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Influence of Anxiety in Affective Factors on the High School English Writing

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of free writing and peer feedback on English writing anxiety and writing performance among Chinese senior high school students. Two intact classes participated in a quasi-experimental design: a control group that got conventional writing instruction and an experimental group that regularly participated in free writing exercises with peer feedback. Both groups were given pre- and post-tests and written anxiety questionnaires. The data was analyzed using correlation analysis, independent samples t-tests, descriptive statistics. According to the results, students in the experimental group significantly improved their writing scores and reduced their writing anxiety when compared to the control group. Writing anxiety and writing performance were shown to be strongly negatively correlated (ρ = -0.761, p <.001), suggesting that worse writing achievement was linked to higher anxiety levels. According to the results, including free writing and peer feedback into English language training can be a useful tactic to lower anxiety and improve writing performance. This study provides useful implications for English teachers and curriculum designers in EFL situations and emphasizes the significance of addressing affective aspects in second language writing education.

Keywords: Affective Factors, English Writing, The Teaching of English Writing, free writing

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Writing is a fundamental skill in language acquisition, it is also vital not only for academic success but also for effective communication in global contexts. Although not so hard as the teaching of speaking that requires certain situation and teachers who could speak English as fluent as a native speaker, English writing still has long been a knotty problem for many educators in China. Firstly, many Chinese learners, when it comes to English writing, are really reluctant to write a word as they feel writing in English is a rather difficult task for them. Teachers, on the other side, apply traditional teaching methods in English writing class that cannot to rouse learners' interests, as a result, students fail to obtained improvement on English writing. Previous studies have showed that positive factors will effectively help learners to overcome a series of mental block, which is good for improving writing skills and strengthening their initiative while passive attitudes will be a fetter to their writing, they will regard writing as a mental stress. What needs to be concern more is not only to enhance learners' writing ability, but also to foster their ability to work with others and the sense of team work and then motivate their interests on English writing.

Previous studies have been conducted on the effect of free writing to enhance second or foreign language (L2) writing [1][2][3][4] (Rahmawati et al., 2023; Sinaga et al.,2022; Atiah et al., 2022; Hwang, 2010) and it has its potential to reduce writing anxiety [5][6][7] (Nordin et al., 2022; Scullin, 2010; Chen, 2019), however its combination with peer-based collaborative learning has rarely been explored, particularly in the context of Chinese EFL learners. Hence this study

introduces a pedagogical approach by integrating free writing with paired learning in English writing instruction. By encouraging learners to express their ideas freely and then engage in supportive peer interaction and feedbacks, the approach aims to reduce emotional barriers such as fear of judgment, lack of confidence and anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 L2 Writing Anxiety

Emotional factors have a considerable impact on the learning process overall, and are especially influential in foreign language writin[8][9]. (D'Mello & Mills, 2014; Shao et al., 2013). Writing anxiety has been consistently identified as a major affective barrier that negatively impacts second language (L2) writing performance. For instance, a meta-analysis by Li et al. (2022) in Frontiers in Psychology revealed moderate to strong correlations between writing anxiety, low self-efficacy, and reduced writing performance across diverse L2 learner populations [10]. According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, emotional states such as anxiety can block language input and output, thereby impeding acquisition and performance [11]. Yan (2024) categorizes writing anxiety into four distinct forms: physical anxiety, idea-generation anxiety, performance anxiety, and self-confidence anxiety. Physical anxiety refers to bodily stress symptoms—such as muscle tension or headaches—that arise during writing tasks. Idea-generation anxiety involves challenges in producing and structuring ideas, which can lead to writer's block or procrastination. Performance anxiety is associated with fear during the act of writing itself, particularly concerning making errors or failing to meet academic expectations. Lastly, self-confidence anxiety stems from a lack of faith in one's writing capabilities, often manifesting in avoidance, reduced motivation, and persistent self-doubt [12]. Study conducted by Zhou et al. (2022) further proved that anxiety evidently caused L2 writing engagement and self-regulated learning strategies declining among Chinese high school students [13]. In the context of higher education, research published in the Journal of Second Language Writing demonstrated that writing anxiety suppresses working memory resources, resulting in lower syntactic complexity and fluency during cognitively demanding tasks [14] (Güvendir and Uzun, 2023).

2.2 Free writing

Free writing is a timed, non-judgmental writing activity that participants write texts continuously for a predetermined amount of time (usually 5 to 15 minutes) without stopping to fix grammar, spelling, or content [15] (Marshall, 2009). In comparison to brainstorming, which ideas are listed or well-organized, a free-written paragraph is somewhat aimless or unstructured [16] (Song, 1998). As an early proponent of free writing, Brande (1981) advised writers to sit and write for 15 minutes every morning as fast as they could [17]. Elbow (1986) also emphasizes free writing as a crucial tool for facilitating both creative and critical thinking, highlighting its role in the writing process. He differentiated between "first-order" and "second-order" thinking in composing and perceived free writing as a tool that initially facilitates raw idea generation (first-order thinking) before refinement and analysis (second-order thinking) [18].

In recent studies, free writing has been empirically proven to be helpful to English language learners in secondary settings by reducing anxiety and developing writing fluency. For instance, Lee and Kim (2022) investigated Korean high school students over a 12-week intervention and found that regular free writing significantly enhanced writing fluency and alleviated writing anxiety [19]. Similarly, focused on Chinese EFL learners, Wang and Chen (2021) demonstrated that integrating free writing practice bettered writing proficiency while reducing anxiety levels, which stressed its dual cognitive and affective benefits [20].

2.3 Peer Feedback

Peer feedback involves giving opportunities for learners to communicate with each other and listen, write, read meaningfully, and reflect on the passage, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject [21] (Meyers & Jones, 1993), which also has been defined as a communication method that learners join into discussions that linked to performance and standards [22] (Liu& Carless, 2006).

As for the benefits of peer feedback, firstly, it offers more variety in the teaching of writing than the general methods of providing teacher feedback [23] (Atay and Kurt, 2006). Additionally, peer feedback gives students right to decide whether or not they want to use the criticism to their peers [24] (Guardado & Shi, 2007). Wei and Liu (2024) conducted a

comprehensive review of peer feedback interventions in academic writing and five types of benefits were categorized: cognitive, behavioral, affective, social, and metacognitive [25]. More importantly, peer feedback ameliorates writing anxiety. Xu, Zhang, and Parr (2022) found that peer feedback significantly improved writing quality and complexity in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners [26]. In line with that, according to Cheng and Zhang's (2024) mixed-methods study, in secondary writing classrooms when peer feedback was effectively scaffolded, it could help mitigate writing anxiety and thus foster cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement[27].

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quasi-experimental design to investigate the influence of writing anxiety on English writing performance among senior high school students in China. Descriptive statistics will summarize changes in emotional variables and writing scores. Then, paired-sample t-tests will compare pre- and post-test results to determine whether there are statistically significant changes in writing performance and emotional engagement. Additionally, Pearson correlation will examine relationships between specific emotional factors (e.g., anxiety, confidence) and writing outcomes.

The intervention lasted for six weeks, during which the experimental group engaged in regular free writing activities combined with structured peer feedback, while the control group received traditional writing instruction.

3.2 Research Questions

The purpose of the research lays stress on the current situation of affective factors in the teaching of English writing and is to figure out workable and practical measures that can handle the existing teaching problems. The research will discuss the following questions:

What is the level of English writing anxiety among Chinese senior high school students?

How does writing anxiety affect students' English writing performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity?

Can the implementation of free writing and feedback reduce writing anxiety among senior high school students?

3.3 Participants

There are 60 participants involved in this research. Before the experiments, there was a background investigation. These students have picked up English for more than ten years, some of them have learned English when they were in kindergarten and some of them had shown great interest in English learning. However, none of them had ever lived in English-speaking countries. Among the participants, few of them excel in all the skills like writing, listening, speaking, and reading. Mostly the way they accepted writing knowledge is the traditional lecturing way.

3.4 Research Instruments

3.4.1 Test

The test is about writing which can analyze the correlation between learners' affective factors and English learning effects. The time restraint in this test is 45 minutes. During the test, English dictionaries or any other useful references are verboten. The judging of the test and the topics will follow the scoring criteria of English writing test of college entrance examination.

3.4.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire includes two parts. The first part is about participants' personal information including name, gender and age. The second part is Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory.

The questionnaire was translated into Chinese so as to getting participants understood.

3.5 Research Procedures and Data Collection

3.5.1 Research Procedures

The research was carried out in five steps. First, participants were divided into an experimental class and a control class, and both groups completed a questionnaire to collect basic information and their attitudes toward English writing. Second, a pre-test was conducted to assess students' writing levels and provide a baseline for later comparison. Third, during a six-week teaching period, the experimental class received instruction that addressed writing anxiety through free writing and peer feedback, while the control class followed traditional writing instruction. Fourth, a post-test was

conducted for both groups and compared with the pre-test results. Finally, the questionnaires and test results were analyzed.

3.5.2 Data Collection

To ensure accuracy, the questionnaire was administered after class with the head teachers' permission in a quiet environment and took about 10 minutes to complete. The purpose and use of the data were briefly explained to the participants, and incomplete responses were excluded. Pre- and post-tests, along with the questionnaire, were conducted under teacher supervision. Quantitative data were collected through a standardized English writing test and a validated writing anxiety questionnaire, administered to both experimental and control groups before and after the intervention. The results were analyzed using SPSS 27 with descriptive and inferential statistics to examine changes in writing performance and anxiety levels.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Data Analysis before the Experiment

Before the intervention, a pre-test and questionnaire were administered to assess students' initial writing performance and anxiety. Descriptive statistics (means, SDs, skewness, kurtosis) were analyzed to confirm group comparability and provide a baseline for evaluating the intervention's impact.

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
Anxiety Score	56	86	75.47	6.437	41.430	-1.693	3.746
Writing Score	17.5	23.0	19.953	1.4515	2.107	0.390	-0.690

Table 4-1 The Result of descriptive analysis of Pre-questionnaire and Pre-test before the Experiment in Experimental Group

The descriptive analysis before experiment shows that students in experimental group generally exhibit high anxiety levels and the distribution is strongly negatively skewed (skewness = -1.693), which indicates that most students reported higher anxiety. The kurtosis value of 3.746 indicates a leptokurtic distribution, meaning the scores are more peaked with heavier tails than a normal distribution. In contrast, writing scores are relatively consistent across students, with a mean of 19.95 out of 25 and a lower standard deviation of 1.45, reflecting less variation.

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
Anxiety Score	30	70	79	76.50	2.403	5.776	-1.597	2.178
Writing Score	30	16.0	22.0	18.353	1.3470	1.814	0.754	1.367

Table 4-2 The Result of descriptive analysis of Pre-questionnaire and Pre-test before the Experiment in Controlled Group

In controlled class, students' writing performance and anxiety levels were analyzed through descriptive statistics prior to the experimental intervention. The writing scores, with a full score of 25, ranged from 16 to 22 and the mean is 18.353 with a standard deviation of 1.347, indicating a relatively consistent performance across students. In terms of anxiety, with a full score of 100, students scored between 70 and 81, with a mean of 76.5 and a standard deviation of 2.403. The strong negative skewness value of -1.597 and a kurtosis of 2.178 suggest that most students reported anxiety scores near the upper end, forming a left-skewed and sharply peaked distribution. This indicates that high anxiety was a common feature in this group. In conclusion, the result reflects generally high anxiety levels and stable writing performance in the controlled class before the experiment.

Based on the results, it can be seen that both groups were fairly balanced in writing ability at the pre-test stage, showed high level of anxiety when writing.

4.2 Data Analysis after the Experiment

4.2.1 Data Analysis and Results of the Post-test and Post-questionnaire

The post-test results (Table 4-3) show clear improvements in the experimental group. The mean writing score rose from 19.95 to 21.30 with low variability, indicating steady progress. Meanwhile, the mean anxiety score dropped sharply from 75.47 to 45.37, confirming a substantial reduction in anxiety. Overall, the intervention effectively enhanced writing performance and created a more positive learning environment.

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
Writing Score	30	19.5	24.0	21.300	1.0954	1.200	0.636	-0.003
Anxiety Score	30	40	54	45.370	3.508	12.309	0.920	0.270

Table 4-3 The Result of descriptive analysis of Post-questionnaire and Post-test after the Experiment in Experimental Group

In the control class, writing performance showed no improvement, with the mean score dropping from 18.35 to 17.12. The results were slightly variable (SD = 1.54) but skewed toward lower scores. Anxiety levels also remained high and virtually unchanged (M = 74.93 vs. 76.50 in the pre-test).

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
Writing Score	30	14.0	21.0	16.117	1.5351	2.357	1.809	3.561
Anxiety Score	30	45	86	74.930	7.071	49.995	-2.904	11.021

Table 4-4 The Result of descriptive analysis of Post-questionnaire and Post-test after the Experiment in Controlled Group

The comparison between experimental group and controlled group in the distribution of anxiety scores and writing scores is showed in box plot in figure 4-1 and 4-2. Group 1 is experimental group and group 2 represents controlled group.

These visual and statistical findings together suggest that the free writing and peer feedback not only supported academic improvement but also effectively alleviated students' emotional stress related to writing tasks.

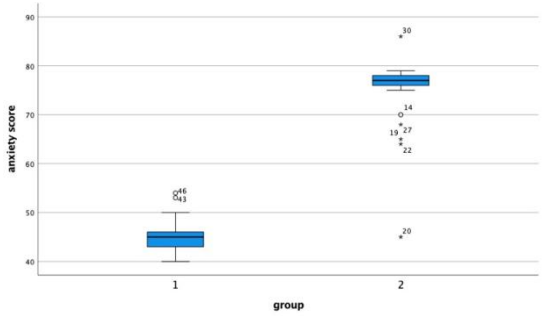

Figure 4-1 Distribution of Anxiety Scores: Experimental Group vs. Control Group

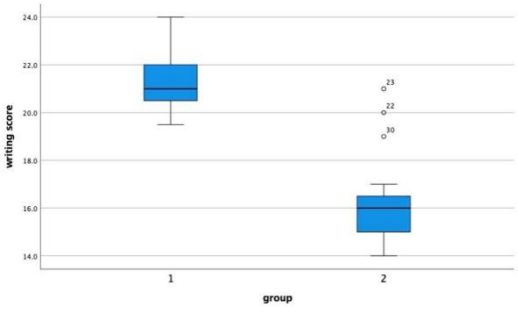

Figure 4-2 Distribution of Writing Scores: Experimental Group vs. Control Group

4.2.2 Data Analysis and Results of Independent Samples Test after Experiment

The results of the independent samples t-test, which is shown in Table 4-6, indicate significant differences between the experimental and controlled groups in both writing performance and anxiety levels after the intervention. For writing scores, Levene's test showed equal variances could be assumed ($p = .406$), and the t-test revealed a significant difference ($t(58) = -15.054$, $p < .001$), as experimental group scoring on average 5.18 points higher than the controlled group. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from -5.87 to -4.49, confirming that this difference was both statistically and practically meaningful. Similarly, for anxiety scores, equal variances were also assumed ($p = .184$), and a highly significant difference was found ($t(58) = 20.516$, $p < .001$), with the experimental group reporting anxiety levels that were, on average, 29.57 points lower than those of the control group. The confidence interval (26.68 to 32.45) further supports the reliability of this effect.

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
writing score	Equal variances assumed	.700	.406	-15.054	58	<.001	-5.1833	.3443	-5.8726	-4.4941
	Equal variances not assumed			-15.054	52.453	<.001	-5.1833	.3443	-5.8741	-4.4926
anxiety score	Equal variances assumed	1.809	.184	20.516	58	<.001	29.567	1.441	26.682	32.451
	Equal variances not assumed			20.516	42.464	<.001	29.567	1.441	26.659	32.474

Table 4-6 Results of Independent Samples T-test

In Table 4-7, the effect size analysis further supports the strong impact of the intervention on both writing performance and anxiety reduction. For writing scores, Cohen's d was 1.33, and Hedges' g (corrected) was 1.35, both indicating a large effect size according to conventional benchmarks ($d > 0.8$) Glass's delta for writing score was 1.10, reinforcing this conclusion based on the control group's variability.

As for anxiety score, the effect sizes were exceptionally large. Cohen's d reached 5.58, and Hedges' g was 5.66, indicating a massive effect of the intervention on lowering students' anxiety. Glass's delta was 3.51, again confirming that the reduction in anxiety in the experimental group was far greater than in the control group.

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer[a]	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
writing score	Cohen's d	1.3335	-3.887	-4.749	-3.012
	Hedges' correction	1.3511	-3.836	-4.687	-2.973
	Glass's delta	1.0954	-4.732	-6.037	-3.412
anxiety score	Cohen's d	5.581	5.297	4.205	6.378
	Hedges' correction	5.655	5.228	4.150	6.295
	Glass's delta	3.508	8.427	6.206	10.637

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control group.

Table 4-7 Independent Samples Effect Sizes

4.2.3 Analysis and Results of Correlations after Experiment

The Spearman's rho correlation analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant negative correlation between writing scores and anxiety scores across all participants ($\rho = -0.761$, $p < .001$, $n = 60$). This indicates that students who had higher anxiety levels tended to have lower writing performance, and vice versa. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level and it suggests a robust inverse relationship between emotional state and academic outcome.

This finding supports the theoretical expectation that emotional factors like anxiety can substantially affect learners' writing performance, especially in the context of second-language acquisition. The results highlight the importance of addressing students' emotional well-being as part of writing instruction.

Correlations

			writing score	anxiety score
Spearman's rho	writing score	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.761**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<.001
		N	60	60
	anxiety score	Correlation Coefficient	-.761**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.
		N	60	60

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4-8 Results Spearman Correlation

5. Conclusion

5.1 The Findings

5.1.1 Level of English Writing Anxiety (RQ1)

The results show that Chinese senior high school students generally experience a moderate to high level of English writing anxiety. In the pre-questionnaire phase, both the experimental group ($M = 76.23$, $SD = 2.81$) and the control group ($M = 76.50$, $SD = 2.40$) had similarly elevated anxiety levels, thus writing anxiety was a common issue prior to the intervention. The high scores, close to the upper range of the scale, suggest that students felt considerable pressure and discomfort when engaging in English writing tasks, which could hinder their academic performance and motivation.

5.1.2 The Relationship Between Writing Anxiety and English Writing Performance (RQ2)

Students who experienced higher levels of anxiety tended to achieve lower scores in English writing, based on the results of Spearman's rho correlation ($\rho = -0.761$, $p < .001$). The results imply that heightened anxiety may interfere with students' ability to organize their thoughts, manage time effectively, or take writing risks — all of which can lead to weaker overall performance.

5.1.3 Free writing Intervention Efficacy (RQ3)

The data provide strong evidence that free writing is an effective method to reduce English writing anxiety. After a period of free writing intervention, the experimental group's anxiety level dropped from 76.23 to 45.37 — a decrease of nearly 30 points — while the control group showed no meaningful improvement ($M = 74.93$ post-test). The independent

samples t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant ($t = 20.516$, $p < .001$), and effect size measures (Cohen's $d = 5.58$) further supported the large magnitude of this reduction. These results clearly demonstrate that free writing had a substantial emotional impact, alleviating students' anxiety and creating a more comfortable environment for writing in English.

5.2 Implications

First of all, in classroom instruction, integrating free writing sessions for students to write without fear of error—can create a psychologically safe environment that helps learners focus on idea generation rather than self-monitoring, thereby reducing debilitating anxiety and promoting greater investment in the writing process. Secondly, for curriculum developers and administrators, they should formally include affective support strategies, such as treating writing as exploration and allocating time for free writing, to enhance motivation and long-term development. Thirdly, teacher training should equip instructors with strategies to address writing anxiety and balance accuracy-focused instruction with activities that build fluency and confidence. Overall, emphasizing both emotional and cognitive dimensions of writing can help students develop stronger skills and self-assurance.

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