Investigation of Second Language Writing Anxiety Among ESL Students in Public University

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ABSTRACT

In order to achieve quality education in English especially writing skills, comprehension of Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA) needs to be investigated. Hence, the study aims to analyse SLWA among ESL students at public universities. The study's specific goals are to answer the following questions: (1) What factors contribute to SLWA?, (2) What impact does SLWA have on students' academic writing abilities? and (3) What are some suggestions to reduce SLWA? 103 Diploma (70 females, 33 males) students from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Samarahan Campus, participated in the study. A questionnaire was shared via Google Forms. The findings depicted a total of 54.3% (n = 56) of the pupils expressed their utmost anxiety about their peers and the teacher's negative evaluations. Despite their SLWA, 71.8% (n=74) of students mentioned they still looked forward to writing down their ideas. 86.4% (n=89) of the students had a positive view that the teacher should make

it clears what the format and style of the essays would be before instructing the class to write them. Students still want to continue writing activities despite their SLWA with detailed guidance from their English lecturers.

Keywords: *Second Language Writing Anxiety; English as Second Language (ESL); Writing Skills*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a cognitive-linguistic activity that calls for using higher-order thinking abilities to organise ideas (Erkan & Saban, 2011). Organising ideas makes writing an easier process as it ensures the flow of thoughts makes sense. This is similar to how authors encode their ideas using the features of language such as vocabulary, spelling, syntax, and grammar, language expertise which is essential in communicating a thought (Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017). Writers who lack fundamental writing skills worry about impairing their writing performance. When writers' language and cognition are not met, their minds experience a feeling of unpleasantness and discomfort that is sometimes referred to as writing anxiety. Due to the reciprocal relationship between language and cognition, a deficit in any one of these would hinder the writing process due to raised anxiety levels.

The significance of high-quality education for students has been emphasized by Sustainable Development Goal 4.0. in ensuring the quality of English as Second Language (ESL) education in higher education is achieved, university students need to master writing skills by eliminating Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA). Academic writing requires the comprehension of great linguistic knowledge such as writing conventions, choice of vocabulary, and grammar. ESL students are known to struggle with this because the idea of success in writing is typically related to self-expression, easy flow of ideas, fulfilling outsider expectations, rising confidence, and love of ESL academic writing (Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002). As a result of this intricacy, students often experience anxiety when asked to write an essay because they lack confidence in their ability to do so in the target language. This lack of confidence stems from a variety of issues which has discouraged students from writing in the English language.

In Malaysia, university students who write essays or theses must possess a specific degree of language competence which would be assessed by using The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Figure 1
CEFR Targets for Each Stage of Malaysian Education (MOE, 2020)
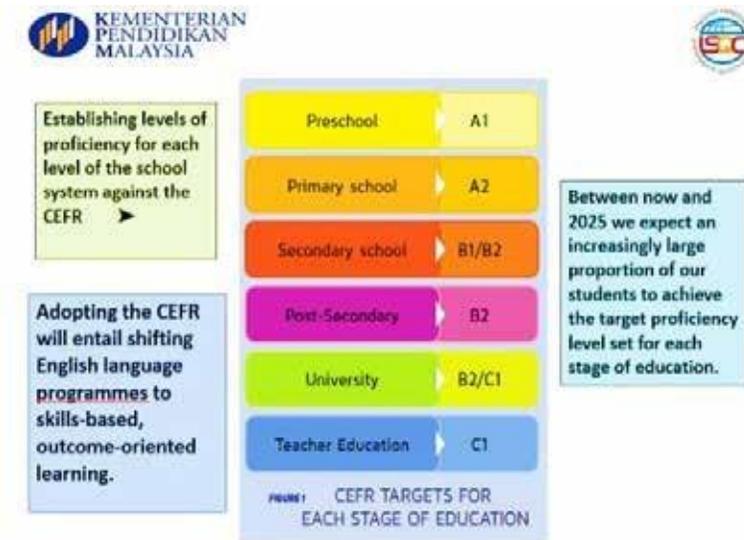
According to the Ministry of Education (MOE) (2020), university students should have mastered English at B2 or C1 CEFR level after going through at least 13 years of learning English since preschool. Since CEFR is employed widely in the world to assess the level of English mastery; it would measure the English level of Malaysian students with other international students. Therefore, the students' performance is reflected validly via CEFR.

There are various studies related to SLWA such as challenges in writing skills (Moses & Mohamad, 2019) collaborative writing (Veramuthu & Shah, 2020), academic and literacy adaptation (Park, 2019), and students' perception of ESL activities (Fauzi et al., 2022). Since most of the studies focus on SLWA as a subcategory of ESL challenges, this study would investigate the concerns by focusing on SLWA as its theoretical underpinning. Hence, the study aims to investigate SLWA among ESL

students in public universities. Specifically, the research questions of the study are i) What are the causes of writing anxiety among university students? ii) What are the effects of second language writing anxiety (SLWA) towards the students' academic writing performance? and iii) What are the suggested possible solutions to decrease SLWA among ESL students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the studies on second language anxiety, especially on second language writing anxiety concerning its definition, causes, effects and possible solutions to be practised during writing lessons in the ESL classroom.

Definition of SLWA

One of the most extensively researched factors in language learning is learning anxiety. SLWA is defined as a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system during the process of learning to write a second language (Daud et al.,2016; Sabti et al., 2019). For example, they could not perform well as their self-motivation and self-efficacy declined in writing ESL. Consequently, second language learners intuitively believe that SLWA has a negative impact on their Second Language (L2) learning.

Causes of SLWA

Writing is an emotional and cognitive activity that involves the students' thinking and feeling while they are writing. Second language writing is also considered a complex system of social, cultural, and contextual factors and of the learners' individual characteristics, such as institutional requirements, parental or social expectations, teaching and evaluation procedures, motivation, personality, self-confidence, learner's beliefs, L2 proficiency and even gender and years in school (Cheng, 2008).

Studies found that most language learners experience difficulties performing in the target language as a result of uneasy feelings (Kondo & Ling, 2004; Marwan, 2007; Hussein, 2010). They dislike learning the target

language, which will undoubtedly have a negative impact on how well they perform in the language (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Andrade & Williams, 2009; Tuncay & Uzunboylu, 2010). To illustrate further, a study that was conducted by Rezaei and Jafari (2014) that looked into causes of writing anxiety in Iranian EFL students discovered that the teachers' critical feedback, high expectations, low self-confidence, and inadequate linguistic proficiency were to blame for the pupils' high levels of cognitive anxiety. Furthermore, the types of criticism writers receive for their writing will probably have a direct emotional impact on them (Hyland, 2003). For instance, providing pertinent, thorough, and effective feedback with encouraging remarks might improve L2 writing ability and lessen anxiety. ESL learners may develop a fear of negative evaluation because writing involves both the academic and personal evaluations made by students based on their performance and competence in the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) and occurs in any social, evaluative situation, such as receiving a teacher's negative feedback or error correction on the compositions.

ESL writers frequently bear the burden of learning to write in English; in particular, they themselves recognize language difficulties, such as a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, as their primary issues with English writing and as the main sources of their frustration when they are unable to express their ideas effectively and correctly in English which is supported by Hassan (2001). In his studies, he found that ESL students may develop anxiety when they write in English due to poor skill development, inadequate role models, lack of understanding of the composing process, and an authoritative, teacher-centred, product-based model of teaching. He stressed that self-confidence is extremely important in determining students' affective responses to writing tasks. Some studies showed that no matter how skilled or capable individuals are in writing, if they believe they will do poorly or if they do not want to take courses that stress writing, then their skills or capabilities matter little (Hassan, 2001).

Other causes, such as time, topic, and language might be influencing the students' poor ESL writing skills (Hyland, 2003). They may struggle to express their ideas in appropriate and correct English due to an inadequate grasp of vocabulary and grammar which leads them to feel frustrated and anxious when they are asked to write a composition. Furthermore, the knowledge schemata assumed or demanded of language learners may also

impact how they feel about the writing tasks. When given writing assignments, students with relevant and sufficient topical expertise can generally be counted on to respond positively. Meanwhile, students without such understanding may experience significant anxiety and nervousness.

Effects of SLWA on writing performance

The majority of studies on language have found a link between performance and language anxiety that is negative (Hassan, 2001; Cheng, 2004). Hassan (2001) concluded that low-anxiety students generated higher-quality compositions than their high-anxiety peers using both the Writing Quality and Quantity Tasks. Shorter and simpler writings are more likely to be produced by anxious writers. Two effects of L2 writing anxiety were consistently observed in earlier studies on second language anxiety: suffering related to writing and a strong aversion to the activity (Hassan, 2001; Cheng, 2004). For instance, studies have shown that more worried writers tend to avoid writing classes and favour academic majors and jobs that are thought to have only a passing connection to writing (Cheng, 2004).

There was a moderately significant negative correlation between students' expectations for grades in their first-semester language classes and their actual final grades, indicating that students with higher levels of anxiety both anticipated and received higher grades than those with lower levels of anxiety. Additionally, several researchers have found a link between language anxiety and other outcome indicators outside final grades. Significant negative correlations between language anxiety and performance with a number of language production measures were also discovered (Hyland, 2003; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014), including a cloze test, and a composition task by using measures of both classroom anxiety and language use anxiety.

The possible solutions to decrease SLWA among ESL students

Studies suggested in order to reduce SLWA among ESL students, teachers and learners should be aware of the learners' language strategies in the classroom. It was proposed that teachers play a vital role in providing a positive, learner-centred classroom climate in order to identify specific sources of students' L2 writing anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Hassan, 2001) to increase students' confidence level in writing in an L2 context.

Oxford (2001) proposed three learning strategies which are meta-cognitive, cognitive strategies, and effective strategies that would be effective in reducing anxiety among L2 learners. Meta-cognitive strategies include identifying one's own interests, needs, and learning style preferences, which help learners to have self-knowledge about their learning style as well as its advantages and disadvantages, to choose strategies that comfortably fit with their preferred learning style.

Cognitive strategies involve interactions with the material to be learned (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990). According to the studies of O' Malley and Chamot (1990), cognitive strategies, specifically repetition (repeating a chunk of language, such as a word or a phrase, in the course of performing a language task), rehearsal (rehearsing the language needed, with attention to meaning, for a written task), translation (using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language) and knowledge transfer (using previously acquired linguistic knowledge to facilitate a language task) might be useful for reducing ESL writing anxiety caused by linguistic limitations) might be useful for reducing ESL writing anxiety caused by linguistic difficulties. Oxford (1990) claimed that practice is the first and most important set of cognitive strategies, which include five techniques such as repeating, formally practising the sounds and writing systems, recognizing and using formulas and patterns, recombining, and practising naturalistically.

Affective strategies include identifying one's feelings, anxiety, or contentment, and becoming aware of the learning circumstances or tasks that evoke them (Oxford, 2001) in order to deal with their anxiety successfully. O' Malley and Chamot (1990) also offered some effective strategies, such as questioning for clarification (asking for clarification or verification about the task), cooperation (working together with peers to solve a problem, pool information, check a learning task, model a language activity, or get feedback on written performance), self-talk (reducing anxiety by using mental techniques that make one feel competent to do the learning tasks), and self-reinforcement (providing personal motivation by arranging rewards for oneself when a language learning activity has been successfully completed).

Self-knowledge about one's learning style preferences will help ESL students and teachers to use various and suitable learning strategies to

accommodate these preferences in ESL writing classes in order to lower the student's anxiety levels.

METHODOLOGY

The sample of this study consisted of 103 Diploma (70 females, 33 males) students from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Samarahan Campus. The participants were mostly in their first year of study and were from various faculties. Their proficiency level ranged from low intermediate to upper intermediate. The heterogeneity helped to give a clearer picture of the relationship between the students' writing skills and their level of anxiety. The participants were selected based on availability sampling and their participation in the current study was by their own consent. The number of respondents was adequate to ensure a presentable data analysis.

Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of four sections with objective-type questions. Section A identified the demographic information of the participants. From Section B onwards, the study employed the following data sources which are (i) Factors that lead to second language writing anxiety, (ii) Effects of second language writing anxiety, and (iii) Solutions to overcome anxiety when writing in a second language. Most of the questions were adopted from the questionnaire developed by Cheng (2004) about the anxiety that students experience when writing in English. The SLWAI was assessed and proved by means of correlation and factor analysis to be valid and reliable (Cheng, 2004) and has been adopted in many studies related to second language writing anxiety.

Section B (Factors that lead to second language writing anxiety) consisted of 10 items that explored the possible causes that may lead to second language writing anxiety. The items were developed based on the researchers' teaching experience and selected questions from Cheng's Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI).

Meanwhile, Section C (Effects of second language writing anxiety) was designed to identify the most common effects associated with ESL writing anxiety that the students experienced when writing in English. Some

of the questions were adapted from Lee's (2005) English Writing Anxiety Scale (EWAS) which was designed to assess English writing anxiety among students. Besides, the researchers included factual statements based on the researchers' observations and teaching experience. By investigating the impacts of second language writing anxiety, the results provided a better understanding of the correlation between the causes and how it affected the students' experience in writing in English.

The final section, Section D (Solutions to overcome anxiety when writing in a second language), consisted of 10 items that were adopted from Reid's Self-Perpetual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (1987). In addition, it was aligned to the current learning setting to identify ways to help the students learn better in the ESL classroom. The results of this section reflected pedagogical implications on the teaching and learning strategies for coping with ESL writing anxiety.

The items in Sections B, C, and D required the respondents to provide their responses on a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their level of agreement. The response continuum was: 1= Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3=Neutral, 4= Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree. Then, the items are totalled, which would generate an index that can act as an indicator for the degree to which the respondents exhibit the traits in each item.

Data Analysis

As mentioned previously, the study employed the survey research method that aimed to provide a quantitative or numeric description of the factors, effects, and solutions to SLWA among ESL students. The study performed a descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data. It included giving a description and presenting the results through a range of scores based on Creswell (2009) and the research questions. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the collected data using the numerical data from the Google Form results. Data collected was extracted and analysed using Microsoft Excel in which the central tendency of each question was translated through a mean score of each question in all three sections of the survey questions (namely, factors affecting SLWA, perceptions on SLWA, and solutions to SLWA). Then, the collected data was interpreted descriptively and cross-tabulated to allow the researchers to identify patterns, trends, and potential correlations between each category of the questionnaires.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The causes of writing anxiety among university students

Table 1 shows that three top-rated factors led to SLWA among the students. Firstly, a total of 54.3% (n = 56) of the students were concerned about the negative evaluations from the teacher and fellow students. Secondly, 48.5% (n=50) of the students agreed that their linguistics difficulties, such as inadequate mastery of vocabulary, simple sentence structures, and grammar, had contributed to their SLWA before writing English essays. Finally, students' lack of practice outside of the classroom stood at 49.5% (n =51). Apart from that, students also agreed on other factors such as insufficient/inefficient feedback from teachers, time and genre constraints, and lack of good command of composition skills. The rest of the listed factors in the qeestions were majorly rated with a neutral stand.

Table 1
Responses to factors of language writing anxiety

		Percentage				
No	Statements	SA	A	NA	D	SD
1.	I am clueless about the topic and content of the writing, in particular when I write English compositions under time constraints.	0.0%	24.3%	47.6%	23.3%	4.9%
2.	I often encounter some linguistic difficulties, such as inadequate mastery of vocabulary, simple sentence structures, and grammatical errors.	2.9%	45.6%	33.0%	15.5%	2.9%
3.	I am afraid of negative evaluations of my English compositions from teachers and fellow students.	9.7%	44.7%	29.1%	14.6%	1.9%
4.	My English writing skill stands still which makes me feel upset.	4.9%	33.0%	46.6%	12.6%	2.9%
5.	I am lacking writing practice inside and outside the classroom.	5.8%	43.7%	36.9%	10.7%	2.9%

6. I do not have a good command of composition techniques. For instance, I am too much concerned about the forms and formats.	1.9%	35.0%	44.7%	15.5%	2.9%
7. The teacher's feedback on my English writing is insufficient and effective.	3.9%	35.0%	35.9%	24.3%	1.0%
8. I am very much worried about writing any genre of English essays	9.7%	31.1%	36.9%	18.4%	3.9%
9. I have no interest because I could not imagine the situation and environment that I should write about.	1.0%	14.6%	35.9%	39.8%	8.7%
10. Time constraints could be an issue because I might not finish the essay on time.	16.5%	33.0%	31.1%	16.5%	2.9%

Overall, the highest mean for the entire set of questions on factors that led to SLWA was m=3.9 for Q2 on linguistic difficulties, followed by m = 3.6 for Q5 on the lack of practice outside classroom time. This finding confirmed previous studies by Moses et al. (2019), and Veramuthu and Shah (2020), which reflected students' worries about their peers, and depending on them and their English teachers, especially in collaborative writing tasks.

The effects of second language writing anxiety (SLWA) towards the students' academic writing performance

On the effects on SLWA, overall, the students had a neutral view towards most of the questions asked. The following Table 2 summed up students' responses to the communication apprehension items in the questionnaires. Despite their concerns about their language skills, as shown in Table 2, a majority of 71.8% (n=74) of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they looked forward to writing down their ideas. Another total of 44.6% (n=46) had the confidence to clearly express their ideas in writing, and in a similar way, 50.4% (n =52) enjoyed completing any genre of English essays.

Despite the positive attitude towards writing in English, 42.7% (n=44) of the students were still nervous about writing. This confirmed the study of Horwitz et al. (1986) that suggested written communication anxiety which could result from shyness, anxiety, or dread of interacting with others. The highest mean rated for this set of questions on the effects of SLWA was rated at m= 3.5 for Q3 (students' confidence level to clearly express their ideas in writing). Some of the issues emerging from this finding indicated the correlation between students' confidence in writing and their academic writing performance despite a majority of them having chosen a neutral stand with a mean lesser than 4 for the overall questions.

Table 2
Responses to effects of language writing anxiety

No	Statements	Percentage				
		SA	A	NA	D	SD
1.	I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.	13.6%	29.1%	35.9%	19.4%	1.9%
2.	I look forward to writing down my ideas.	17.5%	54.4%	25.2%	2.9%	0.0%
3.	I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing	6.8%	37.9%	47.6%	6.8%	1.0%
4.	I enjoy completing writing any genre of English essay.	12.6%	37.9%	41.7%	6.8%	1.0%
5.	Writing is a lot of fun.	17.5%	35.0%	39.8%	7.8%	0.0%
6.	My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on composition.	7.8%	31.1%	50.5%	8.7%	1.9%
7.	Expressing ideas through writing is a waste of time.	7.8%	11.7%	35.0%	33.0%	17.5%
8.	I am nervous about writing.	7.8%	35.0%	41.7%	11.7%	3.9%
9.	I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas.	2.9%	24.3%	47.6%	21.4%	3.9%
10.	I rely on free writing apps to help my writing clear and effective.	16.5%	25.2%	36.9%	15.5%	5.8%

The possible solutions to decrease SLWA among ESL students

For the third research question, students were asked about the possible solutions that could help to overcome their language anxiety. A significant number of 86.4% (n=89) of the students strongly agreed/ agreed that the teacher should clearly state the form and format of the essays before instructing students to write them. The result from the survey also suggested that 81.6% (n=84) of the students strongly agreed/agreed with the statement that clear instructions would help them to understand the writing tasks better. The highest mean recorded for this set of questions is m=5 for Q6 (doing the essay in my free time works best for me).

Table 3
Solutions to overcome language writing anxiety.

| No	Statements	Percentage				
		SA	A	NA	D	SD
1.	The teacher informs clearly the instructions so students could understand better	34.0%	52.4%	13.6%	0.0%	0.0%
2.	Hands-on training on writing English essays should be conducted regularly	32.0%	47.6%	19.4%	1.0%	0.0%
3.	More group works for writing practices	20.4%	41.7%	29.1%	4.9%	3.9%
4.	The skeleton of writing should be made before asking students to write	24.3%	49.5%	25.2%	1.0%	0.0%
5.	Reading books or related articles before doing any writing	39.8%	46.6%	12.6%	1.0%	0.0%
6.	Doing the essay in my free time works best for me.	46.6%	38.8%	35.9%	4.9%	1.0%
7.	The essay form and format are stated clearly before writing essays	27.2%	54.4%	16.5%	1.9%	0.0%
8.	Watching related videos that could aid in the writing process	27.2%	50.5%	18.4%	2.9%	1.0%
9.	Imagine the situations or environment related to my writing	32.0%	48.5%	19.4%	0.0%	0.0%
10.	Making writing English essays class more fun, current, and trendy	31.1%	45.6%	23.3%	0.0%	0.0%

DISCUSSIONS

Generally, several factors ranging from highly personal (self-confidence) to procedural (classroom activities and teaching methods) contributed to SLWA among public university students in Malaysia. Among the top-rated factors were linguistic difficulties, fear of negative evaluation, lack of needed skills and practice as well as insufficient/ineffective feedback from teachers/lecturers. The results of this study supported previous findings (Park, 2019; Fauzi et al., 2022). Despite some responses being rated as neutral, the results have shown interesting findings that can be inferred from this study.

The relationship between students' academic performance and their SLWA was analysed. The results indicated that despite their concerns over some of the factors, as shown in Figure 1, the students had little 'fear' and anxiety in SLWA. In fact, most of them had a neutral feeling about it and did not indicate their concern about their fear of writing. One major finding that was worth pointing out was the student's fear of being evaluated/ given negative remarks by the teachers/peers, which made up more than half of the entire samples, as the results found that 54.3% (n=56) had a fear of being evaluated (Park, 2019; Fauzi et al., 2022).

Even though the students were made up of 86.4% top achievers of CGPA ranging from 3.00-4.00, the fear of SLWA was still present. Therefore, it did not substantiate previous studies that had found a negative correlation between academic performance and language anxiety (Hyland, 2003; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014) as good students also had language anxiety despite their outstanding academic performance. It was probably because of the nature of writing itself which portrayed not only the students' academic performance but also their competency in the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Figure 2
Cause-effect of SLWA among ESL students in Malaysian public university
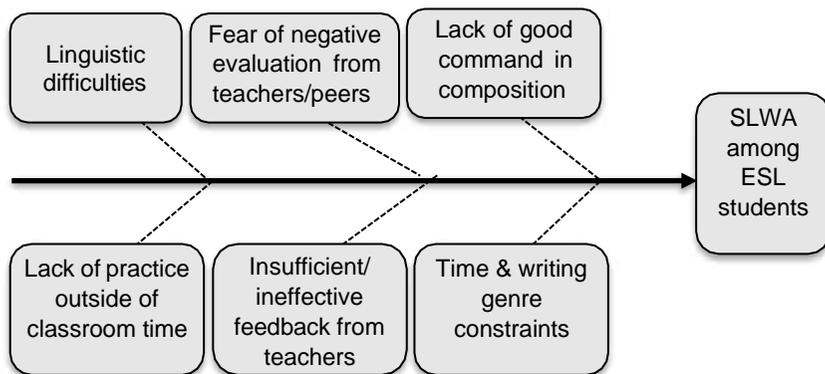

The second point was that students had SLWA due to the combination of multi-faceted layers of factors that were most probably rooted in their lack of self-initiative in improving or overcoming the issue (Hassan, 2001; Cheng, 2004). Perhaps, it was due to the belief that writing in English was a demanding task. It could be translated from the findings that identified factors such as lack of practice, lack of sufficient vocabulary and skills, and fear of being evaluated were rated as top factors by almost half of the total population of the samples. Despite most students voicing their concerns regarding their writing and language proficiency and feeling nervous prior to writing English essays, they had a positive attitude towards writing English compositions. It was reflected in the findings that the students looked forward to writing essays, felt confident about it, and did not think it was a waste of time. The finding was in contrast when compared to Cheng (2004) where worried students tend to avoid writing class.

Next, the solutions to help students to overcome their language anxiety when writing English essays were suggested. As shown in Figure 3, the top-rated solutions to help students overcome SLWA were a combination of interactive pedagogy, sufficient scaffolding writing process, and clear instructions from the teachers/lecturers. It was important to ensure that the three learning strategies which were meta-cognitive, cognitive, and affective strategies (Oxford, 2001) were met during the lesson. The students believed that providing them with the skeleton of writing and giving them exposure to articles and media, such as videos related to the writing tasks,

would help to overcome their language anxiety. The lecturer/teacher could provide repetition, rehearsal, and knowledge transfer to reduce writing anxiety among ESL students. Strategies like memorizing and imitation are favoured by most Malaysian students because, from their experience in schools, repetition and reproduction of existing knowledge are highly valued.

Figure 3
Solutions to overcome SLWA among ESL students in the public university.
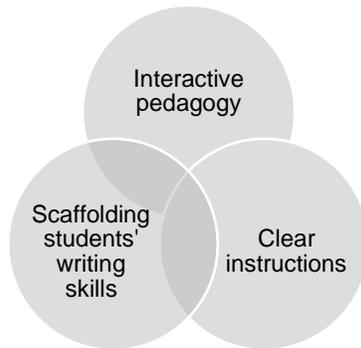
In terms of pedagogy, engaging, student-centred and interactive pedagogy was the most preferred solution. A total of 79.6% (n=82) preferred hands-on training on writing to be conducted regularly, while another 62.1% (n= 64) chose to have more group work for writing practices. 76.7% (n=79) also preferred classes to be more fun, current and trendy. A total of 80.5 % (n=83) of the students suggested real, situational-based learning activity help to overcome SLWA. Hence, the lecturer/teacher may adopt other methods such as task-based or problem-based approaches, when choosing the topic for writing. Students should be encouraged to use the target language authentically to complete the given tasks or to solve the given problems.

CONCLUSION

The study presented in this paper examined the factors, effects, and solutions to SLWA among ESL students in public universities. Despite their SLWA but with appropriate supervision from their English lecturers, students still wish to continue participating in writing activities. Future studies can also consider having a control group to make a direct comparison between students of different academic performances, course majors, socioeconomic backgrounds, and even their learning preferences. Doing so may give an in-depth understanding of the root cause of SLWA among ESL students, particularly among university students.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHORS

The authors confirm the equal contribution in each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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