doubt, followed by physical discomfort and, in some cases, disengagement from writing. The study therefore argues that L2 writing anxiety should be understood as a multidimensional and dynamic experience rather than simply a consequence of inadequate language proficiency. Pedagogically, the findings highlight the importance of combining linguistic scaffolding with supportive feedback practices, confidence-building opportunities and anxiety-sensitive writing instruction.

Keywords: L2 writing anxiety, writing apprehension, engineering students, qualitative research, Malaysian higher education, second language writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognised as one of the more complex language skills because it requires learners to coordinate multiple cognitive and linguistic processes simultaneously. Unlike spontaneous oral communication, academic writing requires learners to generate ideas, organise information, select appropriate lexical and grammatical resources, establish coherence and consider the expectations of an intended audience. These demands can be particularly challenging for learners writing in a second or foreign language, for whom linguistic limitations may coexist with difficulties related to confidence, self-efficacy and anxiety (Altukruni, 2019; Badrasawi et al., 2016; Moses & Mohamad, 2019; Sun & Wang, 2020).

The emotional dimension of L2 writing has consequently attracted increasing attention. Writing anxiety refers broadly to the tension, worry, apprehension and physiological discomfort experienced when learners engage in writing in an additional language. Cheng (2004) conceptualised L2 writing anxiety as a multidimensional

construct comprising cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety and avoidance behaviour. Cognitive anxiety concerns worry, negative expectations and fear of poor performance; somatic anxiety involves physiological manifestations of anxiety; and avoidance behaviour reflects tendencies to delay, minimise or avoid writing activities. This three-dimensional conceptualisation has subsequently been employed in research on L2 writing anxiety.

Research has identified a range of factors associated with writing anxiety. Linguistic difficulties, including limited vocabulary, grammatical problems and inadequate knowledge of writing conventions, may increase learners' apprehension (Badrasawi et al., 2016; Mohamad et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2023). Psychological factors such as low confidence, negative self-perceptions and fear of evaluation may further intensify learners' anxiety (Altukruni, 2019; Cheng, 2002; Wern & Rahmat, 2021). Task conditions, including unfamiliar topics, assessment requirements and time constraints, may also increase the perceived difficulty of writing.

The Malaysian context is particularly relevant. Research has documented continuing challenges in English language and academic writing among Malaysian university students, including concerns relating to writing proficiency, anxiety and confidence (Badrasawi et al., 2016; Kamaruddin et al., 2021; Saravanan et al., 2021). Malaysian learners may also have relatively limited opportunities to use English outside formal instructional settings, potentially increasing their apprehension when required to produce extended academic texts. Previous research has therefore highlighted the importance of further examining writing anxiety among Malaysian learners, particularly at diploma level.

This issue is particularly significant for diploma engineering students. Engineering education requires students to develop disciplinary knowledge while also communicating information accurately and effectively. Academic writing therefore represents an additional demand for students who may already perceive English as a challenging subject. In the present study, the participants were semester three diploma engineering students enrolled in ELC 231, an academic English course that includes expository writing and a standardised writing assessment under specified time and word-count requirements.

Previous quantitative research is useful for identifying the prevalence and relative importance of different sources of writing anxiety. However, numerical measures may not fully explain how these sources are experienced by learners or how one difficulty may become connected to another. Qualitative inquiry can provide access to students' own accounts of the emotional, cognitive, physical and behavioural experiences associated with writing.

This distinction is important because a student who reports "vocabulary problems" on a questionnaire may actually experience a much more complex process. Difficulty finding a word may lead to frustration; frustration may lead to self-doubt; self-doubt may increase concern about evaluation; and accumulated anxiety may eventually be accompanied by physical discomfort or avoidance. Such experiences cannot be fully captured by treating linguistic difficulty, confidence and avoidance as independent variables.

Therefore, this study addresses the following research question:

What factors contribute to writing anxiety among Malaysian diploma engineering students?

Rather than conceptualising writing anxiety as a direct consequence of insufficient English proficiency, the study examines how linguistic, psychological, social and contextual factors interact in students' lived experiences of L2 writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

L2 Writing Anxiety as a Multidimensional Phenomenon

Anxiety has long been recognised as an important affective factor in second language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz & Young, 1991). However, anxiety associated with writing should not necessarily be treated as identical to general foreign language anxiety. Cheng et al. (1999) demonstrated that writing anxiety could be

distinguished from speaking anxiety, supporting the need to examine anxiety in relation to specific language skills.

Cheng (2004) subsequently developed the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), which conceptualises writing anxiety across three dimensions: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety and avoidance behaviour. Cognitive anxiety includes worry, negative expectations and concerns about performance and evaluation. Somatic anxiety encompasses physiological reactions associated with writing, while avoidance behaviour concerns tendencies to withdraw from or minimise engagement with L2 writing tasks.

These dimensions are conceptually distinguishable but may not be psychologically independent. A learner who becomes preoccupied with making grammatical errors may experience increasing tension during writing. Continued tension may be accompanied by physical discomfort and may, in some cases, contribute to delaying or avoiding the writing task. Recent scholarship has similarly emphasised the multidimensional nature of language anxiety and its relationship with cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes.

The present study therefore adopts Cheng's (2004) three-dimensional framework as an analytical lens while also examining how the dimensions may become interconnected within individual writing experiences.

Linguistic Difficulties and Writing Anxiety

Linguistic difficulty is one of the frequently reported sources of L2 writing anxiety. Learners may experience difficulty with vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction and knowledge of academic writing conventions. Such difficulties can increase the cognitive demands of writing because learners must simultaneously formulate ideas and monitor linguistic accuracy.

Vocabulary may be particularly important. Learners may have ideas available in their first language but lack the lexical resources required to express those ideas in English. The result may be a perceived gap between conceptual knowledge and linguistic expression. Research has similarly identified linguistic knowledge, vocabulary and writing conventions as important challenges in L2 writing (Badrasawi et al., 2016; Mohamad et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2023).

Importantly, linguistic difficulty does not necessarily mean that learners lack ideas. Research on L2 writing has highlighted the role of learners' first language in idea generation and the complexity involved in transferring ideas into the target language (Stapa & Majid, 2012). Consequently, a learner who produces a short or underdeveloped essay may not necessarily lack content knowledge; rather, linguistic constraints may prevent the learner from fully expressing and elaborating available ideas.

This distinction is important in interpreting writing anxiety. When students repeatedly experience difficulty translating ideas into English, they may begin to interpret linguistic problems as evidence of personal inadequacy. The problem may therefore shift from "*I do not know this word*" to "*I cannot write well.*"

Confidence, Self-Perception and Performance Pressure

L2 writing takes place within an evaluative academic environment. Students are frequently aware that their written work will be assessed according to criteria relating to language accuracy, organisation, content and overall quality. Consequently, writing can become threatening when students perceive a large gap between what they are expected to produce and what they believe they are capable of producing.

Cheng (2002) identified fear of negative evaluation and concerns about writing performance among factors associated with foreign language writing anxiety. Research has also highlighted the importance of learners' perceptions of their writing ability and writing self-efficacy in L2 writing (Sun & Wang, 2020). When learners interpret mistakes or poor grades as evidence of low ability, anxiety may become intertwined with self-worth.

Feedback can also play an important role. Feedback is central to L2 writing development, but students' responses to feedback depend partly on how they interpret and emotionally experience it (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Feedback that is perceived as excessive, discouraging or judgemental may reinforce learners' negative beliefs about their writing ability, particularly when learners already possess low confidence.

The present study therefore considers evaluation not simply as an external condition but as an experience that may shape learners' perceptions of themselves as writers.

Task Conditions and Contextual Sources of Anxiety

Writing anxiety can also be intensified by contextual demands. Unfamiliar topics may make idea generation difficult, while time restrictions may increase the cognitive pressure associated with planning, composing and revising. Previous research has identified time pressure, assessment and task demands as relevant contributors to L2 writing anxiety (Cheng, 2002; Badrasawi et al., 2016; Rasool et al., 2023).

For students who already experience linguistic difficulties, these contextual demands may magnify anxiety. A learner who normally needs considerable time to search for vocabulary may experience substantially greater pressure when required to complete an essay within a fixed examination period.

Thus, writing anxiety may be understood as emerging from an interaction between learner characteristics and writing conditions rather than from linguistic proficiency alone.

The Need for Qualitative Perspectives

Much existing research on L2 writing anxiety has relied on questionnaires such as the SLWAI. Such measures are valuable for identifying patterns across larger groups, but they provide limited access to the processes through which anxiety is experienced.

Qualitative research allows learners to describe what happens when they encounter writing difficulties and how they interpret those experiences. Badrasawi et al. (2016), for example, demonstrated the value of qualitative investigation in examining the relationship between writing apprehension and writing performance. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful because they provide sufficient structure to address common areas of inquiry while allowing participants to elaborate on experiences that may not have been anticipated by the researcher.

The qualitative component of the present study was therefore designed to complement the broader quantitative investigation and to provide a deeper account of the factors underlying students' writing anxiety.

METHOD

Research Design

This study formed part of a larger explanatory sequential mixed-methods investigation of L2 writing anxiety among Malaysian diploma engineering students. The broader study incorporated quantitative and qualitative phases, with qualitative interviews used to provide contextual and explanatory depth to the quantitative findings. The present article reports specifically on the qualitative component concerning factors contributing to writing anxiety.

The use of qualitative interviews was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' perceptions, experiences and emotional responses rather than simply measure the frequency of predefined anxiety factors. The qualitative component therefore enabled participants to explain how and why particular situations became anxiety-provoking.

Participants

The participants were selected from a broader sample of diploma engineering students enrolled at a Malaysian public university. Twelve students participated in the qualitative phase. All participants were enrolled in ELC

231, an academic English course, and had direct experience with L2 academic writing. They were selected to provide detailed accounts of their experiences and perceptions of writing in English.

To protect confidentiality, the participants are identified as **P1 to P12** throughout the article.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The interview questions explored participants' writing practices, perceived causes of writing anxiety, experiences during writing activities and responses when they felt nervous or uncomfortable while writing.

Participants were permitted to use the language with which they were most comfortable. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language when appropriate, audio-recorded, translated and transcribed for analysis.

The use of participants' preferred language was intended to minimise the possibility that English proficiency would restrict their ability to describe emotionally complex experiences.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Several procedures were used to enhance the credibility of the qualitative analysis, including handwritten notes alongside audio recordings, peer debriefing, cross-case analysis and comparison of the researcher's thematic interpretations with those of an experienced qualitative researcher. These procedures provided opportunities to examine the consistency and interpretation of the themes developed from the interview data.

Findings

The analysis demonstrated that participants did not experience writing anxiety as the result of a single factor. Instead, their accounts revealed a network of interacting linguistic, cognitive, emotional, social and contextual difficulties.

The qualitative findings were interpreted using Cheng's (2004) three dimensions of writing anxiety:

1. **Cognitive anxiety**
2. **Somatic anxiety**
3. **Avoidance behaviour**

These dimensions were used as an interpretive framework rather than as mutually exclusive thematic categories. The factors identified in the interviews could occur across dimensions and, in some cases, appeared to become connected within individual writing experiences.

Several recurring factors were identified:

- grammatical difficulties and fear of errors;
- limited vocabulary;
- performance pressure and fear of negative evaluation;
- low confidence and negative self-perceptions;

- difficulty generating and developing ideas;
- social judgement and fear of embarrassment; and
- difficult topics and time constraints.

The findings suggest that these factors were not isolated. In several accounts, a linguistic difficulty appeared to be accompanied by a sequence of cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioural responses.

Linguistic Difficulties: When Writing Becomes a Constant Search for Correctness

Linguistic difficulty was one of the most prominent cognitive contributors to writing anxiety. Participants described persistent problems with grammar, sentence construction and fear of making mistakes.

P8 described grammar as a long-standing source of frustration:

“Oh God. That is another problem. From childhood to adulthood, I could never be good in grammar. It is really difficult to be good at it.”

His account suggests that grammatical difficulty had become connected to his broader perception of himself as a writer. Although he understood grammatical explanations during lessons, he became discouraged when attempting to apply them in extended writing:

“When you don’t feel good, you’re stressed. Sometimes you don’t feel like doing it because you know in the end it won’t work out.”

Similarly, P1 associated essay writing with extensive correction:

“There will be many spelling and grammatical errors and the work will be full of red marks. It makes me feel bad.”

These accounts suggest that grammatical difficulty was not experienced merely as a technical problem. Participants also anticipated errors before and during writing. Their concern about avoiding mistakes may have made the writing experience more cognitively and emotionally demanding.

This finding is consistent with research suggesting that fear of mistakes can become an important component of cognitive writing anxiety (Badrasawi et al., 2016; Cheng, 2004).

Limited Vocabulary: “I Have Ideas, but They Are in Malay”

Limited vocabulary emerged as another prominent source of anxiety. Importantly, participants did not necessarily describe themselves as lacking ideas. Instead, some participants described difficulty transforming available ideas into English.

P4 explained:

“I don’t have problems with ideas. I often have lots of ideas but my vocabulary is limited... they are all in Malay language. To translate them to English is the biggest issue for me.”

This distinction is theoretically significant. The participant possessed conceptual content but experienced a linguistic barrier at the point of expression. The problem was therefore not idea generation alone but **access to the linguistic resources needed to express and develop ideas.**

P2 similarly described the difficulty of translating directly from Malay:

“There are many words in English that I do not know. I tried to do a direct translation but most of the time, they just sound so wrong. I got frustrated.”

The frustration could subsequently influence writing behaviour. P4 explained:

“If I failed to find the suitable words to use, I simply tossed away the words or ideas. I want to avoid stress because if I feel stressed, I won’t be able to do anything.”

This finding extends the interpretation of vocabulary difficulty beyond language proficiency. For some participants, limited vocabulary affected not only lexical choice but also the retention of ideas, confidence and willingness to continue writing.

From Linguistic Difficulty to Physical Discomfort and Avoidance

One of the significant findings concerned the movement of anxiety across dimensions.

P6 described limited vocabulary as a recurring burden:

“I have vocabulary issues. Lack of vocabulary. So, when I have to write long essays, it becomes a big burden for me... Essay tasks give me migraines every time.”

Similarly, P7 described a progression from difficulty to disengagement:

“When I do not find the suitable words to use... gradually I decided to just ignore it. It’s such a waste of time to spend a lot of time thinking about something I don’t know.”

These accounts are particularly important when considered through Cheng’s (2004) multidimensional model. The initial difficulty appears cognitive and linguistic, but the experience may subsequently be accompanied by somatic or behavioural responses.

In some accounts, the pattern can be represented as:

linguistic difficulty → cognitive strain → emotional frustration → physical discomfort → avoidance

This sequence should not be interpreted as a universal causal pathway. Rather, it represents an experiential pattern evident in some participants’ narratives.

The finding therefore suggests that cognitive, somatic and avoidance dimensions may be analytically distinguishable while remaining experientially interconnected.

Performance Pressure and Fear of Not Meeting Expectations

Performance pressure represented another important contributor to anxiety.

P8 stated:

“For me, to produce perfect essays is always a pressure.”

He further explained:

“The problem started with a lack of vocabulary and then got worse because I had to meet the examiner’s expectations.”

This account illustrates how linguistic difficulty and evaluation pressure could interact. The student’s concern was not simply that he lacked vocabulary. Rather, he perceived a mismatch between his available linguistic resources and the quality of writing expected by the evaluator.

Assessment also created pressure because students associated grades with competence.

P9 stated:

"I often got bad grades. So, it's a pressure."

P12 similarly explained:

"I don't like graded tasks. Everyone is so busy comparing their marks... when I get bad grades, it's so embarrassing."

These experiences are consistent with Cheng's (2002) identification of evaluation concerns as an important component of foreign language writing anxiety. They also resonate with research highlighting the importance of learners' perceptions of their writing ability and writing self-efficacy in L2 writing (Sun & Wang, 2020).

For some participants, therefore, writing became more than an academic activity. It became a visible indicator of competence.

Difficulty Generating and Developing Ideas

Writing anxiety also emerged when participants experienced difficulties generating or elaborating ideas.

P6 explained:

"Although I think I can write essays fairly well, I frequently struggle with running out of ideas... I gave up trying and waited for the lecturer to help me since I lacked motivation."

P12 similarly stated:

"I lack the confidence to write essays because my ideas are insufficient and I frequently struggle to elaborate them."

These accounts demonstrate that anxiety cannot be reduced to linguistic proficiency. Even when learners considered themselves reasonably capable writers, difficulty sustaining ideas could undermine confidence.

The experience may also become self-reinforcing. Difficulty generating ideas may create uncertainty; uncertainty may reduce confidence; reduced confidence may make continued writing more difficult; and the resulting lack of progress may further reinforce a negative perception of writing ability.

Social Judgement and the Social Dimension of Writing Anxiety

Writing anxiety was also shaped by participants' perceptions of other people.

P2 stated:

"Since no one here speaks English, I don't use it often in my daily life. I worry that if I do, people will assume I'm trying to brag."

P8 similarly described concealing his anxiety:

"I've never told anyone about this because I'm afraid they'll think I'm crazy."

These accounts reveal a social dimension to writing anxiety. Students were not concerned only about whether their writing was correct. They were also concerned about how their use of English and their difficulties might be interpreted by others.

This finding is particularly relevant in contexts where learners may have limited opportunities to use English outside formal instruction. Malaysian research has similarly identified anxiety, confidence and social perceptions as relevant dimensions of English language learning experiences (Badrasawi et al., 2016; Kamaruddin et al., 2021).

The fear of embarrassment may also discourage students from seeking assistance. Thus, anxiety may simultaneously create a need for support and reduce the likelihood that students will ask for it.

Difficult Topics and Time Constraints

Finally, participants described task conditions that intensified their anxiety.

P1 explained:

“The topic is difficult and everything has to be explained in English... it’s just the feeling of a terrible headache just thinking about how to write the essays.”

Time pressure further intensified the writing experience.

P11 stated:

“Writing essays is difficult, yet we must write good essays in a short amount of time.”

P5 similarly explained:

“Writing is already difficult and the pressure increases when we must write good essays in a short period of time.”

These findings suggest that contextual demands can amplify existing linguistic and psychological difficulties. A student who requires considerable time to retrieve vocabulary, formulate sentences and organise ideas may experience substantially greater anxiety under examination conditions.

The finding is consistent with earlier research identifying assessment pressure and time constraints as relevant sources of writing anxiety (Cheng, 2002; Badrasawi et al., 2016).

DISCUSSION

This study explored the factors contributing to writing anxiety among Malaysian diploma engineering students. The findings demonstrate that writing anxiety is more complex than a simple consequence of insufficient English proficiency.

The central contribution of the qualitative findings is the identification of an interconnected relationship between linguistic difficulty, cognitive anxiety, emotional responses, somatic experiences and avoidance.

Beyond Language Deficiency

Linguistic difficulties, particularly grammar and vocabulary, were prominent in the participants’ narratives. This finding is consistent with previous research identifying limited linguistic resources as an important challenge in L2 writing (Badrasawi et al., 2016; Mohamad et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2023).

However, the present findings suggest that describing these students simply as having “poor English” would provide an incomplete interpretation of their experiences.

For several participants, the difficulty began with a linguistic problem:

I do not know the correct word.

However, the psychological interpretation could develop into:

I cannot express my ideas.

and subsequently:

I am not a good writer.

This distinction is important because linguistic difficulty can become psychologically meaningful. Once learners interpret linguistic difficulties as evidence of personal inadequacy, the original language problem may become intertwined with confidence, self-perception and fear of evaluation.

Therefore, the findings support a conceptualisation of L2 writing anxiety in which language difficulty may function as a trigger without necessarily providing a complete explanation of the anxiety experience. Once linguistic difficulties are interpreted negatively, they may influence how students perceive their ability to communicate ideas and perform writing tasks. This suggests that writing anxiety may be reinforced through students' interpretations of their own linguistic difficulties rather than arising from language proficiency alone. The findings therefore extend the understanding of L2 writing anxiety by highlighting the psychological meaning that learners attach to linguistic problems.

Anxiety as a Dynamic Movement Across Dimensions

A second important contribution concerns the relationship between Cheng's (2004) three dimensions.

The findings suggest that cognitive, somatic and avoidance experiences may occur sequentially or interactively.

For example, P6 initially described vocabulary difficulty. The continuing cognitive burden was then associated with physical discomfort. P7 similarly moved from difficulty finding appropriate words to eventually ignoring the problem.

This supports the broader conceptualisation of writing anxiety as multidimensional while adding an experiential dimension to the model. Rather than treating cognitive, somatic and avoidance anxiety merely as three separate categories, educators and researchers should also consider how learners may move between these experiences.

This interpretation is compatible with broader perspectives on language anxiety, which recognise the interaction between cognitive, affective and behavioural processes (Gkonou et al., 2017; Horwitz, 2008). The present findings add to this perspective by illustrating how these dimensions may become intertwined within students' actual writing experiences. A difficulty that initially appears linguistic may therefore become cognitively demanding, emotionally distressing or behaviourally consequential when students struggle to manage the writing task.

Importantly, the present findings do not establish a causal sequence. Instead, the qualitative narratives indicate that students themselves experienced these dimensions as connected. The movement across dimensions should therefore be understood as an interpretation of participants' reported experiences rather than as evidence that one form of anxiety necessarily causes another. This distinction is important because it preserves the multidimensional nature of writing anxiety while recognising that students may experience these dimensions as interconnected rather than as isolated categories.

The Gap Between Expected and Perceived Writing Ability

Performance pressure emerged as another important theme in the participants' accounts. Some participants described a gap between the level of writing they felt was expected of them and their perceived ability to meet those expectations. The pressure to produce a "perfect" essay became particularly problematic when linguistic limitations were already present.

This finding is important because anxiety may therefore emerge not only from task difficulty but also from the perceived distance between expected performance and perceived capability.

The role of self-perception is supported by research on writing self-efficacy. Sun and Wang (2020), for example, demonstrate the importance of writing self-efficacy and self-regulated writing processes in L2 writing.

The implication is that improving linguistic competence remains important, but it may not be sufficient once students have developed persistent negative perceptions of their writing ability. In such cases, students may approach writing tasks with expectations of difficulty or failure even when they possess relevant ideas or sufficient knowledge to address the task. Thus, writing performance should be understood not only in relation to what students know linguistically but also in relation to how they perceive their ability to mobilise that knowledge during writing. The findings therefore suggest that students' perceived writing capability may shape how they experience writing demands and respond to performance pressure.

Evaluation and Feedback as Emotional Experiences

Participants' concerns about grades, lecturer expectations and corrections demonstrate that evaluation had emotional significance.

Writing assessment may provide essential information for learning, but learners do not necessarily experience corrective feedback neutrally. Feedback can influence confidence, motivation and perceptions of writing ability (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In the present study, participants described extensive correction and negative evaluation as emotionally discouraging. These experiences suggest that feedback may function not only as an instructional mechanism but also as an emotional experience through which students interpret their own competence as writers. This is particularly relevant for anxious writers because students who already expect failure may interpret repeated correction as reinforcing their perceived inability. Consequently, the emotional meaning attached to feedback may be as important as the informational value of the feedback itself. The findings therefore suggest that evaluation and feedback should be understood as part of the broader psychological experience of L2 writing rather than as purely technical aspects of assessment.

The Social Dimension of Writing Anxiety

The findings further demonstrate that writing anxiety is not exclusively an individual psychological experience.

Some participants described concerns about being judged by lecturers, peers and people in their social environment. Some feared appearing boastful when speaking English, while others concealed their anxiety because they anticipated ridicule.

This social dimension extends the conventional understanding of writing anxiety. A student's writing behaviour may be influenced not only by linguistic knowledge and task demands but also by the perceived social consequences of making mistakes.

The result may be a paradox: students who need assistance may be less willing to disclose their difficulties.

Consequently, students' reluctance to seek assistance may itself be understood as potentially related to writing anxiety rather than simply a lack of interest or motivation. When students fear judgement from lecturers or peers, they may conceal their difficulties and avoid seeking the support that could help them improve. This creates a potential cycle in which linguistic difficulties remain unaddressed, anxiety is maintained and opportunities for writing development are reduced. The findings therefore highlight the importance of recognising the social consequences of writing difficulties alongside their linguistic and psychological dimensions.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest several implications for L2 writing instruction, particularly in Malaysian diploma engineering contexts. As writing anxiety appears to involve interconnected linguistic, cognitive, emotional and behavioural experiences, pedagogical responses should extend beyond the teaching of grammatical and lexical knowledge alone.

Provide Linguistic Scaffolding During Writing

Grammar and vocabulary support should not be separated entirely from the writing process. Students need opportunities to apply linguistic resources while generating, organising and developing ideas. Lecturers can provide targeted vocabulary, sentence structures, language functions and model expressions at appropriate stages of the writing process. Such scaffolding may help students manage linguistic demands while developing their ideas and can be gradually reduced as students become more confident and independent writers.

Separate Idea Generation from Linguistic Accuracy

Students who possess ideas but struggle to express them in English may benefit from staged writing activities in which idea generation is temporarily separated from grammatical correction. This may reduce the cognitive burden associated with simultaneously generating content and monitoring accuracy. For example, students can first brainstorm, discuss or organise their ideas before producing a draft, followed by a separate stage focusing on language accuracy and revision. This allows students to develop content without immediately interrupting the writing process to correct every linguistic difficulty.

Reframe Mistakes as Part of Writing Development

Students should be explicitly encouraged to understand that errors are a normal component of drafting and revision. Such an approach may help prevent individual linguistic errors from becoming evidence of personal inadequacy. Lecturers can reinforce this perspective by distinguishing between early drafts and final assessed texts, emphasising that writing develops through repeated drafting, feedback and revision. Treating errors as opportunities for improvement may also encourage students to take greater risks in expressing their ideas.

Reconsider Feedback Practices

Feedback should remain specific and developmental while avoiding excessive emphasis on error accumulation. Balanced feedback that identifies strengths alongside areas for improvement may help prevent students from interpreting correction as a judgement of their overall ability.

Lecturers may therefore consider prioritising key areas for improvement rather than identifying every error in a student's writing. Feedback can acknowledge successful aspects of a text while directing students towards specific areas that require further development. Where appropriate, students can also be encouraged to respond to feedback through revision rather than simply receiving corrections. This recommendation is consistent with the broader literature emphasising the importance of effective feedback for learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Address Anxiety Before It Becomes Avoidance

The findings suggest that avoidance may emerge alongside repeated experiences of frustration and perceived difficulty. Students who repeatedly postpone writing, abandon ideas or disengage from writing tasks may therefore require early support. Lecturers should be attentive to these behaviours and consider whether apparent disengagement may reflect anxiety or difficulty rather than simply a lack of motivation.

Breaking larger writing tasks into smaller and more manageable stages, providing clear expectations and offering guided practice may help students approach writing progressively. Early support may be particularly important because continued avoidance can reduce opportunities for students to practise writing and develop greater confidence in their ability to complete writing tasks.

Create Psychologically Safe Writing Environments

Writing classrooms should normalise difficulty. Opportunities for collaborative drafting, peer discussion, guided practice and low-stakes writing may allow students to experiment with language without immediately perceiving every error as an assessment of their ability. Such practices can provide students with opportunities to develop ideas and receive support before their writing is formally evaluated.

This is particularly relevant in engineering contexts, where students may place greater emphasis on their disciplinary studies while regarding English writing as secondary to their core academic work. Nevertheless, effective written communication remains important within academic and professional engineering contexts. Creating a supportive writing environment may therefore help students engage more actively with L2 writing while reducing the tendency to interpret writing difficulties as evidence of personal inadequacy.

Limitations

This study should be interpreted within several limitations.

First, the participants were drawn from a single Malaysian public university and a specific diploma engineering context. Their experiences may therefore not represent students from other institutions, disciplines or educational levels.

Second, the qualitative phase involved 12 participants. Although the participants provided detailed accounts, qualitative findings are intended to provide depth rather than statistical generalisability.

Third, the data were based on participants' retrospective accounts of writing experiences. Such accounts may be influenced by memory and personal interpretation.

Fourth, some interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language and subsequently translated into English. Although this approach was intended to facilitate fuller expression of participants' experiences, some nuances of the original language may not have been fully retained during translation.

Finally, thematic analysis necessarily involves researcher interpretation. Although procedures such as peer debriefing, cross-case analysis and comparison with an experienced qualitative researcher were employed to enhance the credibility of the analysis, interpretation cannot be considered entirely free from researcher subjectivity.

Future research could therefore examine writing anxiety across multiple institutions, disciplines and educational contexts, as well as investigate how students' experiences of cognitive, somatic and avoidance dimensions develop over time. Further research could also examine whether pedagogical approaches that integrate linguistic scaffolding, supportive feedback and low-stakes writing opportunities can contribute to reducing writing anxiety and avoidance.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the factors contributing to writing anxiety among Malaysian diploma engineering students through qualitative interviews. The findings demonstrate that writing anxiety cannot be adequately explained as a simple consequence of inadequate English proficiency.

Linguistic difficulties, particularly grammar and vocabulary, were prominent sources of anxiety. However, these difficulties became psychologically significant when participants interpreted them through the lenses of performance expectations, evaluation, confidence and self-perception. Difficulties in expressing ideas were therefore experienced not only as language problems but also as challenges to participants' confidence and perceived ability as writers.

Most importantly, the findings suggest that writing anxiety may involve interconnected cognitive, somatic and behavioural experiences. A linguistic difficulty may become cognitive strain; cognitive strain may be

accompanied by physical discomfort; and continued frustration may contribute to disengagement or avoidance. While the present study does not establish a causal sequence, the participants' narratives indicate that these dimensions were experienced as interconnected rather than isolated.

The study therefore proposes that L2 writing anxiety should be understood as a dynamic and multidimensional experience rather than a fixed consequence of language deficiency. This perspective extends the understanding of writing anxiety by highlighting the ways in which linguistic difficulties may become intertwined with students' perceptions of competence, experiences of evaluation and responses to the social and academic environment.

For educators, this means that reducing writing anxiety requires more than teaching grammar and vocabulary. Linguistic development needs to be accompanied by confidence-building practices, supportive feedback, opportunities for low-stakes writing and classroom environments in which difficulty and error are treated as normal components of writing development.

Ultimately, helping L2 learners become less anxious writers requires attention not only to what they know about language but also to what they believe about themselves as writers and how they experience the social and academic environment in which writing takes place.

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