

Writing Under Pressure: The Correlation between Anxiety and Performance

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0557>

Received: 20 August 2025; Accepted: 26 August 2025; Published: 21 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This article explores the connection between writing anxiety and English learners' writing performance in order to expose the anxiety's effects on assessment outcomes. Through the application of Pearson's Correlation Coefficient, which is a strong statistical tool, a fairly negative correlation was found between the level of anxiety in writing and the performance ($r = -0.951$, $p < 0.001$). It implies that in writing, the high level of anxiety results in a low effect. The research explores into three distinct dimensions of anxiety: somatic, cognitive, and behavioral avoidance. The results reflect that the negative coefficients for performance are highest for somatic anxiety as $r = -0.944$ manifests. This is followed by cognitive anxiety, which shows a correlation of $r = -0.843$, and from avoidance behavior it is $r = -0.704$. These findings revealed physiological and cognitive distress students encountered during the writing process contributed substantially to their writing performance, and that avoidance behaviors played a contributing role to this dynamic. The results underscore a need for more focused strategies that address the issue of writing anxiety, especially both somatic and cognitive parts of anxiety and simultaneously promote students' writing skills. Significantly, the study sheds light to educators and researchers in their efforts to improve student writing through addressing anxiety-related hurdles.

Keywords: writing anxiety, writing performance, somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, Pearson Correlation

INTRODUCTION

Writing anxiety is a common issue for learners, particularly for those learning English as a second language (L2). This issue involves the emotional, mental, and physical stress people feel when writing. Writing anxiety can show up in various ways, including cognitive anxiety, which involves worries about performance, self-confidence, and academic assessments; somatic anxiety, which includes physical signs like nervousness and sweating; and avoidance behavior, where individuals try to escape writing tasks because of stress. Anxiety often arises from the pressure to perform well, fear of evaluation, or a lack of confidence in writing skills, especially for second language learners who face language-related challenges.

For those learning a second language, writing can be very difficult to master. Students often feel overwhelmed by language complexities, grammar rules, and the standards for academic writing. Research shows that second language learners experience more writing anxiety than native speakers, mainly due to limited language skills, lack of vocabulary, and fears of making mistakes. Cheng (2004) argues that writing anxiety significantly hinders students' ability to express their ideas clearly, negatively affecting their overall writing quality. As a result, this can lead to lower academic grades and reduced motivation to engage in writing tasks.

Understanding writing anxiety is critical given how it affects students' academic performance. For these learners, the existence of writing anxiety is likely to result in lowered productivity, hurt their ability to put down ideas in writing, and develop an overall distaste towards writing. Alleviating this concern, or writing anxiety, may help increase learners' self-efficacy and level of performance in writing, which is important in the overcoming the difficulties they face when writing in a second language. By elucidating the link between writing anxiety and performance, this study seeks to contribute to the knowledge base that can assist language instructors with fostering a supportive environment for students learning a second language. This correlational relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance demonstrates the extent to which these two

factors are tied together. In other words, it seeks to determine whether a student's performance on writing tests is statistically related to their anxiety relating to writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing anxiety is a common issue, especially among second language (L2) learners, and it can have a significant impact on their writing performance. For diploma engineering students, writing plays a crucial role not only in academic success but also in their future careers, where technical writing is often required. Despite its importance, many students struggle with writing anxiety, which can interfere with their ability to perform effectively (Horwitz, 2022; Zheng & Cheng, 2021).

Research has highlighted several dimensions of writing anxiety. Zheng and Cheng (2021) found that addressing both the cognitive and physical symptoms of anxiety could significantly improve students' writing abilities. Their study emphasized the role of targeted interventions, such as relaxation techniques and cognitive restructuring, in reducing anxiety levels. Similarly, Horwitz (2022) pointed out that managing anxiety through stress-reduction strategies, like mindfulness exercises and time management, can boost students' confidence and help them approach writing tasks with greater ease. These findings underscore the importance of supporting L2 learners, who often face additional hurdles, such as adapting to new language norms and managing linguistic insecurities (Horwitz, 2022).

While previous studies have explored interventions to reduce writing anxiety, gaps remain in understanding how anxiety specifically affects different groups of learners. For instance, the unique challenges faced by diploma engineering students, who are required to produce clear and precise technical documents are not well-documented in the literature. This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the correlation between writing anxiety and writing performance among 172 diploma engineering students. The findings aim to provide insights into how educators can better support students in overcoming writing-related challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study involved 172 diploma students from the Faculty of Engineering at UiTM. The number of participants was based on the limited pool of third-semester students available during the 2022/2023 academic year. At the same time, care was taken to ensure that the sample was both representative of the wider student population and large enough to be statistically meaningful. Following the guidelines of Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample size within this range was considered sufficient. To avoid bias and give all students an equal chance of being included, a stratified random sampling method was used.

The main tool used was the Expository Essay Writing Test, chosen to examine how students' writing anxiety relates to their actual writing ability. In the ELC231 course, students are required to complete an expository essay as part of their first test in the sixth week of the semester. They are given two hours to write between 200 and 300 words. The essays are marked using a standardised rubric applied across all UiTM branch campuses, focusing on three areas: Content, Language, and Organisation. Because all instructors follow the same marking scheme, the scores provide a reliable measure of students' writing performance.

To analyse the link between writing anxiety and writing performance, Pearson's r was used. This statistical test measures the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables. In this context, writing anxiety refers to the stress or uneasiness students feel when faced with writing tasks, while writing performance reflects the quality of their essays. Pearson's r produces a value between -1 and +1. A result close to +1 suggests a strong positive relationship, meaning higher anxiety might be linked with higher performance (or vice versa).

Table 1 Marking Scheme for ELC 231 Expository Essay Assessment

CRITERIA	ITEMS
Content – 7 marks	Thesis statement and topic sentences provided

	Relevant points and supporting details given Relevant examples given Clear and well explained ideas provided
Language – 10 marks	Appropriate style and tone Correct tenses Suitable and appropriate choice of words < 4 marks : Weak 5-6 marks : Satisfactory (errors do not distort meaning) 7-8 marks : Good (minor errors) 9-10 marks : Excellent (error free)
Organisation– 3 marks	Logical arrangement of content Use of linkers
TOTAL–20marks	

In addition, to ensure that the disparities in awarding marks are fewer than 10%, examiners are required to go through an inter-rater reliability phase for the expository essay writing examination. If there are more than three marks of discrepancy, the examiner is required to remark the essays. According to Tinsley and Weiss (2000), inter-rater agreement is influenced by the degree to which different examiners' assessments differ from one another in absolute terms. The full essay rubrics have been validated through a rigorous process by the university, enhancing the reliability of the examination. The university supports and widely implements these rubrics across all UiTM branch campuses in Malaysia. These data reflect the significance and reliability of grading process of the expository essay writing test. Therefore, an inter-rater reliability phase and validated rubrics will ensure a fair and objective assessment process for the expository essay writing examination that ultimately upholds the integrity and trustworthiness of the university's evaluation policy.

RESULTS

This study reveals a clear link between writing anxiety and writing performance among participants. Understanding this relationship helps clarify how higher anxiety levels can impact students' writing skills. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for writing anxiety and the participants' writing performance. Furthermore, Table 3 displays the results of the correlations between these two factors, calculated using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Writing Anxiety and Students' Performance

Variables	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
MARKS	172	1	14	6.85	4.114
ANXIETY	172	19	148	88.81	42.179
Cognitive	172	10	60	32.92	12.558
Somatic	172	4	95	45.17	26.241
Avoidance Behaviour	172	1	33	10.76	6.564

The analysis presented in Table 2 provides details of the average scores across the three dimensions of writing anxiety concerning the respondents' performance in writing tests. A comprehensive overview of the sample study's overall writing anxiety levels was obtained by calculating the combined mean score for all dimensions (M=88.81). Out of the dimensions considered, the somatic anxiety dimension demonstrates the highest average

score ($M=45.17$), suggesting that the respondents encountered a substantial degree of physiological unease while engaging in writing activities. The cognitive anxiety dimension has an average score of ($M=32.92$), indicating significant apprehensions pertaining to cognitive dimensions, including grades-related worries and self-efficacy in writing assignments. In summary, the results suggest that the avoidance-behaviour dimension exhibits the lowest level of avoidance behaviour among respondents in response to triggers of writing anxiety, as indicated by its mean score of 10.76 ($M=10.76$). This suggests that, compared to cognitive and somatic anxiety dimensions, respondents tend to engage in fewer avoidance behaviours when faced with writing-related stressors.

Table 3 Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance Correlation

Variables	r (Pearson Correlation)	P (sig 2.tailed) $P<0.05$
Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance	-.951**	<.001

A p-value of 0.001 and a correlation coefficient of -0.951 were found using the Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient test. This suggests that there is a significant inverse relationship between writing performance and writing anxiety. The two variables under study have a very strong negative linear relationship, as indicated by the correlation coefficient of -0.951. One variable tends to decline in a predictable fashion when the other grows. The inverse association is strong and close, as indicated by the value of -0.951. The correlation's statistical significance is indicated by the p-value of 0.001.

In this case, a p-value of 0.001 is exceptionally low, signifying that the correlation between the variables is highly statistically significant. This implies that the observed correlation is highly unlikely to have occurred purely by random chance. The result demonstrates a strong and significant negative correlation between the two variables, suggesting that as one variable increases, the other consistently decreases. Moreover, this relationship is unlikely to be attributed to random variation.

Table **Error! No text of specified style in document.** The Correlation Between Each Dimension of Writing Anxiety and Actual Writing Performance

Dimension		r(Pearson Correlation)	P (sig 2.tailed) $P<0.05$
Somatic and	Writing Performance	-.944**	<.001
Cognitive and	Writing Performance	-.843**	<.001
Avoidance-Behaviour and	Writing Performance	-.704**	<.001

As can be seen in Table 4, it is evident that there is a strong negative correlation between the variables (dimensions of writing anxiety and participants' writing performance). The correlation between the somatic anxiety dimension and the actual writing performance of the respondents was the highest with ($r=-.944^{**}$). This indicates a strong negative correlation between the two variables (somatic anxiety vs writing performance). As somatic anxiety increases, writing performance tends to decrease. This suggests that heightened physical manifestations of anxiety are associated with lower writing performance. There is also a strong negative correlation between the cognitive anxiety dimension and the participants' writing performance. However, the result for avoidance behaviour shows a moderate negative correlation between the variables (avoidance-behaviour dimension vs writing performance). This indicates that students who tend to avoid writing due to anxiety have lower writing performance. The negative correlation coefficients suggest that higher levels of each type of anxiety are associated with lower writing performance. The stronger the negative correlation, the more pronounced this relationship. The significant correlation coefficients indicate that these relationships are unlikely to have occurred by random chance. These analyses imply that addressing and managing writing anxiety, whether somatic, cognitive, or related to avoidance behaviour, can positively impact L2 learners' writing performance. Interventions that target these anxiety dimensions might lead to improvements in students' ability to express themselves effectively in writing. Therefore, given the understanding of the respondents' levels of writing anxiety, its causes, and its relationship with writing

performance, it becomes crucial to explore the strategies employed by the sample study in reducing their writing anxiety.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that writing anxiety has a strong negative effect on students' writing performance, with the physical and cognitive aspects showing the greatest impact. Students who experienced physical signs of anxiety, such as restlessness or nervousness, performed the weakest in writing tasks. Those who were troubled by worries about grades or self-belief also showed lower performance, while avoidance behaviours played a smaller yet still noticeable role.

The results highlight several important implications. For teaching, it is vital that educators acknowledge how deeply anxiety influences students' ability to write. Simple steps such as short relaxation activities, guided pre-writing exercises, and creating a more supportive classroom environment may help reduce physical anxiety. At the same time, teachers can build students' confidence by providing constructive feedback, encouraging practice through smaller writing tasks, and placing value on the writing process instead of only the final product.

For curriculum design, strategies that integrate writing practice with anxiety management could be included, such as group writing sessions, opportunities for reflection, and low-stakes assessments that allow students to learn without the constant pressure of grades. Institutions too can play a role by offering writing centres, peer mentoring, or counselling support that work alongside classroom teaching.

In terms of future directions, more studies could look at how different teaching approaches reduce anxiety over time, or how targeted support for specific groups of learners may lead to stronger outcomes. It would also be useful to explore how writing anxiety interacts with other factors such as language proficiency, self-regulation strategies, or motivation. Longitudinal studies could provide insight into whether interventions have lasting effects, while cross-cultural research may reveal whether writing anxiety manifests differently in diverse educational contexts. Additionally, mixed-method studies that combine test results with students' own reflections could offer a deeper understanding of the lived experience of writing anxiety.

In conclusion, writing anxiety is not simply a personal issue but a real barrier to performance. By addressing the physical and cognitive aspects of anxiety through thoughtful teaching and supportive learning environments, students can be better equipped to write with clarity, confidence, and purpose. This study confirms that writing anxiety has a strong negative effect on students' writing performance, with the physical and cognitive aspects showing the greatest impact. Students who experienced physical signs of anxiety, such as restlessness or nervousness, performed the weakest in writing tasks. Those who were troubled by worries about grades or self-belief also showed lower performance, while avoidance behaviours played a smaller yet still noticeable role.

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