

The Challenge of ESL Writing: Understanding Learners' Anxiety in Writing Classrooms

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Abstract

English language writing proficiency is essential for learners' personal, professional, and academic growth. Notably, in a country like Pakistan, English is used and taught as an official and second language from grade one. However, after learning English for more than 10 years, Pakistani undergraduates still lack appropriate writing skills which ultimately leads to their feeling of uneasiness and anxiety in classroom. Thus, the aim of this study is two-fold: First, to investigate the levels of writing anxiety of Pakistani English as a second language (ESL) undergraduates; Second, to discover the factors that may contribute to the writing anxiety of Pakistani ESL undergraduates. A mixed-methods approach was utilised. The quantitative data was collected from 250 participants through a purposive sampling method using Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and five participants were recruited for the semi-structured interviews. The results obtained from the questionnaire revealed that Pakistani undergraduates experienced a high level of somatic and cognitive anxieties in ESL writing. However, the level of their avoidance behaviour was moderate. The semi-structured interviews revealed various administrative, academic and pedagogical factors that contributed to the undergraduates' writing anxiety. These factors included lack of self-confidence, time constraints, weak language skills, frequent assignments, teachers' feedback, fear of assessment, lack of writing practice, pressure to be perfect, topic familiarity, inadequate writing techniques, and classroom environment. Based on the findings, this study provides pedagogical implications for ESL teachers.

Keywords: Anxiety, ESL learners, mixed-methods, productive skills, writing

Introduction

In a second or foreign language learning context, language learners receive due attention from teachers as the learners' progress remains the key focus of teaching practices. This progress of the learners is often testified by their ability to speak and write in the target language and exhibit a certain level of language proficiency. This ultimate focus on the productive skills of learners forces

language teachers to devise strategies that can meet the learners' learning needs and their desired outcomes. At the same time, students too require extra effort to improve their speaking and writing skills and achieve an acceptable communicative competence. In the case of speaking skills, along with classroom activities, a wide range of online resources enable learners to develop their oral proficiency; however, in writing, learners require more guidance, feedback, and support from classroom teacher.

Writing in a second or foreign language can be a daunting task due to a variety of stages, strategies, and techniques involved in the process of producing a coherent piece of writing. As defined by Moore and Murray (2006), "writing is an action, a process of discovering and organizing ideas, putting them on the paper and reshaping and revising them" (p. 36). This definition explicates the intricate nature and the complex process of writing in a second language that challenge the learners' ability to follow the essential steps and communicate their ideas in a coherent manner in order to meet the academic requirements. The impact of this challenge may add to the learners' anxiety in a classroom environment and consequently lead to their underperformances as second or foreign language learners.

In the Pakistani ESL context, writing in English is given immense importance at the undergraduate level as students often aim to enter competitive exams after graduation (Ajmal & Irfan). With respect to the teaching methods, productive writing approach is still a dominant method in this part of the world (Ajmal & Irfan, 2020; Palpanadan et al., 2014) where students are expected to produce an essay on a given topic. Owing to traditional teaching methods and lack of innovative pedagogical techniques, students in teacher-centered classrooms often experience difficulties in their bid to write an essay that meets the teacher's expectations. Since classrooms are teacher-centered due to the application Grammar Translation Method (GTM) (Ajmal & Irfan, 2020), lack of interaction patterns results in the absence of peer support and students mainly rely on the teacher's input that may not be adequate in large classrooms (Irfan et al., 2020; Mesti, 2020). In such a non-conducive learning environment, learners often need extra support and feedback, hence, they become conscious of their underperformance that contributes to their anxiety in ESL classrooms. Similarly, despite leaning English for more than 10 years, Pakistani undergraduates still lacking in arranging and formulating appropriate ideas writing while writing in English (Ajmal & Irfan, 2020; Fareed et al., 2021).

Studies in the Pakistani context underscore the role of writing skills in the ESL learners' communicative competence (Ahmed et al., 2017; Fareed et al, 2021; Dar & Khan, 2015; Solangi et al., 2021). However, there is dearth of empirical evidence to show how anxious the ESL learners feel while writing in English and what factors might add to their anxiety in the Pakistani context (Fareed et al., 2021; Solangi et al., 2021). This mixed-methods study aims to investigate the learners' anxiety from the ESL learners' perspective that would help ESL teachers and learners to cope with effects of anxiety. This research aims to answer the two overarching research questions.

1. To what extent do ESL learners experience anxiety while writing in English in the Pakistani context?
2. What factors may contribute to the ESL learners' writing anxiety in the Pakistani context?

Literature Review

The Challenges of Writing Skills in Second Language (L2)

Writing is defined as “an action, a process of discovering and organizing ideas, putting them on the paper and reshaping and revising them” (Moore & Murray, 2006, p. 36). It is a series of well-connected sentences in a precise way to give a complete idea (Sulisworo et al., 2016). It is the main area in the academic field and in practical life (Kew & Tasir, 2021; Rudiyanto, 2017; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019). Thus, it is a very essential and productive activity for both ESL and EFL learners (Hussin et al., 2015). Proper writing skills enable students to express their ideas and feelings in a meaningful manner (Jani & Mellinger, 2015), and enhance their fluency, independence, and creativity (Sulisworo et al., 2016). Appropriate writing skills assist learners to complete writing tasks effectively, which is the demand of today’s academic field and workplace. Resultantly, writing a cohesive piece of product is the fundamental goal of education in the ESL countries like Pakistan. However, writing has been a daunting task for ESL/EFL learners at school and university levels (Challob et al., 2016; Cocuk, et al., 2016; Rudiyanto, 2017). It requires several stages to demonstrate the complex nature of writing including mechanics, content, organization, and structure but not many ESL learners master and understand them well. Therefore, during learning academic writing skills, learners face challenges.

Moreover, the construction of a sentence is not just a sequence of words (Keshta & Harb, 2013), but requires generating thoughts in a precise, coherent, and informative way to construct a well-organized composition. Ramasamy and Aziz (2018) further explained that the complexity of writing skills lies in its numerous multifaceted roles such as punctuations, spellings, ideas arrangements and expansion, conventions, and proper grammar. Rudiyanto (2017) also pointed out that for well-organized writing a learner needs to comprehend grammar, sentence structure, and appropriate vocabulary. Thus, due to the complex nature of writing, it is considered the most challenging skill even for high-ability learners. As a result, the multiple requirements in L2 writing make learners, demotivated, feel lost, lack of interest, and worried. In general, this kind of feeling is known as writing anxiety.

L2 Writing Anxiety

Writing anxiety is defined by Al-Sawalha and Chow (2012) as a “psychological predisposition faced by an individual in writing task due to tendencies of overwhelming fear arising from a combination of feelings, beliefs, and behaviors affecting the individual’s ability to write” (p. 6). In language learning writing anxiety was first introduced by Daly and Miller’s (1975) significant work (Wahyuni et al., 2019). Since then, writing anxiety and its effects on the learners’ performance has been investigated in various contexts. Cheng (2004) asserted that research on L2 learning anxiety started in the 1990s. To date, it is still a burning issue to be examined as it has been a key factor that influences the learners’ L2 writing performance (Genç & Yaylı, 2019; Miri & Joia, 2018; Quvanch & Na, 2022; Sadiq, 2017). Kirmizi and Kirmizi (2015) also stated that learners with higher anxiety secure lower marks in writing exams due to certain reasons including the use of inappropriate grammar, making more errors, and being unable to arrange ideas. It is observed that during anxiety attacks L2 students are unable to grasp the content of input, fail to

concentrate, fail to produce coherent and cohesive compositions, and even forget ideas. Writing anxiety also hinders learners' motivation, self-confidence, and academic work (Martinez et al., 2011; Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012).

Nevertheless, it is argued that lower anxiety leads to high performance in writing tasks (Hashimoto, 2002). Similarly, Liu and Ni (2015) stated that a moderate level of anxiety may escalate the learners' writing performance. Regardless of low or high anxiety, it may have a facilitative or debilitating effect on learners' performance. Thus, several studies have investigated the learners' performance, achievements, and perceptions in various L2 contexts (e.g., Alfiansyah et al., 2017; Al-Sawalha & Chow, 2012; Dordinejad & Ahmadabad, 2014; Ekmekçi, 2018; Jebreil et al., 2015; Quvanch & Na, 2022; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). However, research on L2 writing anxiety is still in its embryonic stage in the Pakistani ESL context.

Types of Anxiety in L2 Learning

In L2 learning, Cheng (2004) classified writing anxiety into three types, including, avoidance behavior, somatic anxiety, and cognitive anxiety. Avoidance behavior refers to writing anxiety when a learner avoids participating in writing tasks (Cheng, 2004). It is the most common behavior found among L2 learners, which leads students to refrain from any situation that would involve them in writing (Rudiyanto, 2017). Quvanch and Na (2022) stated that it is known as the most serious type of anxiety, which negatively influences the learners' performance in writing inside the class. This is because worried learners are often restless and distracted. Thus, they are unable to pay attention to their writing tasks. Moreover, Morris et al. (1981, p. 541) defined cognitive anxiety as "negative expectations and cognitive concerns about oneself, the situation at hand, and potential consequences". It denotes the psychological state of mind such as fears of being negatively evaluated by others, feeling worried about low performance, and negative expectations (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Rudiyanto, 2017; Wahyuni & Umam, 2017). High expectations of the teacher from the learners' performance may also cause nervousness among learners. More precisely, tasks that are not associated with cognitive activities seem to exert anxiety among students and decrease their performance. Somatic anxiety is an individual's belief in psychological symptoms caused by anxiety. It is basically related to a high level of negative emotions such as feeling butterflies in the stomach, panic attacks, sweating, tension, and nervousness (Cheng, 2004; Rudiyanto, 2017). Marzec-stawlarska (2012) found that learners with such kinds of anxiety suffer from rapid breathing, heart palpitations, tremors, sweating, and stomach disorders. Learners suffering from this type of anxiety feel panic attacks during writing tasks which make their minds blank (Alfiansyah et al., 2017). This type of anxiety causes learners tension and high apprehension that make them forgetful and unable to arrange ideas within given time. It is observed that Pakistani ESL learners often suffer from this type of anxiety during exams when they have to finish a 250-words essay within 20 minutes.

Factors Contributing to L2 Writing Anxiety

The possible factors that contribute to learners' L2 writing anxiety are divided by Rezael and Jafari (2014) into ten categories. The first is the negative evaluation of a learner's writing task. It is fundamental to writing anxiety among L2 learners (Alfiansyah et al., 2017). The students feel

anxious due to their peer and teacher evaluation of their writing tasks. It often happens when a learner's written task is not up to the criteria given by the teacher. Moreover, students often feel worried about being laughed at by peers due to poor performance (Brown, 2007). In such kinds of situations, learners consistently experience looking "dumb" and "foolish" during peer and teacher evaluation. Zhang and Zhong (2012) believe that learners feel uneasy and worried when their writing task is compared to their peers. The second category is self-confidence. Low self-confidence is noticed as one of the key factors of writing anxiety among L2 learners (Olanezhad, 2015). It hinders the writing abilities of the learners. Students will be unable to share their ideas and feelings properly if they feel a lack of confidence. Conversely, learners' positive attitude assists them to engage in writing activities confidently that allows the teacher to cultivate writing skills easily.

The third reason for anxiety is the frequent use of assignments. Shang (2013) pointed out that when a major part of students' final exam marks constitutes an assignment, it exerts their apprehension and nervousness. Fourth, time pressure also causes anxiety among L2 learners. It denotes that the specific time frame given by teachers for a writing task is often identified as a source of anxiety (Rezael & Jafari, 2014). In the ESL contexts like Pakistan often large syllabi and lengthy written tests that are required to be completed within a given time lead to anxiety. A cohesive and well-organizing piece of writing takes a lot of effort and time in the shape of planning or brainstorming, writing, and revising (Quvanch & Na, 2022). It is often observed that learners lose confidence in the writing process due to time constraints.

Fifth, the pressure of being perfect in L2 writing also leads to anxiety. One needs to go through a series of complex processes and put all efforts to come up as an expert writer. Learners feel exceedingly apprehensive when they are asked to come up with a well-organized composition. On the other hand, Alfiansyah et al. (2017) argued that it is advantageous for learners when they are asked to perfect their performance in writing tasks. They believed that it would enable learners to constantly practice and apply their work which will make their writing impeccable.

Sixth, linguistic difficulty in writing may also cause anxiety. It refers to the learners who are linguistically incompetent. It is a very common challenge faced by learners associated with L2 writing (Wahyuni & Umam, 2017). For example, essay writing takes a lot of grammar rules, therefore, linguistically weak learners often feel demotivated to write. The lack of knowledge about grammar, punctuations, prepositions, and coherent ideas also leads to the learners' anxiety. Moreover, not being able to master syntax, morphology, and writing techniques also exert anxiety (Ozturk & Cecen, 2007).

Seventh, the topic choice and lack of familiarity with the topic also leads to learners' writing anxiety (Quvanch & Na, 2022). Prior knowledge about the topic boosts learners' performance (Ubaid et al., 2022). Learners who are exposed to an unfamiliar topic feel anxious compared to those who are writing on a familiar topic. The eighth category is inadequate knowledge about writing techniques. It refers to those students who have poor writing skills. Wahyuni and Umam (2017) opined that a lack of knowledge about writing techniques leads learners to uneasiness, apprehension, and nervousness. To put it simply, students who do not acquire proper composition skills and suitable writing techniques suffer from poor performance in writing tasks.

The ninth category is related to lack of writing practice, which may also cause writing anxiety. It denotes the situations where the students are being instructed to concentrate on more structure than the content of a composition. Yet, the learners are unable to respond properly due to the absence of writing practice (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Abu Shawish and Atea (2010) pointed out that insufficient writing practice and unfamiliarity with writing structure make students anxious. It happens especially when learners are required to explore personal attitudes, experiences, and feeling (Kara, 2013). Finally, fear of tests can also increase learners' anxiety. It arises from the fear of failing exams. It triggers when one thinks that his/her writing will be examined based on vocabulary, cohesion, coherence, and elaboration of ideas in the final test (Ozturk & Cecen, 2007). In addition, being a product skill, writing is strongly affected by time pressure, even bright learners make mistakes when it comes to exam situations (Zhang, 2011).

Methods

Mixed-methods Research design

The combination of both quantitative and qualitative data sets is likely to offer rich insights into the investigated phenomena that may not be fully comprehended by the application of one data set (Dawadi, 2021). Poth and Munce (2020) explained that the integration of both these designs assists the researcher to examine the complex research problem from multiple perspectives. Moreover, the use of a mixed-methods design also allowed the researchers to widen their inquiry with adequate breadth and depth. Plano Clark and Ivankova (2016) argued that the combination of both approaches gives strength to the results because the quantitative method has the strength of offsetting the weaknesses of the qualitative method and vice versa. This signifies that qualitative design can be strong in those parts where the quantitative method is weak and vice versa. More succinctly, a mixed-methods design assists researchers "to overcome the epistemological differences between quantitative and qualitative paradigms and to provide a royal road to true knowledge" (Bergman, 2008, p. 4). Since learners' anxiety is a significant research topic, the current study employed a mixed-methods design to gain an in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon.

Participants

Following the purposive sampling technique, the current study recruited 250 undergraduates including 140 males and 110 females from a public University in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. All the participants had been learning English as a compulsory subject since the primary level. Their ages ranged from 18-22 years. Out of 250, 138 students belonged to rural areas whereas 112 belonged to urban areas. In the second phase of the study, 10 students were reached out to confirm their availability for the interviews on the same topic; however, only five of them showed interest in the interviews.

Instruments

The current study adapted the questionnaire developed and validated by Cheng (2004). The questionnaire was designed to measure the L2 writing anxiety known as "the second language writing anxiety inventory" (SLWAI). This multidimensional inventory comprised 22 items

including three subscales, namely, cognitive anxiety, avoidance behavior, and somatic anxiety. The inventory adopted a five-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Prior to data collection, the pilot study was conducted to measure the reliability of the questionnaire in the Pakistani ESL context. The results revealed that the reliability of the questionnaire on Cronbach’s was $\alpha = .87$.

The study adopted semi-structured interviews as a secondary data collection tool to collect qualitative data from five participants.

Data Collection

The data were collected in two stages. In the stage, one quantitative data was collected and in stage two qualitative data was collected. First, permission was granted from the Dean of the University of Swabi. Second, a consent form was signed by those participants who voluntarily participated in this study. Third, the researcher explained the aim of the study and the procedure of responding to the questionnaire. The data were collected in the participants’ regular ESL classes with their ESL teachers. Finally, the respondents took 20-25 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

In phase two, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants to gather qualitative data. Each interview lasted for 20-35 minutes. The interviews were recorded on iPhone 13 ProMax. To ensure the participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms were used to refer to their views. The recorded files and the interview transcripts were deleted after completing the analysis stage.

Data Analysis

Based on the research questions, a mixed-method research design was employed. The quantitative data was analyzed using mean and standard deviation and the qualitative data was examined through the thematic analysis method. To determine the levels of writing anxiety the cut-off points suggested by Lian and Budin (2014) on a five-point Likert scale were utilized. According to Lian and Budin (2014), a mean score of 3.68 to 5.00 is considered a high level of anxiety, scores between 2.34 to 3.67 demonstrates a moderate level of anxiety, and scores of 1.00 to 2.33 indicates a low level of anxiety. After determining the levels of writing anxiety, the interviews were analyzed based on the themes.

This study combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze the data. The quantitative data was analyzed through mean and standard deviation using SPSS version 25. The qualitative data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach by following the guidelines by Creswell (2012) and Saldaña (2009). In the first stage, open coding was done that produced 180 initial codes. Identical codes were put together that reduced the number to 85 codes in the second stage. The third stage involved developing 11 categories out of 85 codes as shown in Table 1. In the final stage, three overarching themes emerged from 11 categories, which helped explain quantitative findings and answer the two research questions.

Table 1: Factors Adding to the ESL learners’ Writing Anxiety

#	Categories (Factors)
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1	Writing under time constraints
2	Lack of self-confidence
3	Frequent writing assignments
4	Weak language skills
5	Fear of teacher's negative feedback
6	Fear of writing exams/tests
7	Lack of writing practice
8	Pressure to be perfect
9	Lack of familiarity with topics
10	Lack of writing techniques
11	Classroom environment

Quantitative results

Table 2: The undergraduates' levels writing anxiety in different classroom situations

	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	While writing in English, I'm always feel nervous.	3.431	.789
2	While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.	3.921	.934
3	I feel worried that my English compositions are a lot worse than others'.	3.244	1.067
4	If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	4.012	.967
5	I'm afraid that the other students would deride my English composition if they read it.	3.843	.834
6	I feel worried about what other people would think of my English compositions.	3.931	.945
7	I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	3.842	.685
8	I'm afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.	3.465	1.654
9	I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.	2.334	.876
10	I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.	3.454	.921
11	I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.	3.234	1.571
12	I often use English to write compositions	2.323	1.193
13	I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions	3.654	.956
14	I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class	3.434	.789
15	Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions	2.332	1.045

			Research Article
16	I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint.	4.234	.834
17	My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.	4.0543	.968
18	I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure	3.876	.943
19	My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.	3.954	.765
20	I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint.	4.143	.861
21	I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions	4.233	.918
22	I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.	4.125	.863

The SLWAI results show the students' level of writing anxiety was high in most of the classroom situations. Items 1 to 8 denote that cognitive anxiety. The learners' level of cognitive anxiety was high in most of the situations (items 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7) and moderate and some situations (items 1, 3, and 8). Next, items 9 to 15 indicate the avoidance behavior of the learners. Items (10, 11, 13, and 14) demonstrate a moderate level of avoidance behavior of the learners whereas, the mean score of items (9, 12, and 15) is less than ($M= 2.34$), which demonstrates a low level of anxiety. Finally, items 16 to 22 indicate somatic anxiety. It is obvious that the learners' level of somatic anxiety mean score is higher than ($M=3.68$) in all situations, which shows the students felt psychologically more anxious in all classroom situations.

Table 3: The Overall levels of writing anxiety

Type of writing Anxiety	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cognitive Anxiety	3.983	.987
Avoidance Behavior	3.543	1.034
Somatic Anxiety	4.012	.876

Table 2 demonstrates the learners' overall levels of cognitive anxiety, avoidance behavior, and somatic anxiety. It obvious that the means score of somatic anxiety and cognitive anxiety were more than ($M= 3.68$) whereas their level of avoidance behavior was less than ($M= 3.68$) which denotes a moderate level of anxiety. It means that the students were somatically and cognitively more anxious compared avoidance behavior during writing tasks.

Qualitative Findings

Administrative Factors

The qualitative analysis of the interview data reflects several issues that can directly lead to the ESL learners' anxiety in the Pakistani context. First and foremost is the classroom environment

that offers inadequate support to the learners and limits interaction among students due to large number of students. The following excerpts from the interviews highlight these challenges:

Our teacher doesn't have time for every student in the class to check our writing and give us feedback. We are more than 40 students in a class. So, it's not possible for the teacher to help everyone in class. Only a few students get the chance to learn from the teacher, but generally, it's very hard to learn from teacher when you have only 50 minutes and more than 40 students in a classroom. (Alia)

In large classrooms, we always have the problem of focusing on our writing skills. Our teacher comes and delivers a lectures and leaves. It is always up to us to work on our writing tasks. It's so frustrating to learn without the support of the teacher. Students always complain about the lack of teacher support. (Ahmad)

The data also suggests that students lack opportunities to learn from each other. For example, Sami pointed out, *"We don't get a chance to work in pairs or groups and learn from each other. The classroom environment, the course materials, and the teacher do not give us such opportunities"*. Furthermore, as a result of no peer interaction, students mainly depend on themselves that leads to anxiety as indicated by Yusuf, *"Writing is so challenging because we hardly get anything from the class where students have no time to complete exercises and get the teacher's feedback. The whole process is so disturbing"*.

Another source of anxiety emanates from continuous assessment in classroom and the students' inability to meet the deadlines. Since there is a lack of support from peers and classroom teacher, students often fail to complete and submit the writing assignments in time. Consequently, their performance is affected. The following extracts from the participants' interviews illustrate the issue of time constraints in the wake of frequent writing tasks.

For the teacher, it's so easy to give us assignments. There is an assignment almost every week. I think it's too much of work. Homework assignments are usually very long and time-consuming that affect our concentration, and sadly, I never get full grades in such assignments. (Atif)

Too many assignments, too much work. But there is not much to learn from because we don't get any feedback from the teacher. So, assignments are the reason why we feel so stressed out. (Alia)

I never have enough time to finish the assignment because there are other subjects to study as well. Since time is always an issue, I don't focus much on the task. I believe that fewer assignments can help me learn well, but the teacher doesn't consider it important. (Sami)

The participants have highlighted the time factor as a major source of anxiety for ESL learners. Time is also a matter of concern for students during the writing lessons. Yusuf questioned the time allocated for a writing lesson, *"Do you think a 50-minutes session is enough? I don't think so. How is it even possible for a teacher to teach more than 40 students in less than an hour and expect good results. I personally think it's a waste of time"*.

Academic Factors

The participants have voiced their concerns about issues that emerge from their poor proficiency level and issues related to academic performances, which ultimately cause frustration and anxiety in the Pakistani ESL context. The participants have frequently mentioned lack of practice, their inadequate writing skills, lack of confidence, and unfamiliarity with writing topics as major sources of anxiety. The following excerpts show the ESL learners' weaknesses that can affect their writing performance and result in frustration.

Because of my weak educational background, I struggle so much with writing in English. It's not easy for me to write a 300-words long essay in 40 minutes time. I need a lot more time for a task like this. When I think about my weak background, I usually lose motivation to write. I think most of my friends are like me who also need time and lots of practice to improve their writing skills. (Sami)

I'm not very good at English and my writing is especially very weak. I need extra support from my teacher which I don't get and that's something really upsetting for me. I think teaching time is not enough and we have only two sessions a week which makes things very difficult for us. Too many topics are discussed in a 50-minutes class, and we don't get time to practice those topics. Practice makes a man perfect, and we never had enough practice in classroom. (Yusuf)

The participants' views suggest that lack of practice does not allow them to develop writing techniques and grow their confidence. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate that the ESL learners do not have improved writing techniques or skills due to which they lack confidence as language learners.

As classroom teaching is never enough for writing practice, I couldn't learn about writing strategies or techniques that I can use in my academic writing. I think writing is more about strategies than practice. Yes, I can practice when I know how to write. But if I don't know the basics, I can do nothing about it and I think I don't know much about the techniques that's why I'm always so bogged down during the tests and assignments. (Alia)

My teacher doesn't give us topics that are easy to write about. It's not easy to write about topics which I don't know about. I remember a teacher who would discuss a topic with the class and then give us related vocabulary to start writing on it. This was really helpful because we were beginner level students and had no idea about writing in English. In my current classroom, the teacher explains this process but doesn't let us write in class due to time constraints. As we don't practice it in class, writing exams become very challenging for us. (Ahmad)

My goal is to learn about the process of writing, improve my skills, and develop my ability of writing about different topics. I think in classroom it's not possible because we are always short of time and the teacher has to cover a lot of course materials. This is very unfortunate because we don't learn much from the teacher and we have to go for online resources, such as YouTube or Google to learn about writing techniques or strategies that we can use in our writing exams or assignments. (Sami)

Pedagogical Factors

The qualitative data has identified several factors related to teaching practices that have a direct impact on the ESL learners' writing anxiety. These factors are pertinent to the teachers'

expectations from ESL students to achieve excellent grades in writing tests. As a matter of fact, learners face a daunting task to improve their writing skills without receiving sufficient support from teachers. High expectations lead to the learners' anxiety, hence, affects their performances in exams. The following excerpts are indicative of what causes writing anxiety in ESL classrooms.

The teacher wants me to write like her. This is impossible. Whatever I write, the teacher finds a problem with it. It's so disturbing that I can never get full marks in my writing tests. Satisfying my teacher is not easy, so I sometimes don't want to do well on exams because nothing is appreciated by her. (Alia)

If my teacher expects me to do well, he has to teach me well. Sadly, the teaching method, the amount of feedback, the time given to writing lessons do not match our expectations. I think there is a big gap between what we receive and what the teacher expects from us. (Atif)

The participants' views suggest that the occasionally given feedback to the students is not very constructive and students often feel discouraged to work on the teacher's comments and improve their writing drafts. This has been pointed out by Sami and Yusuf.

Yes, the teacher gives us individual feedback sometimes, but I never like it. His job looks like finding out mistakes in my writing and he doesn't tell me how to improve them. It is so disappointing at the end to know your mistakes but have no plan to improve them. I think it's the teacher job to help me out or I will not learn anything at all. (Sami)

The feedback I receive from my teacher is hardly of any use. Students usually see a few underlined sentences or words with no great details. It doesn't help much in learning because students don't know what to do next. I also feel like the teacher only picks out on my weaknesses and there is never any mention of my strengths. (Yusuf)

The participants further mentioned the challenges they face in exams as they appear more challenging than the exercises covered in the course-book. Since exams and the course-book materials lack coordination, students remain uncertain about the format of the writing exams that leads to their anxiety. Atif and Ahmad elaborated on this point:

The book is always easy, the exams are always difficult. I don't know why the teacher gives us exams that are so difficult. During the exam, the writing questions require so much thinking that I often run out of time. I never get A grade in writing just because of the types of questions we find in exams. It's so upsetting! (Atif)

The exercises we cover in class are much easier than what we are tested on in exams. I don't really know the logic for giving us exams that are above our level. Every time I go into a writing exam, I feel nervous because I can't predict the questions. (Ahmad)

Discussion

The quantitative findings revealed that the Pakistani ESL undergraduates' experienced a high level of somatic and cognitive anxiety. Somatic anxiety refers to a high level of negative emotions such as feeling butterflies in the stomach, panic attacks, sweating, tension, and nervousness (Cheng, 2004; Rudiyanto, 2017). Similarly, cognitive anxiety refers to "negative expectations and cognitive concerns about oneself, the situation at hand, and potential consequences" (Morris et al. (1981, p. 541). It denotes the psychological state of mind such as fear of being negatively

evaluated by others, feeling worried about low performance, and negative expectations (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Rudiyanto, 2017; Wahyuni & Umam, 2017). The findings in line with literature indicate that the Pakistani ESL learners were mainly influenced by psychological factors such as time constraints, going blank when starting writing, trembling while writing, jumbled during writing, feeling panic, freezing up, and feeling rigid and tensed during the process of writing in ESL classrooms. Moreover, qualitative findings suggest that the learners' writing was affected by external factors such as being worried about being natively evaluated, being laughed at by others, and pressure of poor performance in the tests.

The qualitative and quantitative results of the current study are in line with the previously published empirical studies (e.g., Jebreil et al., 2015; Masriani et al., 2018; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Wahyuni & Umam, 2017) that identified cognitive anxiety as the most prevailing type of anxiety during writing. Similarly, some of the previous studies reported semiotic anxiety as the leading type of writing anxiety (Alfiansyah et al., 2017; Ekmekçi, 2018; Min & Rahmat, 2014). Nevertheless, the current study contradicts the findings of Jagabalan et al. (2016) who revealed that avoidance behavior was the leading factor that exerted the learners' writing anxiety. The outcomes from different studies demonstrate that the learners' background knowledge, culture, social, and geographical variances may lead to writing anxiety differently.

The qualitative data revealed that a number of factors that led to the learners' anxiety in ESL writing classrooms, such as lack of self-confidence, time constraints, weak language skills, frequent assignments, teachers' feedback, fear of assessments, lack of writing practice, pressure to be perfect, topic familiarity, lack of writing techniques, and classroom environment. These findings corroborate with previous research studies, for example, Alfiansyah et al. (2017), Quvanch and Na (2022), Rezaei and Jafari (2014), Solangi et al. (2021), and Wahyuni et al. (2019).

Furthermore, Solangi et al. (2021) found that Pakistani ESL learners felt anxious while completing writing tasks due to feeling of being perfect, lack of confidence, working under time constraints, teachers' negative evaluation, lack of familiarity with topics, and fear of assessment. Quvanch and Na (2022) and Wahyuni et al. (2019) also found that linguistic difficulty was the main cause of writing anxiety among Afghani and Indonesian learners. Other studies found that the teachers' negative comments were the dominant source of learners' writing anxiety (e.g., Alfiansyah et al., 2017; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Similarly, working under time constraints and continuous assignments also exerted the students' anxiety during writing tasks (Rahim et al., 2016; Solangi et al., 2021). Most of the participants in the current study stated that frequent assignments make them feel stressed. As several factors contributes to the writing anxiety of the learners, the following section provides some pedagogical implications for ESL teachers.

Pedagogical Implications

For ESL learners to overcome their writing anxiety, language teachers should promote the reading habit among the learners because reading is the essence of writing. This will enhance the learners' grammar and vocabulary and they will be able to construct accurate and cohesive paragraphs. Teachers should avoid negative feedback. In other words, students should be given constructive feedback in a positive manner and should be trained to take their tutors' feedback positively. Teachers should promote a tension free environment in the writing class. This can be done

through relaxation exercises, using positive facial expressions, and encouraging students to develop their self-confidence. Various interaction patterns should be used. For instance, group and pair work activities such as jigsaw, role-play, presentations, and mind mapping should be incorporated in the writing class. It will help learners to share their ideas with peers. Consequently, learners will feel more comfortable during writing. Designing assignments according to the abilities, interests, and learning styles of the learners and using modern methods of assessment will not only ease the anxiety of the learners but will also improve the quality of the written tasks.

Conclusion

This study revealed that writing in English is a very challenging task for ESL learners. It was found that ESL learners experienced a high level of somatic and cognitive anxieties, whereas the level of their avoidance behaviour was moderate. Moreover, the current study discovered multiple factors that contributed to the writing anxiety of Pakistani ESL undergraduates. These factors include lack of self-confidence, time constraints, weak language skills, frequent assignments, teachers' feedback, fear of assessment, lack of writing practice, pressure to be perfect, lack of familiarity with topics, inadequate writing techniques, and classroom environment. Thus, ESL teachers should be aware of the existence of writing anxiety among learners. Subsequently, teachers should create a friendly and anxiety-free environment for learners by integrating appropriate language teaching strategies. The current study has some limitations and recommendations. First, the focus of the study was undergraduate students, hence, future studies could focus on school and college level students to further understand this phenomenon. Second, this study was carried out in an underprivileged district of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan where both the teachers and students have limited access to modern teaching resources. Therefore, future studies could be conducted in more developed and metropolitan cities of Pakistan. Third, the current study was conducted in the Pakistani ESL context. Future studies could be considered the EFL countries both at the university and the school levels to draw more interesting conclusions about the learners' anxiety in ESL classrooms.

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