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Addressing Writing Apprehension in Adult English Language Learners

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In this study, I wanted to determine the specific causes of writing apprehension for a group of advanced-level English language learners preparing to enter university-level courses who reported experiencing high levels of writing apprehension. None of the participants claimed to have high trait anxiety, which indicates that they were not generally anxious people and that their anxiety became a perceived problem only when writing in English.

Writing apprehension is generally understood to mean negative, anxious feelings (about oneself as a writer, one's writing situation, or one's writing task) that disrupt some part of the writing process. The term is used to describe writers who are intellectually capable of the task at hand, but who nevertheless have difficulty with it (McLeod, 1987).

In this study, I used the *English as a Second Language Writing Apprehension Test* (Adapted from the DM-WAT) used by Gungle and Taylor (1989). I administered this test and further used it as a guide in selecting ten final participants (five males and five females) who expressed having the highest degrees of writing apprehension. Final participants were from various countries and had studied English in an Intensive English Program (IEP) at a University in the western part of the U.S. for varying amounts of time. Participants had all spent at least six months in an IEP before participating in this study. Ages of students ranged from 18 to 28 years. All students were preparing to enter university-level courses in the United States at the time of this study.

Participants completed the *English as a Second Language Writing Apprehension Test* and results indicated that they were experiencing a high degree of writing apprehension. While knowing this was useful in determining whether students exhibited apprehension or not, I specifically wanted to determine the causes behind the reported apprehension. This required further analysis of participants' answers to understand. To identify specific reasons behind

participants' initial responses, I conducted follow-up interviews with the ten participants who reported a high level of writing apprehension.

The following four questions were probed in more detail: (1) Why students avoided writing; (2) What they specifically feared about their English writing being evaluated; (3) How they felt about expressing ideas in English; (4) Problems with organizing writing; and (5) Other causes of anxiety.

Summary of Interview Results

Based on interviews, it is evident that participants reported avoiding writing because of four main reasons: (1) Frustrations stemming from self evaluation and self expectations of how well one should write; (2) Fear of how the teacher will evaluate the writing; (3) Fear of how their peers will evaluate their writing; and (4) Fear of losing one's identity when using new rhetorical styles and patterns to write. Three of these four reasons focused around the fear of evaluation from various sources.

Participants expressed fear of evaluation for the following reasons: (1) Anxiety when believing little to no progress is being made in learning English; (2) Anxiety stemming from error analysis, which, in turn, leads to feelings of inadequacy as a writer.

Several participants believed that writing in English simply appears to be a waste of time for them. They were either not interested in writing in English because of the classroom content and assignments, or because they would be required to do little writing once they graduated from university. They also expressed a lack of interest in writing in English because of their writing not being sophisticated enough for others to understand.

Participants also expressed a difficulty in organizing their writing because of unfamiliarity with U.S. academic rhetorical expectations and guidelines. Alarming, they also

expressed that their inability to organize or advance their writing was because of teacher feedback or disinterest. Participants reported that some teachers were either unsupportive or did not have enough knowledge/training to teach their classes.

When asked to compare their writing anxiety to any other times they feel anxious, participants reported feeling anxious when speaking in public, when driving and being unable to read directions or signs quickly enough, and when going on a blind date—all of which indicate they are, indeed, feeling high levels of anxiety when attempting to write.

Limitations

This study examined emotions of writers with self-reported writing anxiety and all results were taken from interviews with participants who identified *themselves* as being highly anxious. While I was able to observe participants having difficulty writing in English, I did not conduct any physiological or psychological tests to determine the extent of anxiety. Furthermore, differences between trait and situational anxiety were beyond the scope of this research study, despite participants reporting that they were not generally anxious people. Further research on psychological aspects of anxiety would be necessary for trait anxiety to be fully ruled out of the equation. Moreover, learner motivation was not addressed as a factor in this study, but could be important when further evaluating writing apprehension.

Further Research, Recommendations, and Implications for the ESL Classroom

The following recommendations are a compilation of suggestions from the conference discussion as well as from my experience and research.

(1) Teach writing as a process instead of focusing on the product. Students need to realize that they can work on the process instead of having to achieve perfection in the first draft.

(2) Incorporate other skill areas (integrated learning) so writing isn't an isolated activity. Integrate writing with speaking, listening, and reading, as well as other areas such as music or visual activities.

(3) Acculturate students to what writing in this culture/country means. Teach conventions of writing in a new culture before expecting students to write.

(4) When students first start writing, assign papers that address topics students are already familiar with. Have them master basic skills by working on topics that are 'close to home' for them before moving on to unfamiliar topics.

(5) Explain the role of feedback on their papers before you write on them so students know your motivation for wanting to help them improve. Otherwise, they often see anything you've written (even positive comments) as something negative. If they realize that having the teacher write a lot of suggestions and comments means the teacher cares a lot, then they feel less threatened by all the "red ink" on the paper.

(6) Emphasize clarity and fluency over correctness of form. Don't be a 'Grammar Nazi.' This just fuels anxiety when students think they cannot master something as "simple" as grammar.

(7) Use "task oriented" questions that are designed to focus students' attention on improving and expanding the content, such as: "Could you write about how this example relates to the main point of your essay?" or "Provide a more-detailed example to support your point." Students then have a specific task to accomplish and know exactly what it needed instead of trying to interpret teacher comments that are not task oriented, such as "This is vague," or "Unsupported argument."

(8) Conference face-to-face with students regularly and privately (for especially anxious students). When students have a chance to explain their choices, they feel less anxious about future choices. This also provides the teacher an opportunity to explain more clearly.

(9) Give students the power to choose their own topics (lower their Affective Filters). Some students need to be assigned a topic or taught how to brainstorm before being allowed to simply choose their own topics. Other students need a topic. Be flexible with this.

(10) Let them use familiar technology and familiar outlets of writing (such as IMing on computers) to write in class and translate that experience into writing an essay. (For example, have students pretend they are writing about a particular topic to their IM chat-partner).

(11) Have students work with tutors who are trained to help ESL writers. Often, students in the writing centers on campus are ill equipped to deal with ESL students. Collaborating with writing center staff is always a good idea.

(12) Have students work collaboratively on writing so they feel they aren't the only person being judged on what is being turned in (they share the grade and burden).

While there are many other strategies, these are some of the ways we discussed to help alleviate some of the students' anxiety when writing in English.

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