

Gender Differences and the Influence of Writing Anxiety Factors on Iraqi Postgraduate's Attitudes

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Abstract— This study aimed to examine the levels of the three factors of writing anxiety (somatic, avoidance behavior, and cognitive) and to identify which factor causes more writing anxiety to Iraqi English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Quantitative approach was used in this research on 100 Iraqi postgraduate students at the National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia). The sample included 50 male students and 50 female students aged between 20 and 40 years old. One instrument was used for data collection; the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory developed by Cheng (2004). The results of the study revealed that Iraqi EFL students are influenced by all the three aforementioned factors, but the somatic and cognitive anxiety factors have less impact on Iraqi students compared to the avoidance behavior anxiety factor which had higher impact. Furthermore, the results demonstrated a significant difference between male and female students regarding writing anxiety, in which female students' experienced greater amount of anxiety than male students. This indicates that the effect of anxiety on the attitudes of female students occurred more greatly than male students. The avoidance behavior factor was the most influence on female participants compared to the other two factors, namely, somatic and cognitive which had less influence. This indicates that Iraqi EFL students have a tendency to avoid the situations that require writing. This study recommends that Iraqi EFL students need to enhance their self-confidence to decrease their anxiety generally and avoidance behavior anxiety in particular.

Index Terms—Avoidance behavior anxiety, Cognitive anxiety, Gender, Iraqi students, Somatic anxiety.

I. INTRODUCTION

The need to learn English language is highly in demand for people whose mother tongue is not English language. Some

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Asian countries in general and Arab countries in particular, English is not broadly used for communication or interaction, but it is mainly the language of higher education. In general, Iraqi students have some difficulties in learning English language skills, namely, speaking, writing, listening, and reading, whereby they face impediments in applying these skills due to the very little use of English in their countries (Sabti et al., 2016). Such students may lose their self-confidence and motivation, which may provoke their anxiety. Some academics endorsed this view that anxiety has been recognized as the main factor that may hinder students' academic performance (Latif, 2007; Sabti, 2013).

In the content of investigating the writing skill of Iraqi postgraduate students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), most students show unsatisfactory performance in writing. Most of Iraqi English as a foreign language (EFL) learners were observed to have an inadequate competence in EFL writing (Abbas, 2016). The difficulty of Iraqi EFL students in EFL writing may be ascribed to various factors, dubbed EFL writing instruction, negative feedback, the interference of L1, and some psychological variables, that is, anxiety, loss of motivation, and self-confidence. Anxiety, which is the focus of this study, is considered one of the key predictors of academic performance (Senko, 2016). Anxiety variable has been examined in relation to the four English language skills: Speaking (Hertz et al., 2016), reading (Sabti et al., 2016), listening (Lili, 2016), and writing (Challob et al., 2016; Cheng, 2004). In this light, this study focuses on writing anxiety.

Writing anxiety is defined as an emotional factor which frequently drives to a complex state of feeling that results in physical and psychological alterations that influence thought and behavior of an individual in writing. Research studies in L1 context show that anxiety has an adverse effect on individuals' writing outcome (Leki, 1990). One of the most prominent scholars who examined second/foreign language anxiety is Horwitz et al., in which they alleged that learners with high language anxiety study more than their counterparts who have low language anxiety, but the level of their achievement does not reflect that effort (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Writing anxiety has been constituted with three factors, dubbed somatic anxiety (physiological one), cognitive anxiety,

and avoidance behavior anxiety (Cheng, 2004). Cognitive anxiety denotes a “mental aspect of anxiety experience, including negative expectations, preoccupation with performance, and concern about other’s perceptions; whereas somatic anxiety refers to one’s perception of the physiological effects of the anxiety experience, as reflected in increased autonomic arousal and unpleasant feeling states such as nervousness and tension” (Cheng, 2004, p. 316). As for avoidance behavior anxiety, it is an attempt of a student to escape from a task that demands writing.

Most results are consistent regarding the negative effect of anxiety on individuals’ academic performance. However, the research about gender-related anxiety has yielded conflicting results. In 1991, a study conducted by Mejias et al. (1991) revealed that Hispanic male participants showed higher anxiety than female participants. Similarly, but during this decade, Jibreil et al. (2015) reported that Iranian EFL male students experienced relatively greater amount of anxiety than female students. However, a study was undertaken by Machida (2001) who investigated that EFL Japanese language class anxiety across gender showed otherwise, which revealed that female students were more anxious than male students. By the same token, in 1994, Aida also reported that female participants were observed to score more highly on the anxiety scale than male ones.

Many studies have been conducted on writing anxiety, but it may be said that no single study has examined the three aforementioned factors of writing anxiety across genders of Iraqi EFL students in particular. Therefore, this study seeks to identify which factor between somatic, avoidance behavior, and cognitive anxiety factors causes more writing anxiety to Iraqi postgraduate students in UKM. In this study, gender takes a significant place, which is examined to determine the attitudes between female and male participants of Iraqi EFL students toward the three aforementioned factors.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Participants

The sample of this research involved 100 Iraqi postgraduate students, 50 male students and 50 female students from different faculties, studying at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). The rationale for selecting this number of the participants was based on the limited number of Iraqi postgraduate students studying at UKM in the first semester 2018/2019. In this regard, Krejcie and Morgan (1970) recommended that 100 students should participate in any study that has 150–170 students as the whole population. Simple random sampling method was used to select participants who have an equal and independent chance of being included in this study.

B. Instrument

A quantitative approach was applied in this research. One instrument was used, namely, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) which involves three independent factors: Cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety (physiological), and avoidance behavior anxiety. This questionnaire consists of 22 items to measure the English as a second language/EFL writing anxiety and

scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), which was employed to identify the most factor among somatic, avoidance behavior, and cognitive anxiety that causes more writing anxiety to the participants. Cheng’s (2004) questionnaire was translated into Arabic language to facilitate the understanding of the questionnaire items by the participants (Appendix A).

C. Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software was used to analyze the quantitative data using descriptive and inferential statistics. The former is applied to determine the levels of somatic anxiety, avoidance behavior anxiety, and cognitive anxiety among Iraqi EFL postgraduate students, whereas the latter is used to identify the differences between the three aforementioned factors of writing anxiety across the genders, in which independent samples *t*-test was run to do so.

III. RESULTS

This study seeks to examine the levels of the three factors of writing anxiety (somatic, avoidance behavior, and cognitive) among Iraqi EFL students. Table I shows the results of the mean scores and standard deviation.

As shown in Table I, Iraqi EFL students recorded higher scores on avoidance behavior anxiety factor ($M = 4.15$, standard deviation [SD] = 0.493) compared to the other two factors. The students showed similar mean scores for the factors of cognitive anxiety and somatic anxiety (cognitive anxiety: $M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.497$; somatic anxiety: $M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.444$). It can be said that the Iraqi EFL students are influenced by all the three factors, but the somatic and cognitive anxiety factors have less impact on Iraqi students compared to the avoidance behavior anxiety factor which had higher impact. This indicates that Iraqi EFL students have a strong desire to avoid situations that demand writing. In other words, this can be interpreted that Iraqi EFL students feel apprehensive and unconfident in their writing abilities.

A. Differences between the Three Factors of Writing Anxiety across the Genders

Independent samples *t*-test is used to identify the differences between the three factors of writing anxiety across the genders. Tables II and III display the results of somatic anxiety factor across the genders.

As shown in Table II, overall female students ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.273$) scored higher than male students ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.234$). Based on Table III, the results of independent samples *t*-test show that $P = 0.000$ is smaller than alpha at 0.05 level of significance. Since the significant

TABLE I
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF WRITING ANXIETY LEVELS ACROSS THE THREE FACTORS

Factors	<i>n</i>	M	Standard deviation
Cognitive anxiety	100	3.50	0.497
Avoidance behavior anxiety	100	4.15	0.493
Somatic anxiety	100	3.58	0.444

value is smaller than alpha at 0.05 level of significance, there is a statistically significant difference between male and female students. In other words, the homogeneity of variance is significant ($0.000 < 0.05$). It can be concluded that there is a significant difference between female and male students' mean scores of the somatic anxiety factor. The next tables (Tables IV and V) illustrate the results related to the cognitive anxiety factor across the genders.

Overall female students ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.353$) also scored higher than male students ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.390$). Based on the results of independent samples *t*-test shown in Table V, $P = 0.000$ is also smaller than 0.05. As the significant value is smaller than alpha at 0.05 level of significance, there is also a statistically significant difference between male and female students. It can be concluded that there is a significant difference between female and male students' mean scores of the cognitive anxiety factor. Following are Tables VI and VII which show the results of the avoidance behavior anxiety factor across the genders.

The results of Table VI indicate that female students ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.400$) scored slightly higher than male students ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.474$). The results of Table VII demonstrate that $P = 0.000$ is also smaller than 0.05, and thus, there is also a statistically significant difference between male and female students. It can be inferred that there is a significant difference between female and male students' mean scores of the avoidance behavior anxiety factor.

Based on the *t*-test results, female students recorded higher scores on the three factors than male students. This means that the Iraqi female students feel more anxious toward writing compared to male students. Besides that, both genders recorded higher scores on avoidance behavior anxiety than the other two factors.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed a significant difference between male and female students regarding writing anxiety. Specifically, female students experienced greater amount of anxiety than male students. In this respect, the findings of this study provide parallel evidence with the findings of Sadighi et al. (2009), which revealed that the female students had higher anxiety than male counterparts. Yet, the findings of this study are in sharp contrast to what was reported by Jebreil et al. (2015) and Na (2007) who pointed out that the male students were more anxious than female students. This indicates that the effect of anxiety on the attitudes of female students occurred more greatly than male students.

The findings of this study also demonstrated that avoidance behavior anxiety factor was the most type of writing anxiety influenced Iraqi EFL postgraduate students. Specifically, the Iraqi EFL students had a moderate level at the two factors, namely, somatic and cognitive anxiety factors, but the avoidance behavior anxiety factor was at the higher level. These findings corroborate the findings of a study undertaken by Jebreil et al. (2015) which reported that all Iranian EFL students had moderate to high level at the three factors. Yet, the cognitive anxiety factor was at the higher level in their

TABLE II
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF SOMATIC ANXIETY FACTOR

Gender	<i>n</i>	M	Standard deviation
Male	50	3.22	0.234
Female	50	3.95	0.273

TABLE III
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES *T*-TEST OF SOMATIC ANXIETY FACTOR

Factor name	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -test for equality of means		
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (two tailed)
Somatic anxiety					
Equal variances assumed	1.000	0.320	-14.239	98	0.000
Equal variances not assumed			-14.239	95.805	0.000

TABLE IV
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF COGNITIVE ANXIETY FACTOR

Gender	<i>n</i>	M	Standard deviation
Male	50	3.17	0.390
Female	50	3.83	0.353

TABLE V
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES *T*-TEST OF COGNITIVE ANXIETY FACTOR

Factor name	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -test for equality of means		
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (two tailed)
Cognitive anxiety					
Equal variances assumed	0.612	0.436	-8.901	98	0.000
Equal variances not assumed			-8.901	97.029	0.000

TABLE VI
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOR ANXIETY FACTOR

Gender	<i>n</i>	M	Standard deviation
Male	50	3.72	0.474
Female	50	4.18	0.400

TABLE VII
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES *T*-TEST OF AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOR ANXIETY FACTOR

Factor name	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -test for equality of means		
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (two tailed)
Avoidance behavior anxiety					
Equal variances assumed	0.810	0.370	-5.169	98	0.000
Equal variances not assumed			-5.169	95.301	0.000

study, whereas the avoidance behavior anxiety factor was at the higher level in this study.

Iraqi EFL students could be reluctant to participate in activities involving writing, in which this led to the high level of avoidance behavior anxiety. This is supported by Hamouda (2013) who reported that reluctance is a crucial element that

may cause avoidance behavior. Specifically, reluctance to participate in writing activities often creates anxiety and leads to lack of self-confidence that may steer to unfavorable behavior in writing. Hence, it is necessary for Iraqi EFL students to be aware of the massive impact of anxiety on their performance in writing and avoidance behavior anxiety in particular.

Teachers need to take anxiety variable into account to make their students aware of this negative element. In this case, most Iraqi EFL students can overcome their difficulties in EFL writing, which may drive them to develop their competency that could lead to an exemplary behavior in writing. Based on this, the current study offers some valuable implications. First, teachers should provide more comfortable and supportive learning environment for their students. Second, teachers should attempt to help their students overcome anxiety but not completely because several studies point out that anxiety sometimes operates a positive element and can stimulate learners to put in great efforts on learning.

Several limitations have been recognized in this study. First, the findings of this research cannot be generalized to all Iraqi EFL learners due to the limited number of students participated in this study. Second, one instrument was used in this study, namely, SLWAI, and it would be more comprehensive if other instruments are employed such as interviews, classroom observations, or diaries to give more accurate results. On the whole, the present study is a preliminary attempt to examine the anxiety variable among Iraqi EFL learners. Future investigations need to corroborate the findings of this study to explore anxiety-arousing factors and provide techniques that can reduce anxiety to facilitate the process of language learning and teaching.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings extracted from this study show that Iraqi students attained a higher level at the avoidance behavior anxiety factor compared to the other two factors: Somatic and cognitive. This indicates that the Iraqi students have low linguistic knowledge in English which led to a higher level of anxiety in EFL writing. Some academics assert that second/foreign language learners may recompense their lack of comprehension in the target language by avoiding communication with others (Gonen, 2007; Armendaris, 2009). Thus, it is imperative for Iraqi EFL students to adopt the technique of social activities which could facilitate the second/foreign language acquisition. This may help Iraqi students adopt approach behavior instead of avoidance behavior. Iraqi students need more exposure to EFL writing, which can enhance their self-confidence, and reducing their anxiety that may improve their writing skills which may highly steer to a satisfactory performance in writing.

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APPENDIX A

SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING ANXIETY INVENTORY –LIKERT SCALE

Value	1	2	3	4	5
Answer	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree

PLEASE TICK (✓) THE APPROPRIATE ANSWER WHICH BEST SUITS FOR YOU

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	While writing in English, I am not nervous at all لا اشعر بالقلق على الاطلاق عندما اكتب باللغة الانجليزية					
2	I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint اشعر بزيادة نبضات قلبي عندما اكتب الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية وانا تحت ضغط الوقت					
3	While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated اشعر بالقلق وعدم الارتياح عندما اكتب الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية حينما اعلم انه سيتم تقييمها					
4	I often choose to write down my thoughts in English في الغالب أدون افكاري باللغة الانكليزية					
5	I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions في الغالب ابذل قصارى جهدي لتجنب كتابة الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية					
6	My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition تتلاشى كل افكاري عندما ابدأ بكتابة الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية					
7	I do not worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others لا اكثرث عندما تكون كتاباتي الانشائية باللغة الانجليزية اسوأ بكثير من كتابات اقراني					
8	I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure اشعر بالارتجاف او التعرق عندما اكتب الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية وانا تحت ضغط الوقت					
9	If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade اشعر بالقلق إزاء حصولي على درجة واطنة جداً اذا ما تم تقييم الانشاء الذي كتبت باللغة الانجليزية					
10	I do my best to avoid situations, in which I have to write in English ابذل قصارى جهدي لتفادي المواقف التي اضطر فيها الى الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية					
11	My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint تضطرب افكاري عندما اكتب الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية وانا تحت ضغط الوقت					
12	Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write compositions لا استخدم اللغة الانجليزية لكتابة الانشاء ما لم اكن مضطراً لذلك					
13	I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint غالباً ما اشعر بالهلع عندما اكتب الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية تحت ضغط الوقت					
14	I am afraid that the other students would deride my English composition if they read it اخشى ان يسخر الطلاب الاخرون من كتابتي الانشائية باللغة الانجليزية عندما يقرونها					
15	I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions اشعر بالتجمد عندما يطلب مني بصورة مفاجأة ان اكتب الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية					
16	I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions ابذل قصارى جهدي لإيجاد الاعذار لنفسي عندما يطلب مني ان اكتب الانشاء باللغة الانجليزية					
17	I do not worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions. لا اشعر بالحرص على الاطلاق من رأي الاخرين عن كتابتي الانشائية باللغة الانجليزية					
18	I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class غالباً ما انتهرز اي فرصة ممكنة لكتابة الانشاء باللغة الانكليزية خارج الصف					
19	I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions غالباً ما اشعر بالتشنج والتوتر عندما اكتب الانشاء باللغة الانكليزية					
20	I am afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class اخشى ان يتم اختيار انشائي باللغة الانجليزية كنموذج لنقاشه في الصف					
21	I am not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor لا اخشى على الاطلاق من تقييم كتاباتي الانشائية باللغة الانجليزية على انها ضعيفة جداً					
22	Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions استخدم اللغة الانجليزية لكتابة الانشاء متى ما كان ذلك ممكناً					