



## The Causes of English Writing Anxiety among Pakistani ESL Students: Perceptions of Teachers and Students

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### ABSTRACT

English language writing skills play a significant role in academic and professional lives in the ESL context. Anxiety can have debilitating effects on learning English language listening, reading, speaking and writing skills. The objective of the current study was to explore the causes of writing anxiety in Pakistani undergraduate ESL students. The data for this study were collected from Pakistani ESL students and English language teachers in Karachi with a sample that had both public and private-sector representation. Group interviews were held to collect the data. Interview protocols were designed for the interviews of the students and the teachers and checked for self-validity and expert validity. Three group interviews were carried out with the undergraduate ESL students and two with the ESL English language teachers. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Respondent validation technique was used for the transcription and similarly, inter-coder reliability was carried out for respondents' Urdu translation into English. The findings revealed multiple causes of Pakistani ESL students' English language writing anxiety.

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## 1. Introduction

The English language has a significant role in Pakistan. It is used as an official language along with Urdu and is also the language of communication and examination at the majority of the higher education institutions (Ahmed, Pathan & Khan, 2017; Fareed & Khan, 2017; Coleman, 2010; Dar & Khan, 2015; Ehsan & Aziz, 2014; Khan, 2011; Kazi & Iqbal, 2011; Malik, 1996; Mehboob, 2002; Mansoor, 2005; Rahman, 2004) and most of the reading texts at tertiary level is in English language (Karim & Shaikh, 2012). In Pakistan, students at the tertiary level are often required to submit projects, reports, assignments and dissertations in the English language (Dar & Khan, 2015).

Despite the fact that the English language is taught since the beginning classes in Pakistan, language learners struggle with basic English language skills (Dar & Khan, 2015) and lack appropriate writing skills (Khan 2009; Malik, 1996; Mashoori & Iqbal, 2007). They face difficulties in generating relevant ideas, organizing them, linking the ideas and writing mechanics (Fareed, 2009). Another problem that Pakistani English language learners face in English language writing skills is their writing anxiety (Dar & Khan, 2015).

Language anxiety is a widely researched area in the world. Many studies have explored the impact of writing anxiety on the performance of the students (Sabti, Rashid & Nimehchisalem, 2019; Chen, 2004). Many studies on English language anxiety have also

been conducted in Pakistan. The focus of the anxiety-related studies in Pakistan has been on speaking anxiety and EFL anxiety (Adeel, 2011; Dar & Khan, 2014; Gopang, Bughio, Umrani & Lohar, 2015; Javed, Eng, Mohamed & Sam, 2013; Raja, 2017) and limited research has been available on students' writing anxiety in Pakistan (Ahmed, Pathan, Khan, 2017; Fareed, Khan, 2017; Dar & Khan, 2015). Dar and Khan (2015) measured levels of writing anxiety among Pakistani undergraduate students and concluded that the majority of the learners had an average level of writing anxiety. Writing anxiety being a rarely focused research area in Pakistan creates a justification for the current study.

This study was carried out to investigate the causes of writing anxiety among Pakistani undergraduate students, hence this study answers the research question, 'What are the causes of writing anxiety amongst Pakistani undergraduate students?'. To explore the causes, perceptions of both teachers and students were taken.

## **2. Literature Review**

English language writing skills are essential in both academic and professional contexts where English is a language of communication, first, second, foreign, or official language. Writing is considered a complex skill to master, particularly in a second or foreign language context (Kurt & Atay, 2007; Latif, 2007; Ryan, 2014). It is a technical skill that also involves cognitive-psychomotor skills (Zaid, 2011).

### **2.1 Anxiety**

Trylong (1987) calls anxiety the most complex human psychological phenomenon. It is also considered a negative emotion that weakens and hinders the learning process (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010). Various studies have concluded that anxiety has detrimental effects on learners' English language learning performance (Weda & Sakti, 2018; Cheng, 2004; Aida, 1994; MacIntyre & Gradner, 1994; Young, 1991; Trylong, 1987; Horwitz, 1986;). Sabti, Rashid and Nimehchisalem (2019) have also explored the effect of writing anxiety on writing performance and found a negative correlation between writing anxiety and achievement, while motivation is positively correlated with better performance in writing. Writing anxiety can be defined as a fear that the writer may have during the writing process. Atkinson (2010) defines writing anxiety as "difficulty in producing writing". Writing anxiety has been reported to have negative effects on writing performance. Many nervous writers are "chronic procrastinators" and have problems focusing on writing (Bloom, 1981).

### **2.2 The Causes of Writing Anxiety**

Many studies have been conducted in different contexts to find out the causes of writing anxiety (Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012). The findings can be divided into two domains: learners' related causes and teachers' related causes. To begin with the major part - the learner related causes, Kara (2013) revealed the absence of writing habits and less familiarity with the writing strategies as prominent reasons for writing anxiety. Aljafen (2013) reported a weak educational background, less confidence, and field-specific terms that cause writing anxiety. Similarly, identifying sources of English writing apprehension among Egyptian university students Latif (2007) and Latif (2012) sum up key sources of writing anxiety as fear of criticism, language knowledge and perceived language competence, writing performance and perceived writing competence and low writing self-efficacy. Likewise, Ozturk and Cecen (2007) stated that writing anxiety begins from students' writing ability, planning for a writing assignment and fear of evaluation. Besides, four reasons for writing anxiety have also been reported by Rakin-Brown (2006).

The reasons include frustration, fear of teacher and peer evaluation and nervousness of losing self-identity. Similarly, Atay and Kurt (2006) identified the difficulties (that can also be called causes) which comprise of incapacity to produce ideas, organise thoughts, the influence of the first language, less vocabulary, weak grammar, writing as a compulsory subject and pressure of obtaining low marks and writing being forced as a subject. Bloom (1981) also revealed the causes of writing apprehension which include the previous success of the learners, anxiety of not being able to come up to the expectation of the teacher, strict following of the model writings and self-imagined masterpiece writing pressure. A different and unique cause has also been reported, As in Smith's (1997) words, "Another reason that I recall hearing directly from my anxiety-stricken students is the common fallacy that writing is

mystical and that they only those who are born with a natural ability to write well can ever write well" (p.25).

Language teachers also contribute to learner's writing anxiety. The most common cause that has been reported is pedagogy. Method of teaching writing skills is also considered a source of writing (Sawalha, Chow and Foo, 2012). Oxford (1999) also concluded that writing teaching style is a source of writing anxiety among language learners. Likewise, it is believed that instructional practices and teaching methodology result in writing anxiety (Latif (2007; Latif (2012). Kurt and Atay (2007) also held teaching writing skills practices responsible for learners' writing anxiety. Secondly, it is the feedback learners get from teachers which is a source of writing anxiety among the learner (Ozturk&Cecen (2007). Finally, the pressure of humiliation by readers due to writing errors and anticipated excellence in writing has also been reported as the causes (Walsh, 1986).

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted to explore the writing anxiety causes among undergraduate Pakistani students. Semi-structured focus-group interviews were conducted to gather data from undergraduate ESL students and ESL English language teachers from four universities in Karachi. Two of the selected universities were from the private sector and the other two belonged to the public sector. Three focus group interviews were carried out with undergraduate students and two interviews were conducted with English language teachers from the selected universities. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and a member checking technique was used for the transcription.

#### 3.1 The Sample of the Study

Students for three Focus-group interviews were suggested by the English language teachers. Total number of students for the interviews was 20 (male 14 and female 6). The students were registered in Bachelors of Business Administration (BBA), Bachelors of Science (BS) and Bachelors of Engineering (BE) programmes. Seven English language teachers from the selected universities, who gave consent, were participants of the teachers' focus group interviews. Three of the teachers were male and four were female.

#### 3.2 Validity and Reliability

Two Interview protocols were made, one for the student-participants and the other for teacher-participants. The number of questions for each interview protocol was thirteen. The first drafts of the interview protocols were made in light of the relevant review of the literature. The interview protocols were very cautiously revised for self-validity and then given to two experts for their opinion and the recommended changes were made, finally, the protocols were piloted. Participants' written consent was taken. Some students preferred Urdu Language for participation, after transcription the 28 items were translated into English, and inter-rater reliability was ensured. The translation inter-coder reliability was 80.95%.

### 4. Findings

The causes of Pakistani ESL undergraduate students' English language writing anxiety have been grouped into twelve major themes. Some themes have subthemes as well. The major themes for causes of writing anxiety are related to the audience, specific situations, weak language skills, language teaching practices, feedback, teacher behaviour, education system, large writing classes, and reading culture. Following codes have been used in quotations: Male student (MS), Male Teacher (MT), Female Student (FS) and Female Teacher (FT).

#### Theme 1: Writing audience

The first major cause of writing anxiety is related to people or audiences. To be more specific the people were categorised into four groups. First of all, "*the presence of the teacher*" (MS11) "*or a particular student*" (MT2) caused writing anxiety (MS11). Secondly, a family member "*elders like father*" (MS4). Thirdly, the peer who has better grades or better English language writing skills become a source of writing anxiety (FS 7). Finally, the presence of people with better writing skills, more education than the writer, also contributed to writing anxiety (FT 2, MS9 "*sir sometimes we have (writing anxiety) in the presence of more educated persons (than students)*").

## **Theme 2: Specific situations**

The participants also revealed situations that provoked writing anxiety which sometimes include time duration for the given task FT1, "*When they (students) are asked to write within time limit ...they are more anxious*". Writing in the classroom (FT1), liberty to select a topic for writing (FT3), taking up a role in an organizational context such as in "letter writing" leaving the students nowhere to start from (FS6). The last situation participants revealed was related to the examinations FT1 "*They [students] become more conscious when they write for something that has marks*". Students fear being examined on language, especially in examination halls.

## **Theme 3: Weak language skills**

The next major factor that caused writing anxiety was the lack of language skills. Students considered English vocabulary a problem, MS9, "*we have some ideas in Urdu, (but) we do not have appropriate (English) vocabulary for the ideas*". The next factor students identified was grammar, MS9 "*sir sometimes (I) have anxiety due to grammar (difficulty in grammar)*". The third reason for anxiety was writing tasks organization FT2, "*lack of organization (develop writing anxiety)*". The third language related cause was lack of writing skills, FT3, "*the students who do not have much command over writing ... they don't write anything*"

## **Theme 4: Language teaching practices**

The fourth major cause the participants shared was the method(s) of teaching writing skills. Usually, teachers in the context prefer product-based approaches for teaching writing skills, which create difficulties for students and become a cause of anxiety. FS1, "*instead of producing final draft in first attempt, (I) feel more comfortable with free writing and (writing) short paragraphs*"

## **Theme 5: Teacher feedback on writing**

The fifth cause participants associated with writing anxiety was feedback. "*If it is constructive feedback, they get encouraged if it is finding fault with their writing them they get discouraged*" (MT1). FT2, "*negative feedback from peer and teachers increases writing anxiety*". FT2, "*negative feedback from peer and teachers increases writing anxiety*"

## **Theme 6: Education System**

The next reason shared was weak past educational background and education system. MT1, "*students are not given a lot of opportunities in the schools to write obviously which leads them to the point where they reach the university they lack the confidence to write*" (MT3). Those students who achieved good grades in previous exams, but did not have good writing skills also faced writing anxiety. MS10, "*sir sometimes (grade) has negative effect that you have good grades but your writing skills are not of that level*".

## **Theme 7: Large Class**

Another cause was large writing classes (MT1). "*The number of students in the class*" create writing anxiety (FT1) as "*They (English language teachers) cannot read and give feedback to seventy students*" (FT1). MT3 "*If teacher is available (in small class) their (students') writing anxiety will definitely decrease*"

## **Theme 8: Reading culture**

The last cause shared was about reading customs and culture where learners do not develop a reading habit which affects their proficiency and results in writing anxiety (MT2). Some participants also mentioned how no reading culture of parents further leads to their children's lack of interest in reading. FT4, "*our culture is not generally a literate culture*".

## **5. Discussion**

The present study was conducted to explore the causes of Pakistani ESL undergraduate students' writing anxiety. According to the available data, limited research in Pakistan has been carried out to find the causes of ESL writing anxiety (Ahmed, Pathan, Khan, 2017; Fareed, Khan, 2017; Dar, Khan, 2015). However, studies conducted in other contexts are also being used to support some of the findings. The causes of writing anxiety that were also identified by past studies, particularly in ESL/EFL contexts other than the Pakistani

context include weak educational background, insufficient writing strategies, lack of linguistic knowledge, teaching writing practices, fear of negative feedback and criticism by peers and teachers (Aljafen, 2013; Atay & Kurt, 2006; Kara, 2013; Kurt & Atay, 2007; Latif, 2007; Oxford 1999; Rakin-Brown, 2006; Sawalha, Chow & Foo, 2012). Cheng (2004) has also pointed out that "(1) instructional practices, (2) personal beliefs about writing and learning to write, (3) self-perceptions, and (4) interpersonal threats" are the main factors in writing anxiety for EFL learners (p.41).

Other causes of writing anxiety that this study has revealed were not given in the relevant reviewed studies hence these causes are the contribution of this study to the existing literature. Writing under a teacher, a family member or senior monitoring, a peer who has better grades or better English language writing skills, the more educated observer is among the prominent factors that cause anxiety among language learners. However, time constraints for a writing task, classroom writing, freedom to select writing topic, assumed position in an organization and examinations are also major causes. In addition, the nature of the topic, specific writing genre, lack of feedback on writing, sharing write-ups with class, the teacher behaviour, large writing classes, past grades, less reading habits and reading culture have also been reported potential causes.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has revealed the causes of writing anxiety of undergraduate Pakistani ESL students. Although some of the causes that this study has reported, have already been researched by other studies for the Pakistani context all of the causes are being reported for the first time which serves the rationale of conducting this study. If teaching writing skills strategies are devised keeping these causes in mind, the learners' levels of writing anxiety can be reduced which consequently will lead towards better performance by the learners.

The present study is limited to undergraduate level students at the selected universities. The data for the study was collected only through one instrument. As stated in the introduction and discussion sections more studies should be conducted on this topic at the school level, the undergraduate level and the postgraduate level to fill the gap in research. The future studies should use more than one instrument to collect data, preferably, interview/open-ended questionnaires and observation sheets.

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