Personal factors predicting EFL Learners' writing anxiety

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Abstract

The present study investigated the relationship between writing anxiety with gender, writing self-efficacy and writing achievement, since this issue is quite common in foreign language classrooms and usually has a negative effect on students' writing performance. The participants were 21 intermediate level students at a state university in Turkey. An independent samples *t*-test found no significant difference between the writing anxiety levels of males and females. A statistically significant negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy levels of the students was found in the correlation analysis. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) found a significant difference among three achievement groups regarding their writing anxiety levels. Lastly, the results of the two-way ANOVA indicated a main effect of writing anxiety on students' actual written competence/skills but there was no main effect of gender. Moreover, the interactional effect of gender and writing anxiety was not statistically significant. These results indicate that although there is no relationship between students' gender and their writing anxiety level, students' writing achievement and writing self-efficacy have an effect on their writing anxiety level. This study also calls for more student-centred and process-oriented approaches in language classrooms.

Keywords: Writing anxiety; gender; writing self-efficacy; writing achievement

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1. Introduction

Writing anxiety has been one of the issues that has been investigated in the field of English language teaching. According to Hassan (2001) writing anxiety is an eschewal of writing and of circumstances in which learners might be required to write. In order to measure the writing anxiety of learners, Cheng (2004) developed the second language writing anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) which measures three different concepts: somatic anxiety, avoidance behavior and cognitive anxiety. Somatic anxiety is related to physiological effects of anxiety. Nervousness and tension might be indicators of somatic anxiety. Cheng (2004) also indicated that cognitive anxiety refers to negative expectations, too much concern about performance and other people's opinions. Lastly, avoidance behaviour is related to the avoidance of writing. Some factors such as gender, writing self-efficacy and writing achievement are believed to have an effect on the learners' writing anxiety levels.

1.1. Literature review

Writing anxiety is usually believed to have a debilitating effect on the students' writing performance. Comparing learners with high and low anxiety, Daly (1978) tested the hypothesis that learners with low anxiety will perform better in writing tasks. He found out that learners having a high level of writing anxiety have a tendency to produce low-quality sentences consisting of short and simple structures. In line with these results, Hassan (2001) pointed out that learners who have low anxiety were more succeeding in terms of their writing compared to the students with high anxiety. In addition, Faigley, Daly and Witte (1981) focused on 110 undergraduate students' writing anxiety level and their writing performance and found out that learners with high anxiety had shorter writings and there were problems with word order. Moreover, they were less fluent than others. Previous research also showed that students' writing anxiety might result in avoidance of certain courses. To illustrate, measuring 98 undergraduate students' language intensity and writing anxiety, Daly and Miller (1975) pointed out that students tended to attend courses when they had to hand in writing assignments. Similarly, using four language anxiety scales and an information questionnaire for their background, Cheng (2002) also indicated that students with high writing anxiety avoided taking writing courses.

Writing anxiety is mostly associated with several factors. Several studies focused on the relationship between gender and writing anxiety and they showed contradictory results. Specifically, focusing on an instructor's observations of her students' writing anxiety at a college, Cayton (1990) claimed that because of power and authority issues, women might be more prone to high anxiety. On the other hand, in her dissertation, Wynn (2000) used pre- and post-assessment for writing anxiety and found no significant differences between male and female students regarding their writing anxiety level. Similarly, in a more recent study, Hakkoymaz (2017) also found no significant relationship between gender and writing anxiety level. More recently, Martinez, Kock and Cass (2011) used a questionnaire and participants' GPA scores to investigate the factors associated with writing anxiety. They found that gender was significantly related to writing anxiety wherein females had higher levels of writing anxiety than males. Investigating the factors associated with writing anxiety, Shang (2013) used a questionnaire, writing self-efficacy scale and a composition test. He found out that male students with a higher level of writing anxiety got higher scores on the writing test than female students. Ucgun (2011) investigated primary school students' writing anxiety levels considering several factors. The results showed that there was a significant difference between writing anxiety levels of males and females. She indicated that female students had more writing anxiety than male students. In line with this study, Machida (2001) examined Japanese learners of English and found that females had more writing anxiety than males. On the other hand, Mejias, Applebaum, Applebaum and Trotter (1991) also investigated the relationship between gender and writing anxiety level and found that Hispanic males had more anxiety than females. Investigating the possible factors of writing anxiety, Jawas (2019) found that class essay assignments are one of the most important factors for writing anxiety

and concluded that if students are given a chance to use their strategies their writing anxiety level might decrease. Topuzkanamis (2015) also concluded that teaching strategies might also help in decreasing students' writing anxiety.

Writing self-efficacy is another variable associated with writing anxiety. Writing self-efficacy is usually defined as a person's belief in his or her ability to write. After reviewing 16 studies investigating the relationship between writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy, Klassen (2002) indicated that most of the studies showed a negative relationship between writing anxiety and self-efficacy. In other words, when the students' level of writing anxiety increases, their confidence in their ability to write reduces correspondingly. In their longitudinal study investigating the fluctuation of writing anxiety and self-efficacy over time, Rechtien and Dizinno (1998) found that students with high self-efficacy had less writing anxiety. Moreover, MacIntyre (1994) suggested that there is a stronger correlation between language anxiety and subjective views of language proficiency than between language anxiety and objective assessment of proficiency. In order to investigate the relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety, Shang (2012) examined 146 Taiwanese EFL writers. The results of the study indicated a negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy. In a more recent study, Kirmizi and Kirmizi (2015) investigated writing anxiety, writing self-efficacy and possible factors for writing anxiety. Their results indicated that, compared to female students, male students had higher levels of anxiety and they found a negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy. Similarly, Huerta et al. (2017) also found a negative correlation between writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety. However, there are also studies which indicate that writing anxiety does not only have a negative effect on the writing process. To illustrate, Guneyli (2016) claimed that writing anxiety might also affect students' writing performance positively.

Several other studies investigated the relationship between metacognitive awareness and writing anxiety. Stewart, Seifert and Rolheiser (2015) claimed that students' writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy might have an effect on their metacognitive awareness. Moreover, Blasco (2016) also investigated the relationship between writing anxiety with students' writing self-efficacy and how they use metacognitive strategies for writing. The results showed that there was a negative relationship between these two variables and writing anxiety. In a similar study, Balta (2018) tried to find out whether students' writing skills, writing anxiety and metacognitive awareness are related to each other. She found that a low-level writing anxiety will result in a high level of metacognitive awareness and this will affect their writing skills in a positive way.

There might be several reasons for the second language learners' writing anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) indicated that fear of exams and negative evaluation might be possible reasons for writing anxiety. Hassan (2001) also focused on the possible reasons for writing anxiety and pointed out that poor writing skills, role models who are not proficient enough, lack of knowledge of the writing process and authoritative, teacher-centered, product-oriented teaching might account for writing anxiety. He underlined the importance of self-confidence indicating that even high proficient learners may not be successful if they do not believe in their abilities. Rezaei, Jafari and Younas (2014) investigated Iranian EFL students' writing anxiety levels, types and reasons and found that too much concern about performance and unrealistic expectances, apprehension of negative evaluation, poor language abilities and low self-confidence were the main reasons for writing anxiety.

Based on the framework of the previous studies, the present research aims to investigate the following research questions:

1. Do the learners' writing anxiety levels differ according to their gender?

2. Is there a relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety scores?

3. Do the learners' writing anxiety levels display differences according to their writing achievement?

4. Is there a statistically significant difference in the writing achievement scores of the learners based on their gender and anxiety levels?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 21 preparatory class students at a state university. At the beginning of the fall term, they took the English Proficiency Exam and their level was found to be intermediate according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Their department was English Language Teaching. There were 5 male and 16 female students. Their ages ranged between 18 and 26 years. The mean for their age was 19.05 and standard deviation was 1.93.

2.2. Materials

For the present study, three different instruments were used to gather the relevant data: a questionnaire for writing anxiety, writing self-efficacy and results of the midterm exam.

2.2.1. Writing anxiety questionnaire

The questionnaire was adopted from the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (Cheng, 2004). There are 22 items scored on a 5-point Likert response scale that ranges from 1 standing for 'strongly disagree' to 5 standing for 'strongly agree'. Items 1, 4, 17, 18 and 22 are worded negatively, so reverse scoring was used. The items might be grouped into three types of anxiety. Items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20 and 21 are used for measuring cognitive anxiety, items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15 and 19 are used for somatic anxiety and items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18 and 22 are used for avoidance behaviour. Students' anxiety levels were measured by means of this questionnaire. A total score above 3 indicated a high level of writing anxiety, a total score below 2 indicated a low level of anxiety and a total score in between indicated a moderate level of writing anxiety.

2.2.2. Writing self-efficacy scale

Yli-Renko (1988) indicated that writing self-efficacy is useful for informal assessment of specific skills. In the present study, participants chose their own writing proficiency on a 5-point scale, ranging from (5) excellent, (4) good, (3) fair, (2) not good to (1) poor.

2.2.3. Midterm results

Students' midterm scores were used in order to classify their actual writing proficiency level. Students who got 80 and above were regarded as high achievers and students who got a score below 60 were considered to be low achievers. Finally, students whose scores ranged between 60 and 80 were classified as moderate achievers.

2.3. Procedures

In relation to the purpose of this study, a correlation research design was utilised. The relationship between writing anxiety with gender, writing self-efficacy and writing achievement was investigated. Moreover, the interactional effects of gender and writing anxiety levels of learners on the writing achievement scores were also analysed. The participants were all students in the writing course at the

time of the implementation of the questionnaire. First, the writing anxiety questionnaire with the consent form was distributed to the students. At the end of the questionnaire, writing self-efficacy scale was also provided and the students were expected to choose their writing proficiency on a 5- point scale. They were expected to complete the questionnaire within 10 minutes. After the students completed the questionnaires, they were collected by the researcher for further analysis.

The data were analysed using statistical analysis methods. Firstly, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to see if the writing anxiety scores differed according to gender of the participants. Secondly, a correlation analysis was carried out to find out the relationship between writing anxiety levels and writing self-efficacy. In order to find out the differences in writing anxiety levels among these groups, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Finally, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of gender and writing anxiety level on the writing midterm scores of the participants.

3. Results

3.1. Writing anxiety scores based on gender

Writing anxiety questionnaire results of males and females were compared in the present study. As can be seen in Table 1, the mean score of writing anxiety for males was 3.10 and for females it was 2.73. In addition, the standard deviation for males was 0.48 and for females it was 0.45.

Table 1. Writing Anxiety Scores Based on Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing Anxiety Scores	Male	5	3,1091	,48169	,21542
	Female	16	2,7386	,45892	,11473

The normality of the data was checked by means of tests of normality. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test revealed that the data were normally distributed considering the writing anxiety scores (p = 0.120). However, the normality assumption was violated for writing midterm results (p = 0.001). An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to see if the writing anxiety scores differed according to the gender of the participants. According to Levene's test results, the data were equally varied (p = 0.801). The analysis showed that the difference in writing anxiety scores between the two groups was not statistically significant [p = 0.136, t (19) = 1.559].

3.2. The relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety scores

In order to find out the relationship between writing anxiety levels and writing self-efficacy, a correlation analysis was carried out. As displayed in Table 2, the mean score for writing self-efficacy was 3.48 and it was 2.83 for writing anxiety questionnaire.

Table 2. Writing Self Efficacy and Writing Anxiety Scores

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Writing Self Efficacy Scores	3,48	,680	21
Writing Anxiety Scores	2,8268	,48010	21

Pearson's *r* correlation found that there was a statistically significant negative correlation between the students' writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety scores (r = −0.529, p = 0.014, N = 21).

3.3. Writing anxiety in three different achievement groups

For the present research, based on their writing midterm scores, the participants were divided into three groups: high, moderate and low achievers. Students who got 80 and above were regarded as high achievers and students who got a score below 60 were considered to be low achievers. Finally, students whose scores ranged between 60 and 80 were classified as moderate achievers. In order to find out the differences in writing anxiety levels among these groups, a one-way ANOVA was conducted.

As displayed in Table 3, according to the analysis of the midterm scores, three different groups were defined. There were four low achievers, four moderate achievers and 13 high achievers. Considering the writing anxiety questionnaire, the mean score for low achievers was 3.18 and for moderate achievers also it was 3.18. Finally, the mean score was 2.6 for high achievers.

Table 3. Writing Anxiety Scores Based on Writing Achievement

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Low Achievers	4	3,1818	,30379	,15189	2,6984	3,6652	2,77	3,45
Moderate Achievers	4	3,1818	,54292	,27146	2,3179	4,0457	2,41	3,68
High Achievers	13	2,6084	,38949	,10802	2,3730	2,8438	2,18	3,27

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to find out whether there was any difference among three achievement groups in their writing anxiety levels. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested using Levene's test. It was found that the data were equally varied (*p* = 0.590). The ANOVA was significant [*F* (2, 18) = 4.916, *p* = 0.020]. Thus, it is possible to conclude that there is a significant difference in the participants' writing anxiety scores based on their achievement level in their writing midterm exam. In order to evaluate pairwise differences among group means, *Post-hoc* comparisons were conducted with the use of LSD test since equal variances were assumed. Tests found significant pairwise differences between the writing anxiety scores of high achievers and moderate achievers (*p* = 0.024). In addition, there were significant pairwise differences between high achievers and low achievers (*p* = 0.024). However, the writing anxiety levels of moderate achievers and low achievers did not significantly differ from each other (*p* = 1.000).

3.4. Effects of gender and writing anxiety levels on students' actual writing competence

According to the analysis of the participants' writing anxiety scores, two different groups were defined. As displayed in Table 4, there were 12 students with a moderate level of anxiety and nine students with a high level of anxiety. There were no students with a low level of anxiety. Considering the writing midterm scores of the participants, the mean score for males and moderate anxiety students was 93, while it was 58.5 for males and high anxiety students. In addition, the mean score for females and moderate anxiety students was 83.64, while it was 70.20 for females and high anxiety students.

Table 4. Writing Achievement Scores Based on Gender and Writing Anxiety

Dependent Variable: Midterm Results

Gender	Anxiety Level	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Male	Moderate Anxiety	93,00	.	1
	High Anxiety	58,50	23,000	4
Female	Moderate Anxiety	83,64	10,013	11
	High Anxiety	70,20	14,360	5

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of gender and writing anxiety level on the writing midterm scores of the participants (N = 21). Levene's test result showed that the data were equally varied (p = 0.321). A factorial ANOVA examining the effects of gender and anxiety level on the writing test scores of participants found a statistical main effect of anxiety level [F(1, 17) = 7.425, p = 0.014, partial eta squared = 0.304]. On the other hand, there was no significant effect of gender on students' writing midterm exam scores [F (1, 17) = 0.018, p = 0.896, partial eta squared = 0.001]. Moreover, according to the analysis, the interaction between writing anxiety levels and gender was not statistically significant [F (1, 17) = 1.434, p= 0.248, partial eta squared = 0.078).

4. Summary and discussion

This study investigated the relationship between writing anxiety and three other variables, which are gender, writing self-efficacy and writing achievement. First, it indicated that, in contrast to the expected results and most of the previous studies, there was no significant difference between the writing anxiety levels of males and females (see Cayton, 1990; Machida, 2001; Shang, 2013; Ucgun, 2011; Yaman, 2010). Learners' writing anxiety levels did not differ much in two different gender groups. However, as a limitation of the study, it should be noted that there were only five male students in the present study. If the same study is replicated with more male students, the results might change.

Considering the relationship between writing anxiety levels and writing self-efficacy, in line with the predictions and results of almost all of the previous studies, this study also showed that there is a negative correlation between these two variables (see Huerta et al., 2017; Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015; Klassen, 2002; Rechtien & Dizinno, 1998). As the students' writing self-efficacy increased, their writing anxiety level decreased correspondingly. A high level of writing self-efficacy might be related to a high level of confidence in their ability which, in turn, reduces their writing anxiety level.

The analysis of the writing anxiety levels in three achievement groups showed that there was a significant difference among the three achievement groups. Further analysis also indicated that the main difference was caused by high achievers. Therefore, the predictions related to writing anxiety levels based on writing achievement were fulfilled. There was enough evidence to conclude that high achievers had a lower level of writing anxiety which resulted in a better writing performance. On the other hand, moderate and low achievers had higher levels of writing anxiety which might have had a debilitating effect on their writing performance.

Finally, the main effects of gender and writing anxiety levels on the students' actual writing performance were investigated in this study. The results showed that there was no main effect of gender on students' actual performance in writing. The midterm scores did not differ according to the gender of the students. On the other hand, there was a significant main effect of writing anxiety on the students' actual writing competence. As already indicated, students with a high level of writing anxiety got lower scores in the writing midterm exam, while students with a lower level of writing anxiety got higher scores in the midterm exam. The results also suggested that there was no interactional effect of gender and writing anxiety level on the students' actual writing competence.

Therefore, the expected results were not valid for the last issue. As already indicated, it might be because of the number of the male participants in this study, which might be regarded as the main limitation. Further research needs to be carried out with more participants. Considering these results, it might be an effective strategy for second language teachers to pay more attention to their students' writing anxiety. Process-oriented and student-centred approaches for teaching writing might be useful for decreasing the students' writing anxiety level which, in turn, might result in a better writing performance. Moreover, as there was a negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy, teachers' positive reinforcement and feedback might help in increasing the students' writing self-efficacy. In this way, their writing anxiety may decrease and their might perform better in tasks requiring writing.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The present study tried to answer four research questions. For the first one, the results revealed that there was no significant difference between the writing anxiety levels of males and females. Secondly, the analysis showed that there was a negative correlation between the writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy of the students. For the next question, there was evidence to conclude that students' writing anxiety levels changed according to their writing achievement. Lastly, this study pointed out that there was a main effect of writing anxiety level on the students' writing achievement. However, the effect of gender and the interaction between gender and writing anxiety level were not statistically significant. The results of this study call for some pedagogical implications in the language classrooms. To illustrate, in order to decrease the level of writing anxiety, teachers might implement more student-centred and process-oriented approaches. Since the results of the analysis show that there is a negative correlation between students' writing anxiety levels and writing self-efficacy, teachers might integrate more positive and constructive feedback. The main limitation of the study is the number of male students. Therefore, these results need to be backed up by further studies with more participants.

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APPENDIX A. Writing Anxiety Questionnaire and Writing Self-Efficacy Scale

I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to be a subject in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time.

Name _____

Signature_____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Date:

Researcher's Signature _____

Writing Anxiety

Writing Anxiety Questionnaire – Adopted from SLWAI (Cheng, 2004)

Demographic information

Age:

Gender:

Check the appropriate column.

SA: Strongly Agree

A: Agree

U: Uncertain

D: Disagree

SD: Strongly Disagree

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. While writing in English, I'm not nervous at all.					
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint.					
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.					
4. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.					
5. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.					
6. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.					
7. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others'.					
8. I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure.					
9. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.					
10. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.					
11. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.					

12. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write composition.					
13. I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint.					
14. I'm afraid that other students would deride my English composition if they read it.					
15. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.					
16. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions					
17. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.					
18. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.					
19. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.					
20. I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample to be discussed in class.					
21. I'm not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.					
22. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions.					

Writing self-efficacy scale

(5) Excellent _____

(4) Good _____

(3) Fair _____

(2) Not good _____

(1) Poor _____