

# Causes and Intervention of Academic Writing Anxiety Among Graduate Students in Chinese Universities

WANG Guirong

Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China

The paper reports the findings of an empirical study whose main purpose is to explore ways to relieve English academic writing anxiety among non-English major graduate students in China over the course of one semester. The results of this research indicate that the comprehensive teaching methods the author has adopted are very effective.

*Keywords:* anxiety, academic writing, graduate students, causes, intervention

## Introduction

The rapid internationalization of higher education has positioned academic English writing as a critical skill for graduate students in China, particularly those aiming to publish in international journals or engage in global scholarly exchanges. However, numerous studies have found that Chinese graduate students frequently experience significant anxiety when confronted with English academic writing tasks. This phenomenon, termed Academic English Writing Anxiety (AEWA), manifests as emotional distress, self-doubt, and avoidance behaviors, potentially hindering academic productivity and future career development.

This article will commence with anxiety within the realm of emotional factors as its starting point and explore how teachers can help students reduce anxiety in English academic writing based on Krashen's affective filtering hypothesis. Hopefully, this research will offer some insights into the teaching of English academic writing in Chinese universities.

## Literature Review

The study of anxiety began in the 1970s when Brown (1973) first used the term “affective domain”, arguing that anxiety is the biggest affective obstacle in language learning. Then, in 1987, Horwitz first proposed that foreign language learning anxiety was a separate and special phenomenon in the process of foreign language learning (Zhai & Liu, 2012). Moreover, he constructed “Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale”, which provides a useful tool for the numerous qualitative studies in the field of foreign language anxiety by later researchers. On the whole, the study of language study anxiety abroad lays its emphasis on its concept, theoretical background, modification of the scale, its influence on students' learning results, and its correlation with other types of anxiety.

Domestic study on anxiety started in the mid-1980s with the publication of Ling Wenshan's paper entitled “The Measurement and Analysis on the Testing Anxiety of Chinese College Students with TAI Scale” on

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WANG Guirong, Ph.D., associate researcher, School of Agriculture and Biology, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China.

Psychological Bulletin. In this paper, Ling mainly analyzes the five factors contributing to the language learning anxiety of Chinese college students from psychological and neurological perspectives. Later, anxiety research in China is mainly reviews of anxiety studies at home and abroad. In brief, domestic academic writing teaching research mainly focuses on teaching strategies.

Taken together, the findings of prior studies on anxiety are rather general and theoretical and few studies systematically investigate the unique challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in English academic writing. In view of this, this study aims to:

1. examine the primary sources of AEWA among Chinese graduate students across disciplines;
2. propose pedagogical interventions tailored to this demographic.

### **Theoretical Basis**

This research is based on the “Affective Filter” Hypothesis put forward by Krashen (1985) and “Foreign Language Anxiety” model of Horwitz.

According to Krashen, “affective filter” refers to the emotional barriers that prevent learners from fully digesting and absorbing language input during the language learning process. The term “emotional barrier” refers to the resistance of learners to learning a second or foreign language due to certain psychological factors. Krashen compares the emotional state of learners to a filter, through which all language inputs must pass in order to be learned by learners. The smaller the role of emotional filtering, the better the effect of second language acquisition.

Horwitz’s “Foreign Language Anxiety” model consists of three parts (E. K. Horwitz, M. B. H. Horwitz, & Cope, 1986):

1. fear of communication, which stems from learners’ inability to fully express their mature thoughts and views;
2. fear of negative social evaluation, which originates from learners’ need to give others a positive social impression;
3. test anxiety or fear of exams. Many other researchers have also conducted in-depth research on foreign language anxiety.

The conclusion of all these studies is that foreign language anxiety must be distinguished from other types of anxiety and that it has a negative impact on language learning.

### **Research Design**

#### **Subjects of Study**

As the author teaches graduate students of various majors the course of English academic writing in a Chinese university, the 80 students of the author’s two classes are taken as subjects for this study.

#### **Method**

The author conducted action research on the two classes of 80 students throughout a semester. At the beginning of the semester, the author designed a questionnaire based on Horwitz’s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), aiming to measure students’ English academic writing anxiety, which includes ideational anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and self-confidence anxiety, with a total of 22 questions.

The questionnaire is compiled on wjx.cn (an online survey platform) and delivered to all the subjects through WeChat (a popular social app). The survey indicates that 78% of the subjects are in mid anxiety level or up to high anxiety level. Moreover, the frequency of cognitive anxiety in high or middle anxiety is 70%, of ideational

anxiety is 78%, and of self-confidence anxiety is 89%.

To explore the reasons for the subjects' high anxiety level, the author interviews 10 subjects personally and finds that although all these subjects have already attained the required English level, they are still intimidated by English academic writing tasks mainly for the following reasons:

1. Personal factors:

(a) Language ability: Lack of proficiency in academic English and limited exposure to authentic academic writing contexts in prior education;

(b) Perfectionism tendency: The meticulous pursuit of writing quality is positively correlated with procrastination in and fear of English academic writing;

(c) Academic experience: Students who lack knowledge of discipline-specific writing conventions (such as literature citation and logical construction) are more anxious.

2. Outside factors:

(a) Tutor feedback: Vague or negative evaluation tends to lead to reduced self-efficacy;

(b) Pressure to meet institutional publication requirements in English: All the subjects are under the pressure of the "publish or perish" mentality;

(c) Lack of support system: The absence of a writing center or peer support group renders the subjects helpless when confronted with difficulties in English academic writing.

### Pre-test

Before the experiment, the author conducted a pre-test of anxiety in the two classes to test whether students have English academic writing anxiety and whether there is any difference in anxiety between the two classes. The results showed that the average anxiety values of the experimental group and the control group were 83.802 and 84.139 respectively, and the standard deviations were 11.528 and 12.142. The data of the two groups were very close, and there was no significant difference between them. Furthermore, upon comparing the two sets of data, the author found that, out of the total score of 100 for the assessment questions, the average anxiety level of both groups of students was around 84, indicating that not only did both groups have anxiety in English academic writing, but also to a considerable extent.

In addition, the significance probability of the independent-samples *f*-test was 0.872 ( $P > 0.05$ ), indicating that there was no significant difference in anxiety level between the students of the two classes prior to the experiment. Therefore, the research results obtained from the comparative experiment conducted on the two groups of students are reliable.

### Intervention Measures

In view of the factors mentioned above, the author implemented the following intervention measures in the experimental group to help relieve the students' anxiety in English academic writing.

1. Divide the whole writing process into outline, draft, revision, and other stages to reduce task difficulty;

2. Provide clear oral and written instructions to enable students to complete tasks more efficiently and reduce anxiety on the basis of understanding expectations of them;

3. Help students build learning scaffold by using sentence frames, sentence starting words and vocabulary bank in order that they can express their thoughts and ideas with more ease;

4. Set feasible personal goals for students, record the completion of goals, and give timely affirmation and encouragement to students for their progress;

5. Require students to revise their drafts according to instructors' suggestions until they can attain a satisfactory final paper;
6. Employ peer review and coauthor system to enhance students' confidence;
7. Provide institutional support, such as writing communities for students.

### Post-test

**Comparison between the experimental group and the control group.** After the experiment, the author conducted a post-test on the anxiety level of the students in the two classes. The results showed that after the experiment, the English academic writing anxiety of the students in both the experimental group and the control group decreased. The difference is that the average anxiety value of the students in the experimental group was about 42, far lower than that of the control group of 68. In addition, the significance probability of independent sample *t*-test was 0.001 ( $P < 0.05$ ). This indicates that there is a significant difference in anxiety between the two classes after the experiment, which proves that the intervention measures the author implemented are fairly effective in reducing the students' anxiety in English academic writing.

**Comparison of the pretest and post-test of the experimental group.** By analyzing the pre-test and post test data of the experimental group, it is obvious that the average anxiety value of students has decreased by over 41 points compared with the previous one. Similarly, the statistical results of the independent sample test show that the significant probability of the pre-test and post-test anxiety of the experimental group is 0.002, which is far less than the significant level of 0.05, indicating that there is a significant difference in the pre-test and post-test anxiety values of the experimental group. It can be seen that compared with the traditional teaching mode, the intervention measures the author adopted have a significant effect on reducing students' English academic writing anxiety.

The research results indicate that non-English major graduate students exhibit significant English academic writing anxiety. This emotional anxiety can exacerbate students' learning fear and pressure, leading to their resistance towards English academic writing. The author has demonstrated through the teaching experiment that the comprehensive measures the author has tried are worth trying as they have proved helpful and effective in reducing students' English academic writing anxiety.

### Conclusion

The study is an in-depth empirical exploration of the teaching of English academic writing through a teaching experiment. The results showed that non-English major graduate students in China exhibited significant English academic writing anxiety. The intervention measures the author proposed have a positive effect on reducing students' English academic writing anxiety. Given the limitations of time and conditions, there are still some shortcomings in this study, such as a slightly short research duration and the relatively small number of research subjects. It is hoped that future researchers can address these limitations and further studies in this field.

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