Writing Anxiety: EFL Postgraduate Students Writing Research Papers in English

Montarat Rungruangthum

This paper aims to examine the factors that lead to writing anxiety as perceived by EFL learners and the strategies they use to cope with their anxiety while writing research papers in English. Four postgraduate students (three Thai and one Chinese) studying in the first-year international PhD program in Applied Linguistics were asked to submit their research papers at the end of the course. The *Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)* questionnaire was administered in Weeks 10 and 14 to assess their anxiety levels while they were writing their papers. A semi-structured interview was used to elicit the causes of writing anxiety and coping strategies. The results show that the factors causing anxiety about their writing were: *teachers* and *grading*. Leki's (1995) framework of coping strategies reveal that these participants frequently used *Focusing strategies* and *Stopping writing* when they wrote research papers in English.

Key words: Writing anxiety, writing research paper, and English as a Foreign Language

ความวิตกกังวลในการเขียน: กรณีศึกษา นักศึกษาปริญญาเอกสาขาการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ เขียนบทความวิจัยเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาปัจจัยที่ก่อให้เกิดความวิตกกังวลในการเขียนของผู้เรียนสาขาภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ รวมทั้งกลวิธีที่ผู้เรียนสาขาดังกล่าวใช้ในการเผชิญกับความวิตกกังวลเมื่อเขียนบทความวิจัยเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ ในงานวิจัยนี้ ทดลองใช้นักศึกษาระดับปริญญาเอก ชั้นปีที่หนึ่งสาขาภาษาศาสตร์ประยุกต์ หลักสูตรนานาชาติ จำนวน 4 คน (คนไทย 3 คน และ จีน 1 คน) โดยให้นักศึกษาทั้งหมดส่งบทความวิจัยเมื่อเรียนรายวิชาเสร็จสิ้น แบบทดสอบความวิตกกังวลในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory หรือ SLWAI) ได้นำมาใช้ในสัปดาห์ที่ 10 และสัปดาห์ที่ 14 เพื่อประเมินระดับความวิตกกังวลขณะที่นักศึกษาเขียนบทความวิจัย ผู้วิจัยใช้การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างเพื่อศึกษาสาเหตุความวิตกกังวลในการ เขียนและกลวิธีการเผชิญปัญหาที่ผู้เข้าร่วมการทดลองได้ใช้ ผลการทดลองแสดงให้เห็นว่าปัจจัยที่ก่อให้เกิดความวิตกกังวลในการเขียนของผู้ที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศคือ ผู้สอนและการประเมินผล สำหรับกลวิธีการเผชิญปัญหาจากแนวคิดของ Leki (1995) พบว่าผู้เข้าร่วมการทดลองใช้กลยุทธ์การเน้นจุดสนใจ (Focusing strategies) และกลยุทธ์การหยุดเขียน (Stopping writing) เมื่อเกิดความวิตกกังวลในการเขียนบทความวิจัยเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ

คำสำคัญ : ความวิตกกังวลในการเขียน การเขียนบทความวิจัยเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

As English is becoming more dominant as a world language, many higher education institutions use it as a medium of instruction in their educational programs (Parker, 2010). In Thailand, the number of government universities which provide international PhD programs has been increasing (Wiriyachitra, 2002). Postgraduate students studying in international programs in Thai universities are required to write assignments, research papers, and dissertations and to make presentations in English. For example, at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), postgraduate students of Applied Linguistics must have at least one publication in an international peer reviewed journal as one of the graduation requirements (School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, 2008). The challenge of writing in English may cause anxiety which is hypothesized to result in poor-quality written tasks. Therefore, it is very important to study the causes of anxiety as perceived by EFL learners and investigate how to help them cope with anxiety.

Writing anxiety

Writing anxiety can be defined as "a fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write" (Thompson, 1980, p. 121). The productive skills, such as speaking and writing, generate anxiety higher than the other language skills (Aydin, 2008; Tsui, 1996). Prior studies on writing anxiety over the last two decades have been centered on ESL learners, whereas there has been little information available on how EFL learners perceive anxiety about writing in academic contexts (Aydin, 2008; Atay & Kurt, 2006; Mat Daud, Mat Daud, & Abu Kassim, 2005). In Thailand, English writing skills are very important for postgraduate students because they are required to be published in scholarly publications. Research into problems encountered by non-native students of English writing research papers has highlighted four broad areas of concern: 1) little awareness of the audience/reader; 2) the amount of time needed for writing; 3) lack of ability in making claims and writing arguments; and 4) being concerned with vocabulary, structure, and writing style (Cheung, 2010; Flowerdew, 1999: Gebhard, 1996).

Writing anxiety, as shown in Table 1, can be assessed by using two types of questionnaires: *Writing Apprehension Test (WAT)* and *Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)*. The former was proposed by Daly and Miller (1975) to measure writing anxiety of ESL learners. However, this test was originally developed with reference to first language learners (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Cheng 2004; Erkan & Saban, 2011). The latter was developed by Cheng (2004) and has been widely used to estimate the degree of writing anxiety perceived by ESL and EFL learners. Many research studies on writing anxiety report that SLWAI has good internal consistency (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Cheng, 2004; Erkan & Saban, 2011; Oztürk & ÇeÇen, 2007). The SLWAI was therefore chosen for the present study to examine the degree of anxiety of EFL postgraduate students when they were writing a research paper in English.

Table 1: Studies on writing anxiety

Author(s)	Research Focus	Data Collection	Results
Harris & Grangenett (1992)	Graduate students in U.S.	WAT and a record of network use	Writing apprehension was significantly correlated to login frequency
Cheng (2004)	EFL students	SLWAI	The development of SLWAI
Mat Daud, Mat Daud, & Abu Kassim (2005)	ESL university students	WAT	The low proficiency group was anxious about vocabulary and language use. By contrast, the high proficiency group was worried about content.
Atay & Kurt (2006)	ESL prospective teachers	SLWAI and open-ended questions	Causes of writing anxiety were: Teachers, past experiences, due date, inability to organize ideas, and exams
Öztürk & ÇeÇen (2007)	EFL students	SLWAI and portfolio	Using portfolios to overcome writing anxiety perceived by EFL students

Notes: *While "SLWAI" stands for Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory, "WAT" refers to Writing Apprehension Test*.

Coping strategies for writing in English

Coping strategies originally referred to "the methods these participants used to approach and complete the writing tasks assigned them over the course of the semester" (Leki, 1995, p. 240). The present study attempts to investigate whether the original categorization by Leki could be used to identify how EFL participants deal with writing anxiety. For non-native speakers of English, writing anxiety may have a negative effect on their writing performance. It is essential to analyze their coping strategies to

help them become less anxious when writing a research paper in English. It seems an important study on coping strategies was conducted by Leki (1995), investigating how ESL university students achieved their written assignments when they were studying in the United States. The data includes interviews with ESL students over a semester, interviews with their professors, classroom observations, and examinations were further analyzed using a qualitative approach. According to Leki's findings, these ESL students reported ten categories of coping strategies when they needed to submit their written assignments in English:

1. *Clarifying strategies*- The participants use these strategies to make sure that they understand what is required in the written assignment, such as talking to other students about the assignment.

2. *Focusing strategies*-The participants use these strategies to concentrate on a written task, such as rereading the assignment several times, reading books or relevant research articles to develop their written tasks.

3. *Relying on past writing experiences*-The participants refer to past writing experiences in their efforts to accomplish their current writing tasks.

4. *Taking advantages of first language/culture*-The participants take advantage of being international students and attempt to incorporate something about their background knowledge in their written tasks.

5. *Using current experience or feedback to adjust strategies*-The participants receive current feedback on their assignments from teachers or friends to guide their work.

6. *Looking for models*-The participants find examples for their written assignments.

7. *Using current or past ESL writing training*-The participants may use current or past writing techniques that they have learned before, such as brainstorming before writing.

8. *Accommodating the teacher's demands*-The participants gauge their teacher's opinions, purposely suppressing their ideas about their written tasks.

9. *Resisting the teacher's demands*- The participants may ignore the guidelines given by the teacher or fail to do the written assignments.

10. *Managing competing demands*-The participants are aware of their responsibility in the time allotted, including managing course loads, managing work load for a specific course, regulating the amount of investment made in a specific assignment, and managing the demands of life.

Since some postgraduate students in Thailand have to publish in a scholarly publication in an international refereed journal, the challenge of writing in English may cause anxiety and may affect their written tasks. The coping strategies used by EFL learners were included in the present study to help them deal with the anxiety of writing their research papers in English. This paper, therefore, investigates the factors leading to writing anxiety and the strategies that EFL learners in Thailand frequently used when writing a research paper in English. The research questions addressed were as follows:

(1) What factors contributed to writing anxiety of EFL postgraduate students while writing their research papers?

(2) What strategies did the EFL postgraduate students use to cope with their anxiety while writing their research papers?

Research methodology

Participants

Participants in the present study were four EFL postgraduate students who were studying in the first-year international PhD program of Applied Linguistics at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), Thailand. All participants, as shown in Table 2, enrolled in the course *Theories in Language Learning* (TLL) and were assigned to submit a research paper in English based on their interests at the end of the course. Since these EFL participants had never written a research article in English before, this task was completely new to them. It was predicted that the participants might encounter a certain degree of anxiety while writing a research paper although they had high English language proficiency and passed the university language test (or had at least a 6.5 IELTS score). In this paper, the participants' names are replaced by pseudonyms and permission was obtained from each participant for collection and publication of the research data.

Table 2: Participants' profile

Background	Participants			
	Ping	**Suda**	**Ying**	**Chai**
Nationality	Chinese	Thai	Thai	Thai
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male
Age	34	30	28	24
Writing research paper in English	Never	Never	Never	Never
Passed language test /6.5 IELTS score	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Research instruments

Two research instruments were utilized to investigate the writing anxiety and the coping strategies used by the EFL participants while they were writing their research papers: the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and semi-structured interviews.

The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), the latest version, was proposed by Cheng (2004) initially to assess the degree of writing anxiety individuals feel when writing in a second language. The SLWAI consists of 22 items, all of which are answered on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Many studies have reported the effectiveness of this questionnaire in terms of reliability and validity (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Cheng, 2004; Öztürk & ÇeÇen, 2007; Guo & Fan, 2009) and can be used to determine writing anxiety levels perceived by either ESL or EFL learners (Cheng, 2004; Guo& Fan, 2009). Consequently, the SLWAI was employed in the current study to establish the level of writing anxiety at three levels: low anxiety, moderate anxiety and high anxiety.

A semi-structured interview was used to gather information on the nature of the anxiety caused by writing a research paper in English and the coping strategies used by EFL participants. The participants' responses in these interviews enabled the current researcher to understand the participants' experiences of being anxious and the contexts of English writing. These EFL participants were then asked to: 1) report the progress of writing their research paper; 2) specify their writing difficulties and reasons for feeling anxious; and 3) identify the coping strategies they used when they were writing a research paper in English.

Data collection

The data collection on writing anxiety was conducted in the second semester of 2008 when four EFL participants were in the first-year of the international PhD program at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand. The SLWAI was administered to investigate changes in writing anxiety. For the semi-structured interviews, each participant was informed about the research purposes, procedures and confidentiality. They then signed a consent form before the data collection. Each participant was individually interviewed in English in the final week to elicit his/her experiences of being anxious and to avoid any influences from the other participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The semi-structured interview lasted for 10-20 minutes. They were also asked to report their causes of anxiety and coping strategies that they used while they were writing a research paper.

Results

Analysis of second language writing anxiety inventory (SLWAI)

The data obtained from the SLWAI revealed the anxiety levels when these participants were writing research papers. The writing anxiety level can be divided into three levels based on the total score of the questionnaire (the total score = 110): *low anxiety* (equal to or lower than 58), *average anxiety* (ranging from 59 to 82), and *high anxiety* (equal to or higher than 83) (Atay & Kurt, 2006, p. 5). Table 3 indicates that there was a slight change in writing anxiety from week 10 to week 14. Only Chai, the male participant, was able to decrease his anxiety significantly when writing a research paper in English.

Table 3: Writing anxiety level

Participants	SLWAI Week 10	Anxiety level	SLWAI Week 14	Anxiety Level
Ping	55	Low anxiety	57	Low anxiety
Suda	50	Low anxiety	48	Low anxiety
Ying	52	Low anxiety	58	Low anxiety
Chai	57	Low anxiety	53	Low anxiety

The results of the SLWAI, as summarized in Table 4, show that these EFL participants did not display avoidance behavior in using English while writing a research paper (Items 5, 6, and 21). Some items (3, 9, 14 and 20) point to the fact that these participants had no strong feelings about having their writing task evaluated or graded by teachers. In addition, these participants did not report any physical

or emotional changes as shown in items 2, 6, 8, 11, and 13 while they were writing a research paper in English.

Table 4: Interpretation of SLWAI

Statement	M_{w10}	Week 10	M_{w14}	Week 14
1. While writing in English, I am not nervous at all.	4.25	Strongly agree	2.75	No strong feeling
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraints.	2.75	No strong feeling	2.00	Disagree
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.	3.00	No strong feeling	2.75	No strong feeling
4. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.	4.25	Strongly agree	3.50	Agree
5. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.	1.00	Strongly disagree	1.50	Strongly disagree
6. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.	1.50	Strongly disagree	1.50	Strongly disagree
7. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others.	2.50	Disagree	3.25	No strong feeling
8. I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions that are a lot worse than others.	3.00	No strong feeling	2.50	Strongly disagree
9. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	3.25	No strong feeling	2.75	No strong feeling
10. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write English.	1.25	Strongly disagree	1.50	Strongly disagree
11. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraints.	2.25	Disagree	1.75	Strongly disagree
12. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write compositions.	1.25	Strongly disagree	1.50	Strongly disagree
13. I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraints.	2.25	Disagree	2.75	No strong feeling
14. I am afraid that the other students would deride my English composition if they read it.	3.00	No strong feeling	3.25	No strong feeling
15. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.	2.50	Disagree	1.50	Strongly disagree
16. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.	1.50	Strongly disagree	3.00	No strong feeling
17. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.	3.25	No strong feeling	3.75	Agree
18. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.	4.00	Agree	2.50	Disagree
19. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.	1.50	Strongly disagree	1.75	Strongly disagree
20. I am afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	1.75	Strongly disagree	2.50	Disagree
21. I am not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.	3.25	No strong feeling	3.00	No strong feeling
22. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions.	4.50	Strongly agree	4.25	Strongly agree

_Notes__: (1.00-1.80 = Strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60 = Disagree; 2.61-3.40 = No strong feeling; 3.41-4.20 = Agree; 4.21-5.0 = Strongly Agree)_

Analysis of factors leading to writing anxiety

The responses obtained from the semi-structured interview were analyzed based on the investigation by Atay & Kurt (2006) to describe how each EFL participant felt about a writing task that they had never done before. The first and second interview questions aimed at finding the difficulties perceived by these participants while they were writing a research paper. The results, as shown in Table 5, reveal that frequent problems with writing a research paper in English were presenting ideas and text organization. Suda also added that she was very anxious because she had no background in language learning theories. Only Ping, the Chinese participant, reported that selecting technical terms used for writing research paper was very difficult since previous researchers and practitioners might interpret key terms differently.

Table 5: Writing difficulties of EFL learners

Difficulties	Ping	Suda	Ying	Chai
Inability to present ideas	--	✓	✓	✓
Inability to organize written texts	✓	--	✓	✓
Lack of background knowledge	--	✓	--	--
Choosing technical terms	✓	--	--	--

Table 6 also shows that writing anxiety was generated by grading and teachers. Ying and Chai were anxious about time limits because they held part-time jobs as university teachers. Two participants, Ping and Suda, mentioned that they wanted to achieve their self-expectations, namely, trying to write a good research paper for scholarly publication.

Table 6: Causes of writing anxiety

Factors	Ping	Suda	Ying	Chai
Teachers	--	✓	✓	✓
Time limits	--	--	✓	✓
Grade/Evaluation	✓	✓	--	✓
Self expectation	✓	✓	--	--

Analysis of coping strategies

The participants were asked to report what they did when they were anxious about writing this research paper in English. The interview data were then transcribed and analyzed based on Leki's framework of ESL coping strategies for writing (1995). Table 7 provides a summary of coping strategies used by EFL postgraduate students in this study. The results show that the strategies these EFL participants frequently used were *focusing strategies* and *stopping writing*. Both Suda and Ying reported using *talking with friends* to get moral support and to find out what the others were doing.

Table 7: Coping strategies used by the four EFL participants

Coping Strategies	Participants	Transcription
1.Clarifiying Strategies	—	—
2. Focusing Strategies	**Suda:**	"When I have any difficulties, <u>I will read and read more</u>. I <u>read and try absorb try to understand it</u>"
	Ping:	"I will stop and go to <u>read more about it</u>"
	Ying:	"<u>Maybe reread anything that related to my study</u> but when I'm anxious. I cannot do my work"
3. Relying on past writing experiences	—	—
4. Taking advantage of first language/culture	—	—
5. Using current experience or feedback	**Ping:**	"… I stop and keep thinking <u>and get feedback from my teacher on the first draft</u>".
6. Looking for models	—	—
7. Using current or past ESL writing training	—	—
8. Accommodating teacher's demands	—	—
9. Resisting teacher's demands	—	—
10. Managing competing demands	—	—
11. Other(s) • Stopping writing research paper • Talking with friends	**Suda:** **Ping:** **Ying:** **Chai:**	"If it is too much for me, <u>I ignore it</u>. I cannot pay attention to it. So <u>I have to leave it</u> for a while". "So <u>I like to ask the other what they are doing</u> but it does not mean I want to compare but I don't like getting behind. <u>If I know my friends have done a lot of things, I will have anxiety because it helps me to catch up</u>" "<u>I stop</u>. If I cannot write, sometimes <u>we need to stop</u> because your ideas are not available". "…<u>go to consult</u> also <u>talk to my friends</u>. We cannot finish early". "The first thing I do when I'm anxious. I <u>will stop doing this project</u> and doing something else if I have time." "<u>Stop doing it</u> for a while is good but I can't because it's already close to the due date. Sometimes <u>I share feeling with the others</u>." "Rest. <u>Take a rest, stop doing it</u> for a while but actually you cannot forget it because it will haunt you"

Analysis of overall results

In the present study, the overall picture shows that there was a mismatch between the SLWAI results and the interview data. These EFL participants were not concerned with English writing and their written tasks being evaluated by teachers. The participants' responses, conversely, describe the causes of writing anxiety (e.g. teachers and grading) and the writing difficulties (e.g. inability to present ideas and text organization) that they had encountered when writing a research paper in English. The mismatched data obtained from the SLWAI and semi-structured interviews will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion and Conclusion

This preliminary study attempted to find out the level of writing anxiety perceived by EFL postgraduate students and coping strategies that they used when writing research papers in English. The results show that all the participants had low anxiety when they were writing their research papers, and there was a slight change in writing anxiety level between weeks 10 and 14. On some items in the SLWAI, these participants had no strong feelings when their written tasks were evaluated or compared with others. The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews, however, reveal that the factors leading to writing anxiety were teachers and grading. One possible explanation is that all the first-year postgraduate students were required to earn a GPA of 3.25 or higher to avoid academic probation. For the writing difficulties, these EFL participants reported that they worried about how to organize written texts and how to present their ideas in the research papers. Previous studies on English writing (e.g. Atay & Kurt, 2006; Cheung, 2010; Flowerdew, 1999) also point out that non-native speakers of English have problems with word choice, grammatical structures, and less facility of expression when writing a research paper in English.

The results of coping strategies used by EFL postgraduate students reveal that they used *focusing strategies* and *using current experience or feedback strategy* to guide them in writing a research paper in English. Other strategies used by EFL learners were *to stop writing* and *to talk with their friends*. These two new categories of coping strategies may be added to Leki's original framework (1995). However, the limitation is that the original categorization was based on how non-native speakers of English achieved their written tasks, whereas the present study focused on ways to help them manage their anxiety when writing research papers in English.

The overall results of the current study show the mismatched findings between the SLWAI and the semi-structured interview. The questionnaire used in this study did not provide adequate information on their worries and writing experiences. For example, the participants reported that they had no strong feeling of being evaluated by teachers. In contrast, the data from the semi-structured interview enabled the researcher to verify the results obtained from the questionnaires and to illustrate a comprehensive understanding of the analyzed data and the contexts of what factors contributed to writing anxiety as perceived by the EFL learners and how they dealt with anxiety when writing a research paper in English.

As a final note, I may say that the study was limited by the small number of participants; therefore, the results may not be representative of all EFL learners. The coping strategies should be followed up in a real-time situation when participants are doing written tasks. Further studies on coping strategies for English writing should take research methodology and the analysis framework into account because they may influence the whole procedure of data collection and data analysis.

Acknowledgements

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Biodata

Montarat Rungruangthum is a PhD. candidate in Applied Linguistics at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, under the program Strategic Scholarships for Frontier Research Network. Her research interests are linguistics and social psychology. Currently, she is conducting research on cyber deception by Thai internet users. She can be reached at lect.montarat@gmail.com