The Understanding of L2 Writing Anxiety in Graduate Students and Its Research Implications

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Lee, Young-wha. The Understanding of L2 Writing Anxiety in Graduate Students and Its Research Implications. *The New Studies of English Language & Literature* 75 (2020): 167-185. This article explores the importance of recognizing L2 writing anxiety manifested in graduate students. Despite a recent decline of studies on the matter following a surge of interest from the 1970s to the 2000s, L2 graduate students’ anxiety in regards to writing still flourishes to various degrees and remains a critical issue in academia. As a whole, writing anxiety is situated in how emotion affects writing with an emphasis for how emotion mediates student’s learning. After the discussion of negative effects of the phenomenon of writing anxiety, there still remains room to explore the treatment options or self-strategy which L2 graduate students consider taking. To this end, the paper raises several questions to prompt further research into how to deal with the issue of writing anxiety existing persistently in the L2 graduate students. (Arizona State University)

Key words: L2 writing anxiety, L2 graduate students, L2 writing, emotion, self-strategy

I. Introduction

“I was attacked by anxiety again! I could not do anything”. One of my friends, a graduate L2 writer, was depressed to say this to me in the middle of the semester when she felt overwhelmed to engage in various writing requirements in her courses. Like her case, with an intense academic workload, the writing anxiety may remain persistent for some L2 graduate students. This example illustrates that L2 writing anxiety certainly influences her writing practice.

The purpose of this article is to argue that there is a need for more research on writing anxiety among L2 graduate students. I will
examine the definition of writing anxiety and its negative effects, followed by a discussion of L2 graduate students’ writing situations. Then, several questions will be posed about managing writing anxiety on their own.

II. What Is L2 Writing Anxiety?

Anxiety is an important topic in psychology. Anxiety is “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018, para. 1). For example, “worried thoughts” may arise for anxious L2 writers such as “I’m afraid that the other students would deride my English composition if they read it” or “I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated” (Cheng, 2004: 324). Physical changes also may occur for anxious L2 writers such as “I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure” or “I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint” (p. 324). Also, anxiety has been described in many terms such as depression, stress, trauma, panic, or phobia (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). Psychologists have used various psychotherapy methods including cognitive-behavioral therapy, group psychotherapy, or family psychotherapy in order to treat this emotional disorder (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018).

Anxiety is also important in scholarly work on L2 writing. Understanding writing anxiety not merely as “feelings”, but also as “attitudes or behaviors” provides more expanded meaning of writing anxiety in terms of its effect. For example, writing anxiety is basically defined as “negative, anxious feelings (about oneself as a writer, one’s writing situation, or one’s task) that disrupt some part of the writing process” (McLeod, 1987: 427), but the scope of writing anxiety meaning
incorporates attitudes or behaviors (Bloom, 1985; Daly & Miller, 1975b; Daly & Wilson, 1983). The negative effects of anxiety will be discussed more in detail later, but it is important to understand that one’s emotion is all related to one’s attitudes or behaviors since negative feelings can expand to negative attitudes, or behaviors. Thus, if L2 writers feel anxious, writing anxiety may possibly expand to negative attitudes or behaviors in writing practice accordingly since anxious L2 writers may demonstrate avoidance behaviors toward writing practice. This description of writing anxiety as feelings, attitudes, or behaviors (McLeod, 1987; Daly & Miller, 1975b; Daly & Wilson, 1983; Bloom, 1985; Wynne, Guo, & Wang, 2014) signify that writing anxiety is a course of responses to writing related situations which hinders students’ writing development.

There has been a large amount of research on writing anxiety including the development of writing anxiety scales for L1 writers and L2 writers. These systematic measurements of writing anxiety will provide statistically precise information about anxiety levels. For example, Daly and Miller (1975a), who have initially used the term, writing apprehension (a synonym of writing anxiety in this article), developed writing apprehension scales for the L1 writing contexts because they thought an organized tool for measuring anxiety was needed beyond just a simple observation of anxious students. Daly and Miller’s scale in Likert type contains 26 items in total, and it attempts to measure, “an individual difference characterized by a general avoidance of writing and situations perceived by the individual to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing” (Daly, 1979: 37). This scale asks students to describe their writing experience by connecting it to phrases such as “I avoid writing; My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition; Or I don’t like my compositions to be
evaluated” (Daly & Miller, 1975a: 246). However, as Daly and Miller's scale was mainly developed for L1 students, the scale calibrated for L2 students would need to more address L2 writers’ concerns.

As a response to this need, Cheng (2004) developed the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) for the L2 writing context. Cheng’s (2004) development of SLWAI was adapted from the Horwitz’s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS), a measure of speaking anxiety (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999). SLWAI is a Likert Scale, and there are 22 items with desirable internal consistency (Ozturk & Cecen, 2007). SLWAI scale items were based on the students’ experience, and a factor analysis was used for its development. SLWAI consists of somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behavior (Cheng, 2004). Somatic anxiety refers to “one’s perception of the physiological effects of the anxiety experience” (p. 316). Cognitive anxiety refers to “the mental aspect of anxiety experience, including negative expectations, preoccupation with performance, and concern about others’ perceptions” (p. 316). The items of somatic anxiety include “I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions; I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.” The items of cognitive anxiety include “I don’t worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others’; I'm not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.” The items of avoidance behavior include “Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions; I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class” (Cheng, 2004: 324-25). These items were negatively scored. The items of these scales for measuring anxiety may anticipate students’ attitudes and future writing performance as a complement to other metrics of writing ability and aptitude (Daly & Miller, 1975b).
III. Why Is L2 Writing Anxiety Important?

Writing anxiety can have important effects on L2 students. Some of these effects are positive. In general, being anxious about future uncertainty, people strive to make an effort to solve current problems and achieve their goals (Cheng, 1998). For example, people study and work for a future job to anchor their security. In the context of L2 learning, this facilitative role of anxiety is also represented in the literature (Imai, 2010; Nugent, 2013). For example, during the collaborative group work of EFL Japanese students, some negative emotions such as frustration, boredom, and anxiety from the class instruction made them try harder in their group work by engaging in class materials with more effort (Imai, 2010).

More importantly, writing anxiety can have negative effects on L2 writers. During the operation of facilitative anxiety, students would only perform greater if their abilities and the task challenge level correspond to each other. If the challenge level goes beyond the student's maximum ability, their anxiety level becomes excessive (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; McLeod, 1987). While facilitative anxiety may help students achieve more and higher (Ortega, 2009), the anxiety, which goes beyond facilitative anxiety may slow their learning process.

Some of these negative effects are on attitudes and behavior. In other words, writing anxiety thrives enough to appear in students’ attitudes and behavior causing a tendency to avoid writing, and not to enjoy writing practice (Faigley, Daly, & Witte, 1981). For example, highly anxious students demonstrated shorter length of writing, syntactically less fluent writing, less development of idea, and less complex grammatical rules (Faigley, Daly, & Witte, 1981). Specifically, writing anxiety may inhibit L2 writers from actively investing in their writing practice from the early stage of the writing process (Lee, 2011). From
my personal experience, anxious writers may also have difficulty in representing their academic identities, in demonstrating their expertise, and in perpetuating their scholarship by limiting their opportunities to actively engage. Anxious writers also maintain a silence that prevents them from taking risks, making challenging decisions, or thinking logically (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Ortega, 2009).

Also, other negative effects on behavior are represented in academic or professional decisions (Daly & Miller, 1975b). Highly anxious students tend to prefer programs and disciplines with less intense writing requirements as they appear to feel more sensitive and find greater difficulty about demanding writing requirements (Daly & Shamo, 1976, 1978). On the other hand, those with less anxiety tend to be able to adapt to many writing requirements than those with higher anxiety. This phenomenon directly translates into the intentional avoidance of jobs with any substantial reliance on their skills in documents (Daly & Shamo, 1976). Also, the students with more writing anxiety tend to avoid academic disciplines with demanding writing work loads and choose academic programs with fewer writing requirements such as science or engineering majors. On the other hand, less anxious students select more writing-enriched academic programs (Daly & Shamo, 1978).

Furthermore, some of the negative effects can be on writing performance. In other words, writing anxiety contributes to the prediction of lower academic performance and overall lower quality of writing (Young, 1991). Researchers have found that despite the prominent skills and active willingness to write, a high level of anxiety will weaken—if not hinder their overall writing performance and competency (Daly & Wilson, 1983; McLeod, 1987; Faigley, Daly, & Witte, 1981; Young, 1991). For example, highly anxious learners show comparatively lower results than low anxious peers on both writing competency and writing performance when asked to write both
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descriptive and narrative essays (Faigley, Daly, & Witte, 1981). The difference in writing anxiety levels also appears in length (Fox, 1980), fluency of syntax, and in “structure, language use, and amount of information conveyed” (Book, 1976: 10). When anxiety takes control of writers, their ability to develop ideas as well as their grammar skills for syntactic fluency all but disappear.

IV. Why Is More Research on L2 Writing Anxiety, Particularly among Graduate Students, Necessary?

In scholarly work on L2 learning, there has been little attention to emotion. L2 research has primarily focused on cognition, and emotion traditionally bore little interest. This uncritical acceptance of relatively more focus on cognition derived from a historical tendency for the past years in the realm of academic research in L2 learning with an attention to “thinking, knowing, representing knowledge, attending, processing information, reasoning, problem-solving and decision making” (Swain, 2011: 2), but less attention to emotion (Pavlenko, 2005, 2006; Schumann, 1997; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007, as cited in Swain, 2011: 1). Ideologically, more emphasis on cognition can be traced back to Chomsky’s cognition-centered ideas and the spread of the Socrates’s philosophy throughout the Western world as well as the era of Enlightenment which focused on reason separating the notions of cognition and emotion (Swain, 2011). This imbalance is important, because emotion is seen as an important part of L2 learning and use. More specifically, the role of emotion dwells deep within every moment of learning and teaching (Williams-Johnson, Cross, Hong, Jennifer Osbon, & Schutz, 2008). For example, in a L2 writing class, there may be various emotional events when students feel anxious about a new
writing project, but they may feel encouraged when they achieve their writing assignment with positive feedback on their writing.

Therefore, in scholarly work on L2 learning, more attention to emotion is needed. It is argued that there should be always a room for emotion, and cooperation between emotion and cognition will bring a synergy effect for language attainment (Swain, 2011). This is because each of these notions actively mediates learning (Swain, 2011; Imai, 2010); each plays their own role while reciprocating with the other in a complicated way (Imai, 2010). Emotion mediates learning and facilitates cognitive process as “emotions … are socially constructed acts of communication that can mediate one’s thinking, behavior, and goals” (Imai, 2010: 279). The synergy effect on emotion and cognition can be found from the several examples of language learners who have made an active effort to language learning during the emotion regulation of “pleasure, … trust, … and excitement” (Swain, 2011: 8). With the help of these emotions, language learning becomes activated. Another example of cooperation between emotion and cognition on positive outcome is from the several meetings of EFL Japanese students where they prepared for a class presentation (Imai, 2010). Imai (2010) found that emotions such as boredom, or frustration were not simply a byproduct created during the meeting, but they played an active role in making the students have an intentional positive attitude toward their task rather than succumbing to formerly established negative emotions. The students reviewed their class reading critically and engaged in constructive, collective thinking process. According to Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective, cognition and emotion stand, “as being inextricably interconnected,” and even further, emotion is considered to be with the realm of cognition as “emotions are an integral part of cognition” (Swain, 2011: 1).

Not only the gap found in the area of L2 learning, but also another
gap is discovered in the trend of the writing anxiety research depending on its targeted population. Various studies on writing anxiety have been conducted on undergraduate students or younger aged students. For example, early studies on L1 writing anxiety (e.g., Daly & Miller, 1975 a,b; Daly & Shamo, 1976; Daly & Shamo, 1978; Faigley, Daly, & Witte, 1981) have all focused on undergraduate students, and the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory developed by Cheng (2004) has initially been applied and validated to both undergraduate and graduate students but with an average student age of around 20 years old.

Because research on L2 writing anxiety has focused on undergraduate students, there is a need for more research specifically on graduate students. The scarcity of research on L2 graduate students’ writing anxiety needs attention since writing is an every day hurdle for graduate students. Despite the necessity to look closely into L2 graduate students’ writing anxiety issue, studies on the anxiety of graduate students have been marginal compared to those of their undergraduate peers (Wynne et al., 2014; Cheng & Erben, 2012). Wynne et al. (2014) pinpointed that there had been relatively less studies on graduate students. Cheng and Erben (2012) also specifically discussed the lack of research on Chinese graduate students' language study in spite of language anxiety's commonality in graduate population.

There are particularly unique characteristics of L2 graduate writers. First, with L2 graduate students, writing in a different language, culture, and discourse community is particularly challenging. For international L2 graduate students, the challenge arises where they must not only adapt to a foreign culture and academic discourse community but must also maximize their writing performance to the graduate level in a language unfamiliar to them. When we observe the whole collection of these characteristics, writing anxiety is particularly strong for L2 graduate students. While there are overlapped characteristics with L1
graduate writers below, writing anxiety is more critical for L2 writers since L2 writers have more layers of burdens for linguistic and cultural challenges in their foreign academic writing environments.

As a graduate student’s academic performance is usually judged by the quality of their written work through the thesis, dissertation, and publications, due to these continuous writing requirements, the pressure may be never-ceasing for some. L2 graduate students are held to the expectation that they wield the appropriate levels of academic writing ability to succeed while handling writing anxiety. For example, many doctoral programs require students to submit publishable research papers as one of the qualifications for Ph.D. candidate for writing dissertation. L2 writers may have a high level of anxiety to the extent that their life beyond academia falls into a dysfunctional mess that gives way to severe physiological reactions (Wirza & Lee, 2016). During the Symposium on Second Language Writing presentation, Wirza and Lee (2016) raised awareness about the seriousness of L2 writing anxiety by sharing some stories of L2 graduate students suffering from writing anxiety by at their institution; one student even called an ambulance due to the anxiety attack. While instances of this may stand as extreme, the matter of writing anxiety among some L2 graduate students remains serious.

Also, with L2 graduate students, the risk of writing anxiety transferring to their future academic career is particularly strong. The above anxiety symptom can become a form of graduate student depression (Pain, 2017), and the depression may also be viewed as a negative precursor for future career. Junior faculty in the tenure-track process strive to publish to the expectation of the institution’s requirement and even tenured faculty members feel pressure to working on new projects while creating “productivity anxiety”(para. 3) as noted in the popular quote, “publish or perish”(para. 4) (Szetela, 2018).
Furthermore, graduate students are expected to have a particularly high level of writing ability. The combination of the various anxiety-arousing factors serves to influence their writing anxiety. Foremost, the intense writing skills necessary to succeed at the graduate level requires the engaging of dense theories in the students’ fields as they begin to develop their own arguments and engage in meaning making works in writing. As Cheng and Erben (2012) argue, complex cognitive thinking level of L2 graduate students does not always match their target language skills. In the early days of their graduate study, sometimes they may not be able to adequately translate their nuanced and delicate meaning of their thoughts into their new language. In this kind of situation, an acute awareness in this discrepancy may make these older, mature students suffer from writing anxiety more intensely.

The expectations are high also because of the need for graduate students to become familiar with their own discourse community. In order for this to become successful, they need to be engaged in the process of creating knowledge and organizing ideas which requires persistent practice to master (Torrance, Thomas, & Robinson, 1994; Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Students should also become familiar with specific vocabulary of their discipline in order to engage in their academic communities while developing their texts with such academic writing abilities to define, synthesize, or analyze (Ondrusek, 2012). Furthermore, many come to the realization that in the highly research-oriented jobs, their writing will fall under even more serious scrutiny by other expert discourse community members (Bloom, 1981).

Another reason this research is needed is that the influence of students’ experience, education background, or personality is particularly strong. Depending on a variety of writing experiences and circumstances
before entering graduate school, individual students may bring different writing abilities, understandings, and perceptions toward their writing. Those returning to academia following a long period away from formal education may require more time to adjust to the written rigors than those starting immediately after a prior degree. On top of that, the emergence of perfectionist tendencies often leads a student to postpone their academic writing due to a self-imposed higher expectation or low self-efficacy (Ondrusek, 2012).

Also, with L2 graduate students, their personal commitments outside school (e.g., financial needs, family care) may be particularly heavy. These kinds of personal commitments are reflected in Bloom’s (1985) argument that the contexts in which anxious writers interact emerge as a point of exploration for a more complete understanding of the sources of their anxiety. For example, the various external responsibilities students shoulder in their academic, social, and personal lives in addition to their studies may distract their focus away from their writing while increasing their perceived anxiety levels (Bloom, 1981; Wynne et al., 2014). In particular, some international graduate students often take on additional household tasks for taking care of family members, and others struggle with a lack of emotional support when living alone. For financial support, they take the various academic roles such as Teaching Assistance (TA) or Research Assistance (RA) positions. They may also do a service to their community voluntarily. Unless they constantly prioritize their research and writing, the academic life will be overtaken by other duties (Bloom, 1981).

Furthermore, with L2 graduate students, the impact of delays to their academic progress is particularly important. Although many academic institutions provide suggested progression timelines, the frequent lack of fixed deadlines for each writing requirement promotes a passive attitude for all but the most motivated students. Graduate students are expected
to be independent enough to diligently follow their program schedule, but they often find it challenging to streamline stringently and follow their internal deadline. Any delays to the academic progress further the student’s current anxieties (Bloom, 1981).

Another reason this research is needed is that the impact on academic performance can be particularly strong. Exacerbating the academic circumstances further, the L2 graduate students may delay the selection of research topic. Yearning for their advanced degrees, these individuals must operate under the most stringent standards of outstanding performance in regards to the strength and quality of their research. Some anxious graduate students may avoid meeting with their advisors with a self-perception that they may not reach the advisors’ expectations in their academic progress (Bloom, 1981), and this lack of communication with advisors may delay their overall achievement.

With L2 graduate students, concern about their social image, professional identity, or completion of degree can be particularly strong. Within the larger academic community, writing anxiety may harm the L2 graduate student’s social image. Choosing to avoid situations where written academic communications is considered to downgrade their professional identity, L2 graduate students may suffer from the sense of unease, a spiral of anxiety, social isolation, or withdrawal-frequently culminating in incomplete dissertations and dropping out of degrees (Wynne et al., 2014).

**V. What Research Is Needed on L2 Writing Anxiety among Graduate Students?**

For future research on L2 writing anxiety among graduate students, several research questions would be valuable. Some of these questions are about the different kinds of solutions that might be available. For
example, are there any instructional approaches as a classroom level from which L2 graduate students can manage their writing anxiety? Or, would any counseling assistance be provided to the graduate students? If there are any of those solutions, how have they been effective or helpful?

Other questions are about a particularly difficult situation: When students are by themselves and feeling anxious. Since writing is an everyday practice for them, if writing anxiety is following them everyday for some students, how would the students manage writing anxiety when they work independently after they leave the classroom? How could they seek help for the management of writing anxiety after they complete their coursework but write independently? Or, even if students work in writing groups where several students regularly gather together for a designated time and write on their own for the purpose of writing progress, how could students deal with writing anxiety that different paces of writing group members may cause? Would there be any strategies that the students can try out themselves so that they do not need to rely on the external help to reduce anxiety (Lee, 2016)?

Furthermore, some questions focus on students’ personal commitments outside school. Considering their busy life or academic circumstances where they are easily overwhelmed by other responsibilities such as TA or RA duty, family care, professional activity, or community service, how could they solely rely on other external sources of help for managing anxiety unless they prioritize writing? How could they always squeeze out of their time going to the outside sources of help, which may require another set of significant time commitments? Could students break the chain of anxiety along with self-defeating, pessimistic thoughts or over-optimistic evaluation but engage a synergy of realistic and positive self-perceptions?
VI. Conclusion

To summarize, this article has made a case that more research is needed on L2 graduate students' writing anxiety. The article has raised awareness that writing anxiety of L2 graduate students, as one essential form of emotions, could negatively mediate their writing practice and performance in their writing-enriched life. This article serves as a rationale for why writing anxiety study needs to be resumed with several important questions for further research for self-treatment option. Writing anxiety study has flourished for a while, and there have been various treatment studies, but they halted at some point. However, there are still important questions to be answered, so there is a need for this research to continue.

Graduate students understand that graduate study is bound to be much writing work, so they are supposed to enjoy writing. However, they cannot always enjoy writing, and sometimes writing can be considered as a severe requirement. Since writing anxiety may creep into or overpower L2 graduate students’ academic life as a stressor, an exigent countermeasure should be tapped as a trial with students’ acute awareness and insightful reflection on their surrounding context. It is expected that the above raised questions for calling for self-strategy may contribute to the future promising research.

With more research, some graduate students’ confession at the beginning, “I was attacked by anxiety again! I could not do anything”, can be resolved. Writing anxiety, occasionally overloaded to the L2 graduate writers, is yet a surpassable challenge. Many established scholars reported that they once had higher level of writing anxiety particularly when they were novice writers (Belcher & Connor, 2001). However, they finally have become proficient and effective writers. Writing anxiety can be overcome, and L2 graduate students can expect
to have an enjoyable academic life toward a less gravity of emotional pulling, writing anxiety.

**Works Cited**


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