

Anxiety in the foreign language writing classroom: A study using Horwitz's FLCA model

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Abstract

This mixed methods correlational study investigates the relationship between EAP/ EFL learners' written performance and writing anxiety. Although it is sometimes overlooked in pedagogical planning in large classrooms as in KSA, situational writing anxiety can significantly narrow the scope for learners to write communicatively. The study participants comprised a convenience sample of 120 upper-intermediate students enrolled in three academic EAP courses in the EFL department at Majmaah University. An edited version of Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was used to gauge the participants' anxiety levels in three iterations of writing tasks. These findings were fortified with the results of the thematic analysis of focus groups conducted with fifteen volunteering learners. Results indicated that cognitive and affective writing anxiety facets like fear of negative judgments or time pressure were the primary originators of learners' anxiety in the writing class. However, the average scores for anxiety showed a slight but not statistically significant drop across the three attempts. This finding was correlated with learners' feedback in the focus group discussions which highlighted the fact that being aware of anxiety helped learners feel less anxious as experience reinforced that such anxiety was uncalled for. Learners' anxiety perceptions were modified due to teacher feedback and the assurance that their peers had the same obstacles as themselves, a fact that would keep peer criticism at bay. The theoretical basis for this study comes from Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Horwitz's foreign language anxiety model. Pedagogical gains can be expected from the key finding that writing anxiety is highly correlated with learners' performance, teachers can be guided in making appropriate changes. The study concludes with pertinent recommendations, mainly that Saudi writing classrooms need newer strategies to support learning such as keeping the writing tasks simpler, providing adequate and optimal practice, and having scaffolding measures in place. The study underscores the value of understanding and overcoming emotional obstacles to effective writing in EFL learning.

Keywords: EAP writing class, writing anxiety, anxiety perceptions, FLCAS

INTRODUCTION

Research such as the meta-analysis of Masgoret (2003) and Huang (2025) have established that learners' achievement in a language skill has a deep relationship with their attitudes to it. Their key findings converge on success prediction in the presence of positive attitudes, influence of affective factors including environment, and 'virtuous cycle' i.e., higher achievement leading to even more positive attitudes, creating a positive feedback loop. The massive corpus on research carried out on writing anxiety in English as L2 has repeatedly established a strong influence of affective, cognitive, and contextual factors on the learners' writing performance in EFL environments. According to Nawaz (2021), students of the secondary school under study were found to be under the effect of writing anxiety the most; and the factors

contributing to it are recognized to be different forms of anxiety (somatic and cognitive), lack of writing practice, avoidance behavior and poor vocabulary skills. Ali et al. (2023), a study with IELTS preparatory learners, acknowledged similar factors causing anxiety: FNE, test pressure, lack of topical knowledge, and poor vocabulary were the main reasons for the stress related to writing in their case. Among the Saudi female university students Alamri et al. (2021) reported that anxiety was often triggered by structural or accuracy-related challenges—like paragraph organization and grammar mistakes—while the learners also experienced some occasional anxiety from the teacher's feedback, corrections, and grading. Most literature tends to accentuate the negative effects of anxiety on writing but, recently, some studies have started to shed light on the psychological processes involved. Xu et al. (2025) suggested a chain mediation model indicating that anxiety disorders cause English academic writing to be impaired indirectly, through the disruption of learners' motivation and their use of metacognitive strategies. They, thus, pointed out the complex psychological pathways rather than a straightforward and direct effect. Interestingly, not all studies state anxiety as a major factor determining writing results. Ochoa (2025), in a large-scale study involving Filipino senior high school students, found that although the learners were writing under moderate anxiety condition, it was not a significant predictor of their English writing skills. Rather, writing efficacy was the one to outshine as the central factor (Al-Ahdal et al., 2014; Alqasham & Al-Ahdal, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Based on Hayes's updated writing model, Choi and Kim (2025) looked at how genre and writing anxiety impact writing performance in group difference analysis among intermediate EFL learners in China. Measures of correctness, fluency, and syntactic and lexical complexity were used to evaluate writing performance. The second language (L2) Syntactic Complexity Analyzer, Lexical Complexity Analyzer, Grammarly Premium, and manual error coding in accordance with Polio and Shea's (2014) standards were used to examine the argumentative and narrative essays that the participants submitted. Significant effects of writing anxiety on complexity and fluency, as well as genre effects on total complexity, accuracy, and fluency—aside from interaction effects—were found using mixed analyses of variance and t-tests. These findings are replicate with Biber and Conrad's functional explanations and Skehan's (2015) Limited Attention Capacity hypothesis since they uphold the correlation between performance and learners' anxiety. Further, pedagogical changes to address learning objectives are needed to allay anxiety in EFL genre-specific writing.

Ali et al. (2023) investigated the effect of interactive writing strategies applied by EFL learners on the writing product. Findings point out that adopting these boosts the overall writing performance of EFL students ($p = .000$). Other gains included improved vocabulary use in terms of quantity and quality to the tune of being statistically visible, firmly establishing the efficacy of interactive writing sessions. However, no change was observed in lexical variation in the output.

Teacher feedback and its effect on L2 writing has been examined by Ayadi (2025) in the Cambodian EFL setting, which has few studies on the subject. Many aspects of feedback have been explored including measured to enhance corrective feedback, the scope of it, trends in feedback and the role of linguistic aspects in feedback (Al-Ahdal, & Abduh, 2021; Albelihi, & 2024).

Writing anxiety critically affects the already challenging academic situation of writing in EFL classrooms (Mogesse et al., 2025). Learners' expression in the academic contexts has been found in this study to be seriously hampered by writing anxiety. The three types of anxiety examined were cognitive anxiety ($M = 2.68$), bodily anxiety ($M = 2.81$), and avoidance behavior ($M = 2.83$) and results were moderate for all three. Physical tension was reported by the learners cause by the constraint of time in the task, as much as fear of criticism for mistakes leading to escape mechanisms such as avoidance and delaying the task itself. Deeper investigation revealed poor self-confidence, limited exposure to writing, and assessment worries as the causes of anxiety. At the same time, they found the affective barrier challenging but not threatening so that it was reported as still manageable.

Ghane et al. (2024) used DingTalk in an EFL writing situation to measure learners' anxiety and writing output when tasked to work in an online collaborative prewriting environment. The affordance of computer-mediated communication (communication across two or more networked computers) was reported to have lowered the writing anxiety thus making a case for technology in the writing classroom.

Academic writing is a challenging but mandated skill that EFL students need to acquire during higher education (Huang, 2025). A great deal of research is dedicated to L2 learning anxiety but being empirical they provide little in terms of recommendations for improving the situation. Huang has examined academic writing and identified two types of factors viz., intrinsic such as ideational challenges and poor confidence, and extrinsic that are found in the learning environment. Amongst others, the study recommends improving the writing environment and modifying the assessment systems. Furthermore, it is recommended that EFL students improve their English language competence, develop critical thinking abilities, recognize their writing ability when feeling anxious, and modify their self-efficacy appropriately.

Masgoret and Gardner (2003) examined how motivation and emotions affect L2 writing achievement to better understand the significance of individual differences in L2 writing. More precisely, it looked at how students' L2 writing future selves—that is, their ideal L2 writing self, which represents their aspirations, and their ought L2 writing self, which represents their obligations—lead to qualitatively different emotions, such as anxiety and enjoyment, and how the future selves both directly and indirectly affect L2 writing achievement through anxiety and enjoyment. To gauge L2 writers, questionnaire scales were created utilizing qualitative data. 85 students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) at a private university in Iran were given the new measures in addition to the ones that were already in place for assessing L2 writing anxiety, joy, and motivation. The ideal L2 writing self positively predicted L2 writing joy, motivation, and achievement, while ought L2 writing self positively predicted L2 writing anxiety and motivation; L2 writing joy and anxiety both positively predicted L2 writing motivation; L2 writing anxiety predicted L2 writing achievement negatively but L2 joy did not, according to multiple regression results. Overall, the results demonstrate qualitative variations in students' emotions and motivation for L2 writing success.

The objective of Alqurashi (2024) was to determine the level of writing anxiety experienced by bilingual students in Turkish and to investigate how factors like gender, grade level, parental education level, the language spoken at home, daily TV viewing time, reading habits, diary-keeping practices, and the kinds of books read affect this anxiety. One of the quantitative research methodologies used in the study was a descriptive survey model. The results showed that bilingual learners in Turkish had "moderately high" levels of writing anxiety. It was

discovered that there was no significant correlation between the dependent variable, writing anxiety, grade level, parental education level, daily TV viewing time, reading habits, or the kinds of books read. Nonetheless, it was found that bilingual students' writing anxiety in Turkish was influenced by the language spoken at home, male students had higher levels of writing anxiety than female students, and students who did not keep a diary had higher levels of anxiety than those who did.

Based on the researcher's classroom experience and previous studies, the following research queries were formulated:

1. Does the FLCA afflict Saudi EAP writing classrooms as discussed in Horwitz (1986)?
2. Is there a difference in the anxiety experienced by females versus males in the Saudi EAP context?
3. In the prevalent paradigm, which factors allay the FLCA of Saudi undergraduate learners?

METHOD

The study took a mixed methods approach by conducting an online survey across three cycles of English (EFL) academic writing spread over a period of seven weeks. The survey was based on Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) but adapted to writing skills in the Saudi undergraduate classroom.

The participants in this study comprised third year upper intermediate students enrolled in the English for Academic Purpose (EAP) optional program at Majmaah University. Being a convenience sample, it was easy to enroll both male and female participants as the study intended to answer a research question on the role of gender, if any, on FLCA. Thus, there were in all 62 male and 58 female participants, all were Arabic as MT Saudi residents with comparable background in English language learning. The median age of the sample (irrespective of gender) was 21.4 years.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As stated earlier, the study used an adapted version of Horwitz's FLAS to elicit data on learners' anxiety perceptions in the EAP writing class. Since only a few substitutions were made to the original battery, internal consistency was taken to be the previous value. The study was conducted over seven weeks during the fall semester and three iterations were used to replicate Jia (2024) which established that recasts brought about significant reduction in learners' anxiety. All surveys used the online mode i.e. Google Forms for data collection, which was then treated statistically to answer the research questions.

There are three constructs that Horwitz's FLCAS proposes: i. **communication apprehension**, ii. **test anxiety**, and iii. **fear of negative evaluation**. In the final version of the questionnaire, 5 statements dealt with the construct of **Communication Apprehension**, 9 statements dealt with the construct of **Fear of negative social evaluation** and 4 dealt with the construct of **Test anxiety**. Thus, the adapted version of Horwitz's FLCAS comprised 18 statements. The five-point Likert Scale was used for the responses with 1 representing Strongly Disagree and 5 representing Strongly Agree.

Table 1 below summarizes the accumulated means for males and females on statements pertaining to **Communication Apprehension** in the questionnaire.

Table 1: Communication Apprehension of females (F) and males (M), mean and p-values

	Statement	m(F)	SD	m(M)	SD	p-value
1	I am never quite sure of myself in the writing class.	4.3	1.5	4.6	1.03	0.20
2	It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is asking me to write about in the writing class.	3.9	1.8	4.2	1.2	0.29
3	During the writing class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the writing task.	4.01	1.1	4.04	1.2	0.89
4	I keep thinking that the other students are better at writing in English than I am.	4.6	1.02	3.9	1.8	0.46
5	I start to panic when I have to write without preparation in the writing class.	4.06	1.7	4.1	1.02	0.87

The data in table 1 reflects the results of the independent sample t-test for each statement under the construct of **Communication Apprehension** between male and female learners to measure if statistically significant difference prevails between the average scores of the two groups in this study (males and females) on the perception towards anxiety in the foreign language class. For each of the statements, the mean values of the groups are comparable with low SD indicative of convergence of perceptions within the groups and also vis-à-vis the other. In other words, statistically, there are no differences in the perceptions of anxiety experiences of male and female learners in the study. This is an important finding as language research has demonstrated in many studies differences in the perceptions of learners attributable to the gender.

This finding, therefore, answers two research questions. One, the Saudi EAP writing class is afflicted by foreign language classroom anxiety, and two, that the variable of gender does not have a role in anxiety perceptions of the participants in the study.

Table 2 below summarizes the accumulated means for males and females on statements pertaining to **Fear of negative social evaluation** in the questionnaire.

Table 2: Fear of negative social evaluation of females (F) and males (M), mean and p-values

	Statement	m(F)	SD	m(M)	SD	p-value
1	I worry about making mistakes in the EAP writing class.	4.5	1.02	4.1	1.2	0.051
2	In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.	4.3	1.1	4.2	1.3	0.65
3	I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.	3.9	1.4	3.8	1.01	0.65
4	Even if I am well prepared for the EAP writing class, I feel anxious about it.	4.7	1.02	4.5	1.01	0.28
5	I often feel like not going to my EAP writing class.	3.9	1.6	4.1	1.4	0.47
6	I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.	2.1	1.03	1.9	1.0	0.28

7	The EAP writing class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.	4.5	1.1	4.3	1.09	0.32
8	I feel more tense and nervous in my EAP writing class than in my other classes.	3.7	1.01	4	1.06	0.11
9	When I'm on my way to the EAP writing class, I feel unsure and tense.	4.1	1.4	4.3	1.3	0.42

Data in table 2 above indicates that the fear of negative social evaluation does negatively affect the Saudi EAP writing class learners to a great extent as reflected in the high mean values they have assigned to almost all the statements. The values summarized in the table are computations of independent samples t-test for the two genders over nine measures pertaining to their anxiety perceptions of negative social evaluation. The largest difference appeared in the first comparison ($M_1 = 4.5$, $M_2 = 4.1$), which approached significance, $t(118) = 1.97$, $p = .051$, but still fell slightly above the threshold. Low t-values were obtained <1.6 and therefore, corresponding low p -values between 0.11 and 0.65 indicating absence of statistical significance in the perceptions of males versus females on the construct of social evaluation. One reason for this could be that language learners may exhibit greater anxiety in mixed genders classrooms as compared to segregated classrooms that are prevalent in KSA. Studies that support this view are Liu et al. (2022) placed in Oman, Mahmoodzadeh (2013) placed in Iran, and Zulkiflee and Nimehchisalem (2022) in Malaysia. It can, hence, be concluded that co-educational settings in the context of Muslim language learners are not conducive to lower FLCA.

Lastly, responses to statement 6 deserve special attention: Teacher feedback is seen as appositive input and one that does NOT trigger anxiety response in the study sample since the mean values for responses of females and males to this assertion are low at 2.1 and 1.9 respectively which indicates their disagreement with the input. It can be added here that this thought also emerged during the focus groups where the participants repeatedly attributed their learning in the EAP writing class to teacher input as much as peer response in the later iterations. This is discussed later in the study in greater detail.

Table 3 below summarizes the accumulated means for males and females on statements pertaining to **Test anxiety** in the questionnaire.

Table 3: Test anxiety of females (F) and males (M), mean and p-values

	Statement	m(F)	SD	m(M)	SD	p-value
1	The more I study for an EAP writing test, the more confused I get.	4.6	1.02	4.7	1.2	0.75
2	I am usually at ease during tests in my EAP writing class.	1.9	1.3	1.2	1.1	0.002
3	I worry about the consequences of failing my EAP writing class.	4.5	1.2	4.2	1.01	0.14
4	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for the EAP writing class.	2.0	1.03	2.2	1.03	0.29

In this independent t-test for the four measures under the construct of test anxiety, there are no significant statistical differences in the anxiety perceptions according to gender in three out of four situations, i.e., statements 1, 3, 4. However, the anxiety perception of females for *I am*

usually at ease during tests in my EAP writing class is somewhat lower at a mean value of 1.9 than that of males at a mean of 1.2. However, it is notable that standard deviation values are low within each group which shows a trend towards convergence of views to an agreement. Overall, the findings suggest that the two groups/ genders performed similarly on most measures, except for the second, where females demonstrated a clear advantage.

Thus, the answer to RQs 1 and 2 as derived from the data obtained through the surveys indicates that Saudi EAP writing course learners experience anxiety on all the three constructs proposed by Horwitz. However, the iterations through the seven-week period showed a slight fall in the group mean values across the three constructs, though this was NOT statistically significant.

Thereafter Focus Group discussions highlighted a few leading themes: One, the role of teacher feedback is significant in allaying the FLCA of the participants, in fact most of them agreed that despite of technological assistance being available and even promoted by the university, the presence of the teacher itself created an affable atmosphere and helped set aside writing anxiety to some extent. Two, the participants across genders agreed that being aware of anxiety (when answering the survey) helped them feel better in the later iterations of the writing tasks. Three, participants opined that they felt less anxious when assigned free writing tasks as compared to content focused academic writing which demanded highly coherent and cohesive writing output.

DISCUSSION

The discussion on the correlation between anxiety and second language learning is one fraught with controversies, it can be a learning stimulus though generally lower anxiety is considered desirable for optimum learning to take place. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), learning anxiety can arise from three main situations: One, **Communication apprehension** due to learners' inability to adequately present their thoughts and ideas; two, **Fear of negative social evaluation** such as negative feedback of peers and teachers; three, **Test anxiety** which is especially relevant in learning situations such as found in KSA where formatted tests are the only means of judging ability. However, in the current study, at least one of the constructs was found to be more of a phantom than real one, i.e., fear of negative feedback as participants were positively inclined to teacher feedback and peer feedback was reported (in focus groups) to be rather a figment of imagination as they discovered that contrary to their beliefs their peers were performing as good or bad them.

To tackle this situational anxiety, studies suggest that L1 intervention such as in seeking clarification in L1, can be effective (Meyer, 2008). This is ratified by an earlier study (Shimizu, 2006) which showed that Japanese learners of English rarely asked questions when asked to do so in English, which had a negative impact on their language progress. Yet, this is not a gospel truth and cannot be applied as a blanket solution to all L2 learning anxiety cases. In the background of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, it can be said that situational language learning anxiety is not something inherent to the learner, rather as MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) propose, it develops as learners encounter problems or setbacks in their learning experience. In other words, in the initial learning experience, they experience little anxiety. This finding has important ramifications for KSA like learning environments which are evolving themselves in the light of research and can ensure that anxiety does not enter their EFL classrooms at all by taking pre-emptive measures. Further, in their model, there can be

different stages in the learning process when anxiety can afflict the learner: one, the input stage or their first encounter with L2, two, the processing stage when they use L1 to grasp L2, and three, the output stage, when they apply the new knowledge. Results in the current study demonstrate that the Saudi EFL learners experience anxiety the most in the first and third stages of English language learning. Consequently, the processing of the input is fractured and their motivation to learn is severely retarded. In this context, Sheen (2008) found that error correction was seriously impeded in high anxiety learners as their short-term memory was not active enough to process the inputs. This finding is not supported by other studies which support anxiety as facilitative by prodding learners to work harder. One example is Djigunovic (2006) which showed longer writing output in high anxiety learners despite poor fluency.

Feedback was reported as a positive input in the current study. This aligns with Jia (2024) which uses a quantitative research approach to examine the psychological effects of corrective feedback on language anxiety in English as a Second Language (ESL) students. The results point out that anxiety was lowered in repeat tasks but certain feedback types such as metalinguistic still added to learners' fears. Moreover, feedback frequency could also be linked to anxiety suggesting the importance of controlled or modulated feedback. These findings suggest the need for teacher training in feedback in terms of emotional inputs and actual correction of errors. In other words, it is important to incorporate indirect feedback to create supportive learning environments which will also add to learners' confidence and engagement in the learning process.

Guo et al. (2025) found that the learners' state of mind is a factor in writing anxiety generation. This study examined freshman students' writing anxiety and attitudes to writing at an Ethiopian university in a comparative study with two groups. Both groups were given anxiety and attitude questionnaires before and after writing to gather data for the study. Conversation journals writing was introduced to the experimental group as an intervention and data was treated statistically with a paired sample t-test and a one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Findings indicated lower anxiety and higher positive attitudes in the experimental group due to the let up they got in the form of the journal which helped them be more aware of their mental state.

Focus group revealed that mandated tasks were found to be more stressful by the learners, the reason could be the fear of assessment linked to these. A study of 149 Korean eighth-grade students' perceptions and writing fluency in English as a foreign language (Can & Karda, 2024) showed increased fluency in iterative tasks, indicating that the benefits of freewriting practice were carried to other situations. Furthermore, research shows that free writing improved satisfaction and decreased writing anxiety. Most learners thought that freewriting enhanced their writing abilities. Increased self-confidence and written production were the most often cited advantages, whereas inadequate freewriting time was the main drawback. Overall, the results show that freewriting is a useful fluency-based strategy that promotes emotional development and fluency development in secondary EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study set out to answer three questions pertaining to learners' anxiety in the EAP (EFL) classroom based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis which states that emotional aspects such as anxiety, lack of motivation, and self-esteem issues can function as a "filter" that obstructs the process of learning a new language. The negative feelings cause the

filter to be high which blocks the understanding of the input, the opposite of which happens with the positive feelings where the input is easily acquired. So, it becomes important to develop an environment that is low in anxiety and supportive for the second language acquisition. Data from three EAP writing iterations was collected from a mixed convenience sample of learners who had opted for the course. Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was used to gauge the participants' anxiety levels and results indicated that Saudi EAP writing courses caused high foreign language anxiety amongst the learners. Responses to all the three constructs of Horwitz's model were positive for anxiety across the genders in this study. This could be taken as a cause in poor writing output and general failure to attain learning objectives as motivation and engagement are negatively impacted by learning anxiety. In a similar context, [11] examined the degree of writing anxiety among Iraqi senior secondary school EFL students and whether there is a statistically significant difference between male and female students who experience writing anxiety. Additionally, the study sought to determine the sort of association between students' competence and writing anxiety as well as whether there is a significant difference in writing anxiety between low and high-proficient students. The study's conclusions showed that writing anxiety is favorably and moderately experienced by Iraqi EFL senior secondary school students during the English language learning process. When it comes to writing anxiety, there is no statistically significant difference between male and female learners. When it comes to writing anxiety, there is no discernible difference between learners with low and high proficiency. The positive influence of teacher feedback was also one of the points of inquiry in this study. Findings indicated that continuous teacher feedback was found helpful in allaying learners' anxiety. This result is much like Alamri et al. (2021) which investigated how EFL students who study English for academic objectives view and prefer written corrective feedback. Most students considered it helpful to identify and successfully fix mistakes, and they preferred direct feedback. Additionally, many students favored thorough feedback that addressed every kind of mistake in their texts. They discovered that a wide range of feedback remarks were useful in making effective changes and lowering the number of mistakes in subsequent iterations.

Furthermore, all students supported positive feedback and thought that compliments and encouragement were an effective way to boost their performance and push themselves. EFL writing instructors are therefore expected to become more perceptive of their students' demands, accommodate their preferences, and modify their written corrective feedback to address specific writing components that students most require.

Lastly, the results showed a negative association ($r = -.012$ -) between students' writing anxiety and competency; this suggests that students who are less proficient in a foreign language are more likely to feel writing anxiety.

Recommendations

Before learners are exposed to EAP writing coursework, it is important to stabilize their performance via low stakes writing, mindfulness practice, and scaffolding. This will allay their anxiety and boost motivation.

Institutional and pedagogical steps to ensure that emotional and affective obstacles are adequately tackled should be undertaken so that effective writing in EAP is attained.

Limitations

Although the study is unique in its objectives and scope, some limitations were observed. The anxiety perceptions of the sample were not correlated with academic performance; it is hoped that future endeavors will be mindful of this. Also, results pertaining to learning anxiety in

courses other than EAP were found beyond the scope of this study, making the results less generalizable.

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