

A Study on Junior High School Students' English Writing Anxiety

Xingyi Zhong^{1, a}

¹Department of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College, Guangzhou 510545, China

^aE-mail: 22401651223@e.gwng.edu.cn

Abstract: This study investigates the current state of English writing anxiety among junior high school students in China, focusing on gender and grade-level differences. A sample of 343 students from a private school in the Pearl River Delta region participated in the survey, which utilized an adapted version of Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). The results revealed that students exhibited moderate overall writing anxiety, with avoidance behavior being the most pronounced dimension. Gender differences were significant, with female students reporting higher levels of teaching anxiety, ideation anxiety, and lack of confidence, while male students displayed more avoidance behaviors. Grade-level analysis showed progressive increases in teaching and ideation anxiety from Grade 7 to Grade 9, whereas avoidance behavior decreased. Confidence-related anxiety peaked in Grade 8. The findings highlight the need for differentiated teaching strategies to address these anxiety patterns, such as providing positive feedback for female students and engaging writing tasks for male students, as well as tailored interventions for different grade levels. This study contributes to the understanding of writing anxiety among junior high school students and offers practical insights for improving English writing instruction.

Keywords: Anxiety, foreign language anxiety, writing anxiety, middle school students.

1. Introduction

As a member of the Indo-European language family, English differs significantly from Chinese, which belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. This linguistic disparity poses numerous challenges for Chinese learners in acquiring English proficiency. Extensive research has demonstrated that affective factors, particularly anxiety, play a crucial role in second language acquisition.[1] While foreign language anxiety research has advanced considerably in Western contexts, expanding from general language anxiety to skill-specific anxieties, Chinese scholars only began exploring English learning anxiety in the 1990s. Existing studies in China predominantly focus on listening and speaking anxieties, with limited attention given to writing anxiety. Furthermore, most available research targets undergraduates, vocational college students, and high school students, leaving a significant gap in understanding writing anxiety among junior high school students.

English writing, as a crucial form of language output, not only reflects students' comprehensive ability to utilize vocabulary, grammar, and syntax but also plays a vital role in developing students' logical and critical thinking skills.[2] Given that junior high school represents students' initial exposure to English writing, this stage is particularly susceptible to the emergence of writing anxiety. This study aims to investigate the current state of writing anxiety among junior high school students through a comprehensive survey. Based on the findings, we intend to propose targeted teaching strategies to alleviate writing anxiety, enhance writing efficiency and performance, and ultimately contribute to the advancement of English writing instruction in Chinese junior high schools.

2. Literature Review

Research on writing anxiety in foreign countries began earlier. In 1986, Horwitz et al. proposed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory, categorizing foreign language anxiety into communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. [3] Based on the theory, they developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which has been widely used in investigations of foreign language classroom anxiety. Building on the FLCAS, numerous studies abroad have demonstrated that anxiety exerts a negative impact on the academic performance of language learners. [4-6] But research on English writing anxiety abroad actually began in the 1970s. Daly and Miller developed the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) to measure writing apprehension. However, this scale was primarily designed for native English speakers and could not accurately reflect the writing anxiety of second language learners. [7] Therefore, Cheng, Y. S. developed the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), a scale specifically tailored to second language writing anxiety.[8] This inventory includes three dimensions—cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior—and demonstrates higher reliability and validity. Utilizing Cheng's Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), Rezaei & Jafari has been consistently demonstrated that writing anxiety is significantly negatively correlated with writing performance.[9] They highlight that anxiety has the detrimental impact on learners' ability to produce high-quality written work.

Research on English learning anxiety in China started relatively late, beginning in the 1990s. In 1999, Wang conducted one of the earliest studies on English learning anxiety among Chinese university students, highlighting its negative impact on language performance.[10] In 1990, Liu Runqing mentioned that "students with emotional

fluctuations generally perform poorly," underscoring the detrimental effects of foreign language learning anxiety on students' achievement. [11] As for English writing learning, Wang Xuemei pointed out through survey research that learners' anxiety levels have a significant impact on their English writing performance.[10] Additionally, Guo Yan and Fan Weiwei conducted a questionnaire survey using the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) among university students at three proficiency levels: general, higher, and advanced requirements. [12] Their findings revealed that English writing anxiety is prevalent among students across all three levels. Under the influence of relevant research achievements both domestically and internationally, Chinese educators have increasingly recognized the importance of learners' emotional states in the process of English learning and have actively adopted various methods and strategies to reduce learners' English learning anxiety.

However, research on English learning anxiety in China still faces several limitations. Firstly, the research subjects are limited in scope. Most domestic studies on English learning anxiety in China have focused on university students, vocational college students (who enroll after high school), and high school students, while research targeting junior high school students remains relatively scarce. Secondly, the research content lacks specificity. Domestic studies have primarily focused on the broad field of English learning, while specialized research on anxiety related to specific skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing is relatively limited. Lastly, the research findings are relatively homogeneous. Among the published studies, the majority concentrate on analyzing the prevalence and detrimental effects of English learning anxiety, while research exploring grade-level differences and gender differences in students' English learning anxiety is minimal. Based on the gaps identified above, this study aims to address the following research question:

(1) Do junior high school students experience anxiety in English writing?

(2) Are there gender differences in English writing anxiety among junior high school students?

(3) Are there grade-level differences in English writing anxiety among junior high school students?

3. Research Method

3.1. Respondents

This study examined 343 junior high school students from a private school in the Pearl River Delta region. The sample comprised 122 seventh-graders (35.57%), 113 eighth-graders (32.94%), and 108 ninth-graders (31.49%), with a nearly balanced gender distribution (180 males, 52.48%; 163 females, 47.52%).

3.2. Research Instruments

3.2.1. English Writing Anxiety Inventory

This study utilized the "English Writing Anxiety Inventory", which was adapted from the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng. [8] The inventory was contextualized for junior middle school English education in mainland China. [13] It comprises four dimensions: classroom teaching anxiety, conception anxiety, avoidance behavior, and lack of confidence anxiety, with a total of 20 items. Six of these items are reverse-scored (items 3, 6, 15, 16, 19, and 20). To meet research requirements, personal information items, including participants' gender and grade, were added at the beginning of the inventory. The scoring was conducted using a Likert 5-point scale (1 = "Completely Disagree" to 5 = "Completely Agree").

3.2.2. Reliability Analysis

This study examined the internal consistency reliability of the scale using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and corrected item-total correlation (CITC). The results demonstrated good reliability for all dimensions ($\alpha > 0.7$), with each item meeting the threshold for correlation with the total score (CITC > 0.4). (See Table1)

Table 1. Reliability Analysis

Item	Corrected Item-Total Correlation (CITC)	Alpha if Item Deleted	Cronbach's Alpha
Teaching Anxiety 1	0.585	0.901	0.888
Teaching Anxiety 2	0.581	0.901	
Teaching Anxiety 3	0.84	0.841	
Teaching Anxiety 4	0.843	0.839	
Teaching Anxiety 5	0.87	0.833	
Ideation Anxiety 1	0.772	0.904	0.919
Ideation Anxiety 2	0.732	0.912	
Ideation Anxiety 3	0.815	0.895	
Ideation Anxiety 4	0.802	0.898	
Ideation Anxiety 5	0.835	0.891	
Avoidance 1	0.727	0.88	0.898
Avoidance 2	0.685	0.886	
Avoidance 3	0.774	0.873	
Avoidance 4	0.725	0.88	
Avoidance 5	0.704	0.883	
Avoidance 6	0.735	0.879	0.883
Lack of Confidence 1	0.726	0.857	
Lack of Confidence 2	0.752	0.847	
Lack of Confidence 3	0.757	0.845	
Lack of Confidence 4	0.745	0.85	

3.2.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis

While Cheng primarily focused on measuring general student anxiety levels, their studies did not specifically examine the effects of gender and grade level on English writing anxiety.[8] Given this gap and the distinct objectives of the current study, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was deemed necessary to validate the scale's dimensionality in the target context. The study employed principal component analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure yielded a value of 0.909, and Bartlett's test of sphericity showed a result of 2910.903 ($df = 190$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis.(see Table2)

The data were subjected to principal component analysis with varimax rotation, yielding four common factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, which collectively accounted for

72.275% of the total variance. All items demonstrated factor loadings exceeding the standard threshold of 0.4 on their respective factors. Specifically, avoidance behavior items loaded on the first factor (0.698-0.790), ideation anxiety items on the second factor (0.734-0.821), teaching anxiety items on the third factor (0.579-0.855), and lack of confidence items on the fourth factor (0.787-0.821) (see Table 3). Furthermore, Harman's single-factor test revealed that the first unrotated factor explained only 46.070% of the variance, below the critical threshold of 50%, indicating no significant common method bias in the data (see Table 4). These analytical results confirm the validity of the four-dimensional structure of English writing anxiety, encompassing behavioral avoidance, ideation anxiety, teaching anxiety, and lack of confidence, thereby providing a reliable theoretical framework and measurement tool for subsequent research.

Table 2. KMO value was and Bartlett's test

KMO		0.909
Approx. Chi-Square		5010.766
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	df	190
	p-value	0.000

Table 3. Factor Loadings

Item Names (Translated)	Factor Loading Coefficient			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Teaching Anxiety 1			0.776	
Teaching Anxiety 2			0.579	
Teaching Anxiety 3			0.818	
Teaching Anxiety 4			0.814	
Teaching Anxiety 5			0.855	
Ideation Anxiety 1		0.790		
Ideation Anxiety 2		0.734		
Ideation Anxiety 3		0.821		
Ideation Anxiety 4		0.795		
Ideation Anxiety 5		0.807		
Avoidance Behavior 1	0.790			
Avoidance Behavior 2	0.698			
Avoidance Behavior 3	0.756			
Avoidance Behavior 4	0.766			
Avoidance Behavior 5	0.727			
Avoidance Behavior 6	0.761			
Lack of Confidence 1				0.787
Lack of Confidence 2				0.794
Lack of Confidence 3				0.795
Lack of Confidence 4				0.821

4. Result

4.1. Variable Descriptive Statistics

As presented in Table 5, this study investigated foreign language writing anxiety among 343 students. The results indicate that the sample population exhibited a moderate overall level of writing anxiety. According to Oxford and Burry-Stock's 5-point Likert scale classification, the overall anxiety mean score was 3.188 ($SD = 0.922$), suggesting a level between moderate (mean range: 2.5–3.4) and high-frequency anxiety (mean ≥ 3.5), approaching the upper threshold of moderate anxiety[14].

Among the four anxiety dimensions examined, teaching anxiety registered the lowest mean score at 2.855 ($SD =$

0.943), indicating a moderate-to-low level. Students reported higher levels of ideation anxiety ($M = 3.072$, $SD = 0.973$), though this remained below the high-frequency threshold. Lack of self-confidence anxiety showed more pronounced levels ($M = 3.375$, $SD = 0.885$), approaching high-frequency anxiety. Most notably, avoidance behavior anxiety exceeded the high-frequency benchmark with a mean score of 3.448 ($SD = 0.881$).

These results suggest a clear hierarchy of anxiety dimensions: classroom-related concerns were least prevalent, followed by ideation difficulties, with self-confidence issues representing a mid-level concern. Avoidance behavior emerged as the most significant manifestation of writing anxiety among participants.

Table 4. Explained Variance

Factor Number	Eigenvalue			Variance Explained (%) (Before Rotation)			Variance Explained (%) (After Rotation)		
	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained (%)	Cumulative (%)	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained (%)	Cumulative (%)	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained (%)	Cumulative (%)
1	9.214	46.070	46.070	9.214	46.070	46.070	3.979	19.893	19.893
2	1.818	9.090	55.160	1.818	9.090	55.160	3.812	19.058	38.951
3	1.795	8.976	64.136	1.795	8.976	64.136	3.523	17.613	56.564
4	1.628	8.139	72.275	1.628	8.139	72.275	3.142	15.711	72.275
5	0.787	3.933	76.208	-	-	-	-	-	-
6	0.605	3.023	79.231	-	-	-	-	-	-
7	0.550	2.749	81.980	-	-	-	-	-	-
8	0.460	2.300	84.280	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	0.401	2.007	86.287	-	-	-	-	-	-
10	0.375	1.876	88.163	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	0.363	1.814	89.978	-	-	-	-	-	-
12	0.344	1.721	91.699	-	-	-	-	-	-
13	0.298	1.488	93.188	-	-	-	-	-	-
14	0.256	1.280	94.467	-	-	-	-	-	-
15	0.226	1.129	95.596	-	-	-	-	-	-
16	0.202	1.010	96.606	-	-	-	-	-	-
17	0.192	0.961	97.567	-	-	-	-	-	-
18	0.176	0.879	98.447	-	-	-	-	-	-
19	0.167	0.837	99.284	-	-	-	-	-	-
20	0.143	0.716	100.000	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Writing Anxiety Levels

Variable	Sample Size	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teaching Anxiety	343	1.000	5.000	2.855	0.943
Ideation Anxiety	343	1.000	5.000	3.072	0.973
Avoidance Behavior	343	1.500	5.000	3.448	0.881
Lack of Confidence	343	1.500	5.000	3.375	0.885
All Items	343	1.250	5.000	3.188	0.922

4.2. Gender Differences in Writing Anxiety

To examine whether there were significant differences in anxiety levels across four dimensions between male and female participants, independent-sample t-tests were

employed. The results indicated that female participants exhibited significantly higher scores in teaching anxiety, ideation anxiety, and lack of confidence compared to their male counterparts. Conversely, male participants reported slightly higher scores in avoidance behavior. (see Table 6)

Table 6. Independent Samples t-test (Gender Differences)

	Gender (Mean $\pm$ SD)		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Male(n=180)	Female(n=163)		
Teaching Anxiety	2.71 $\pm$ 0.92	3.01 $\pm$ 0.94	8.851	0.003**
Ideation Anxiety	2.95 $\pm$ 0.89	3.21 $\pm$ 1.04	6.532	0.011*
Avoidance Behavior	3.54 $\pm$ 0.86	3.35 $\pm$ 0.90	4.025	0.046*
Lack of Confidence	3.13 $\pm$ 0.82	3.65 $\pm$ 0.87	32.763	0.000**

4.3. Grade Differences in Writing Anxiety

As seen in the Table 7, both classroom-related anxiety ($F=4.785$, $p=.009$) and ideation anxiety ($F=8.777$, $p<.001$) demonstrated a progressive increase from Grade 7 to Grade 9, with Grade 9 students exhibiting significantly higher scores (classroom anxiety: $M=3.04\pm0.92$; ideation anxiety: $M=3.33\pm0.96$) compared to Grade 7 students (classroom anxiety: $M=2.66\pm0.94$; ideation anxiety: $M=2.81\pm0.97$). Conversely, avoidance behavior showed a declining trend

($F=3.162$, $p=.044$), with Grade 7 students ($M=3.55\pm0.87$) scoring significantly higher than Grade 9 students ($M=3.28\pm0.89$). The self-confidence dimension displayed a nonlinear pattern ($F=7.409$, $p=.001$), peaking among Grade 8 students ($M=3.63\pm0.77$) and showing significantly lower scores in both Grade 7 ($M=3.28\pm0.95$) and Grade 9 ($M=3.22\pm0.87$). The results revealed significant grade-level differences in English writing anxiety among junior high school students across multiple dimensions (all $p<.05$).

Table 7. One-way ANOVA (Grade Differences)

	Grade (Mean $\pm$ SD)			<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Grade 7(n=122)	Grade 8(n=113)	Grade 9(n=108)		
Teaching Anxiety	2.66 $\pm$ 0.94	2.88 $\pm$ 0.93	3.04 $\pm$ 0.92	4.785	0.009**
Ideation Anxiety	2.81 $\pm$ 0.97	3.11 $\pm$ 0.92	3.33 $\pm$ 0.96	8.777	0.000**
Avoidance Behavior	3.55 $\pm$ 0.87	3.50 $\pm$ 0.86	3.28 $\pm$ 0.89	3.162	0.044*
Lack of Confidence	3.28 $\pm$ 0.95	3.63 $\pm$ 0.77	3.22 $\pm$ 0.87	7.409	0.001**

5. Discussion

The present study reveals that non-English major university students experience moderate levels of foreign language writing anxiety overall, with one particular factor - avoidance behavior - reaching high anxiety levels. This finding aligns with Cheng's research results.[15] This phenomenon may be attributed to students' initial exposure to systematic English writing instruction during junior high school, where deficiencies in vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structure often trigger anxiety. Furthermore, the excessive emphasis on writing accuracy within China's exam-oriented educational system exacerbates psychological pressure. MacIntyre and Gardner's anxiety theory posits that moderate anxiety levels can actually facilitate language learning, while either excessive or insufficient anxiety negatively impacts learning outcomes.[4] This perspective is empirically supported by Oxford, whose research demonstrates that maintaining moderate writing anxiety levels most effectively promotes writing proficiency development. [1] Consequently, determining how to regulate students' writing anxiety within this optimal range through pedagogical interventions has become a crucial challenge for both educators and researchers.

The study also identifies significant gender differences in English writing anxiety among junior high school students. Overall, female students exhibit higher levels of writing anxiety than their male counterparts, though this manifests differently across various anxiety sources. Females demonstrate significantly higher levels of teaching anxiety and confidence-related anxiety, showing greater concern about teacher feedback and evaluation in writing classrooms. This disparity may stem from societal gender roles. Eccles' expectancy-value model of achievement-related choices suggests that females are socialized to value social evaluation and interpersonal interaction more highly.[15] As writing represents a highly feedback-dependent expressive task, female students may experience greater anxiety about negative evaluation. Additionally, Eccles notes that "Parents believe that daughters are better at English than sons, and sons are better at math than daughters," suggesting that higher parental and teacher expectations regarding females' language abilities may further intensify this anxiety.[16] Lakoff's research indicates that societal stereotypes about female language competence lead women to develop "accuracy monitoring" strategies in language use, causing them to prioritize precision in linguistic expression to meet social expectations. [17] This sociocultural pressure makes female students more susceptible to self-doubt regarding language errors in English writing, potentially resulting in higher anxiety levels in the ideation dimension. Conversely, male students demonstrate significantly more avoidance behaviors in English writing, possibly because females' greater concern about teacher evaluation leads them to repeatedly revise their

work rather than completely avoid writing tasks.

The findings further reveal that English writing anxiety persists across all grade levels in junior high school while exhibiting distinct developmental patterns across different dimensions. Both teaching anxiety and ideational anxiety show significant increasing trends as students progress through grades, likely due to cumulative academic pressure and increasing writing task complexity. In contrast, avoidance behaviors demonstrate an overall declining trend, potentially because heightened exam pressure in upper grades leads students to employ templates, resulting in increased covert avoidance behaviors. The nonlinear fluctuation in confidence-related anxiety suggests that the second year of junior high school may represent a critical period for confidence development, possibly corresponding to a plateau phase in writing skill acquisition. These findings suggest that educators should implement targeted strategies based on grade-level characteristics to effectively alleviate students' writing anxiety.

As educators, we should pay particular attention to gender differences in English writing instruction. Given that female students experience significantly higher levels of teaching anxiety and confidence-related anxiety, teachers should provide more positive feedback and encouragement to help them build self-confidence. This can be achieved through specific, constructive, and positive feedback that helps female students recognize their progress and strengths, thereby fostering confidence in English writing. For male students who exhibit more pronounced avoidance behaviors, teachers can design diversified writing tasks to stimulate interest and reduce avoidance. Incorporating more challenging and engaging writing themes may enhance male students' participation.

Regarding writing instruction across different grade levels, educators should employ differentiated pedagogical approaches. For first-year junior high students who demonstrate significant avoidance behaviors, teachers can provide writing templates and model essays to help students overcome initial difficulties and gradually adapt to secondary-level writing tasks. Second-year students experiencing confidence deficits in English writing may benefit from step-by-step guidance and gradually increasing task difficulty to help them build confidence and overcome "plateau phase" anxiety. For third-year students who exhibit notable instructional and ideational anxiety, teachers might introduce more open-ended writing tasks to stimulate creativity and self-expression.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated foreign language writing anxiety among Chinese junior high school students through questionnaire surveys, revealing that their overall writing anxiety level falls within the moderate range. Both the

composite writing anxiety score and its four constituent factors demonstrated significant negative correlations with writing performance. Significant gender and grade-level differences were observed across all four anxiety dimensions: female students exhibited more pronounced confidence anxiety, ideational anxiety, and teaching anxiety compared to their male counterparts, whereas males displayed more evident avoidance behaviors. Among grade levels, ninth graders reported the highest levels of teaching and ideational anxiety, seventh graders showed the most significant avoidance behaviors, and eighth grade emerged as the critical period for writing confidence deficits.

Based on these findings, we suggest that junior high school English teachers implement differentiated instructional approaches that account for both gender and grade-level variations in writing anxiety.

This research contributes to the understanding of current patterns in English writing anxiety among junior high school students, particularly examining gender and developmental differences, while providing practical insights for improving writing instruction. However, several limitations should be acknowledged, including the single-school sampling frame and the relatively limited qualitative data, which may affect the generalizability of findings. Future research could enhance methodological rigor by incorporating multiple data sources (e.g., actual writing performance metrics) and employing mixed-methods approaches (e.g., supplementary interviews) to obtain a more comprehensive and objective assessment of students' foreign language writing anxiety profiles.

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