

# Students' Perception on the Use of Free Writing in Overcoming Writing Anxiety

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## ABSTRACT

*Writing is believed to be one of the most challenging skills to be acquired among students especially second language learners. They then develop writing anxiety which eventually leads to poor writing performance. Various teaching methodologies have been implemented to reduce students' writing anxiety. One teaching strategy that can be applied is free writing as a pre-writing activity. In this study, the instructor introduced free writing to examine students' perceptions on their writing anxiety. Thus, this paper aimed to explore students' perceptions on using free writing as a pre-writing activity in helping them cope with their anxiety while completing writing tasks. A quantitative study was conducted among Diploma students in UiTM Melaka using a free writing task given as pre-writing activity to 68 students. A questionnaire was also used for the research to assess their perceptions towards free writing. The study revealed that the respondents were most anxious when their written works would be graded. On the other hand, the questionnaire also indicated that free writing generally had a positive influence in reducing writing anxiety among the participants.*

**Keywords:** *writing, writing anxiety, free writing, second language acquisition, teaching methodology*

## INTRODUCTION

While participating in writing tasks, students have always had the belief that it is a daunting and challenging experience. The complexity of writing, according to (Khoii, 2011), stems from having to pay attention to both low and high levels of writing skills, which are planning and organizing as well as spellings, punctuations, vocabulary in the latter. In other words, when students are asked to produce a written product, they will be involved in an elaborate and strenuous process. Although the perception that surrounds the act of writing is unfavourable, it is still considered as a quintessence in acquiring a language as well as performing in all disciplines (Bjork & Raisanen, 1997). Hassan (2010) and Fitrinada (2018) respectively stated that writing acts as a display of the students' verbal competence and knowledge in English patterns. Hence, writing could principally determine a student's knowledge, level of language

acquisition and creativity. In teaching and learning, ability to write competently allows students to perform in their academic life especially in tertiary level as success in university is influenced by their ability to write proficiently.

## **Problem Statement**

Regardless of this extensive requirement forced onto the students, they nevertheless, face difficulties in writing well which can be due to low writing skills (Dirgeyasa, 2016), lack of vocabulary and low control over English grammar (Wigati, 2014). Learning to write in second language or foreign language is a demanding task as mentioned by Khoi (2011) considering students must write within a limited time. In relation to time, Kruse (2003) highlighted students have limited time to prepare for their writing assessments. Erkan and Saban (2011) added another contributing factor to this issue, which is learners are afraid of making mistakes in English writing.

Due to these reasons, students have a high tendency in developing writing anxiety. Previous study has revealed that anxiety forms the foundation of poor English result among learners as it disturbs the process of acquiring writing skills (Worde, 2003). High level of writing anxiety intimidates students; thus, they end up writing shorter compositions (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Kara (2013) highlights that students who are anxious during writing activities may suffer from lack of self-confidence about their writing ability and achievements. In the worst-case scenario, according to Cheng (2004), learners will unconsciously try to avoid writing all together.

Acknowledging this as a problem for English language learners, various studies on techniques and strategies are introduced to help students overcome their writing anxiety and ultimately, improve learners' writing skills. One strategy in particular is free writing. Elbow (1983) noted that free writing is simply to write what you are thinking at the moment of writing, within a limited amount of time and not stop for anything even to check the spelling. The key to is to never stop writing and without any editing during the writing process (John, 2017). Free writing can be used to generate content which was sometimes new even to the writers, thus making it an effective tool (Elbow, 1973), which in this case, can reduce anxiety while writing.

## **Research Questions**

This study would like to answer the following research questions:

1. Do the participants experience writing anxiety?
2. Does free writing influence the participants' writing anxiety?

## **Significance of Study**

Writing using English language has always been regarded as intimidating. Students build destructive attitude and rejection against writing because of this belief. Thus, this study would like to emphasize and illustrate the students' perceptions on free writing, as a method for teachers to employ in classroom and for students to practice during their leisure time, could just become one of the influential tools to help overcome writing anxiety. It could further shine light to policy makers on the issues faced by both students and teachers in regards to teaching and learning English as a second language.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This paper explores the use of free writing as a pre-writing activity. Studies have indicated that writing is generally viewed as the most challenging skill to be acquired in language learning. Meanwhile, free writing is deemed as an influential strategy that could assist students overcome their writing anxiety as well as encourage writing fluency and creativity.

### **Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance among Students**

Writing is one of the four basic language skills in English learning and is also considered to be a sign of one's language competence and comprehensive quality (Zeng, 2018). However, it can be observed that students would normally be anxious, reluctant, or unmotivated to perform any writing activity. Genç and Yayli (2019) cited Daly (1978) and Cheng, et. al. (1999) in explaining about writing apprehension, a "situation and subject-specific individual difference concerned with people's general tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to demand writing accompanied by some amount of evaluation", and writing anxiety which is accepted as "language-skill specific anxiety". According to Genç and Yayli (2019), writing anxiety could lead to students writing shorter essays, getting lower writing scores, and having lower self-confidence. Patwary and Sajib (2018) asserted that when such students are asked to write, they usually face challenges in gathering and arranging ideas and coming up with error-free and cohesive sentences and expressions. As a result, they would demonstrate poor writing performance.

One of the factors that lead to such scenario is the lack of knowledge of the writing processes (Patwary & Sajib, 2018), command of grammar, and skills necessary for writing tasks. Students will show inhibition to complete writing tasks when they do not possess knowledge on the steps that they can follow or the expressions that they can use to produce the writing pieces. Writing anxiety is even more prevalent among second or foreign language learners when there are clashes of the communication conventions of their mother tongue and of English such as in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and genre conventions (Nguyen, Admiraal, Janssen, & Rijlaarsdam, 2018). Shamsuzzaman, Everatt, and McNeill (2018) added that majority of their participants reported that vocabulary is an area of difficulty which they have to experience in L2 writing. These studies indicated that writing anxiety and poor writing performance resulted from lack of necessary target language knowledge and skills.

Meanwhile, Zeng (2018) claimed that even students at university level suffer from inability in organizing their ideas in proper ways and are usually short of ideas. He explained that in China, most of the university students came from isolated areas in dire need of competent English teachers while the exam-oriented teaching strategies in schools seldom require them to carry out real writing tasks or allow independent time for the students to read and think wide on their own. Similarly, Oka and Fujita (2018) reported that students in Japan were not given enough opportunity to write English sentences or even words during their high school years. In addition, Genç and Yayli (2019) asserted that the time restriction in completing writing tasks, inability to produce relevant ideas, and the students' judgement on their own writing competence could induce writing anxiety. In sum, the teaching strategies in schools and students' own view of themselves are also anxiety-provoking.

### **Teaching Writing**

Two approaches that are commonly explored in teaching writing are the product approach and the process approach. In light of the product approach, students are traditionally encouraged to model after a

text that is studied and analysed before the assignment of writing tasks (Zeng, 2018). These model texts are carefully read with much attention given to the type of reading, language, paragraphing, and techniques used in organizing sentences and paragraphs. Shamsuzzaman, Everatt, and McNeill (2018) further elaborated that product writing is normally emphasized in academic writing. They stated that academic writing is convention-ridden, and the conventions of academic writing are closely related to instruction. Students are asked to study and even memorize the format or pattern from the models given and later attempt to replicate what they have previously gathered onto the desired composition. In short, more emphasis is put on the end result of the required composition in the product approach.

For process approach on the other hand, much emphasis is given on the various stages that any writing piece goes through. Students would normally be exposed and become accustomed to pre-writing phase, brainstorming, drafting, revising and editing phases that can involve multitude of strategies and activities. According to Patwary and Sajib (2018), processes work as tools needed to discover ideas that can assist learners 'overcome their inhibitions and open the fountain of ideas concealed inside them to guide them forward in the proper direction'. Zeng (2018) explained that the process of writing can be divided into manageable parts which involves practices of speaking, reading and writing in order to develop ideas and achieve their tasks easily and more efficiently. Some of the strategies that can be applied in pre-writing phase are group discussion, reading, and free writing. While-writing usually involves drafting, discussion, and re-drafting the piece while post-writing can include final editing and presentation. However, majority of the students are unaware of the required knowledge of writing processes (Patwary & Sajib, 2018) and unable to practice different writing strategies efficiently.

A study by Patwary (2018), meanwhile, revealed that insufficient input and strategies applied in classrooms are reasons why students in Bangladesh remain weak in writing. Participants in Genç and Yayli (2019) also recommended that teachers provide clear instruction, feedback, and more time allocated for writing. Teachers must also be aware about their students' writing anxiety and find ways to tackle the situation by diversifying teaching method, providing sufficient input and feedback, as well as encouraging independent writing strategies. Zeng (2018) insisted that the process approach should be given more emphasis compared to product approach in order to encourage students to be more independent in writing and able to apply writing strategies to numerous writing tasks.

## **Free Writing**

Prewriting tasks might overcome challenges faced by language learners in writing (Nguyen *et al.*, 2018) and subsequently, their writing anxiety. Prewriting can be viewed as a process of discovery where students have room for mistakes and to restart. It generally occurs at the beginning of writing process, but more and more teachers are encouraging students to use this technique whenever they are writing so as to encourage self-reflections at any point of time in their writing progress. Some of the prewriting activities that can be applied are free writing, group discussion, and presentation. Out of all the activities, free writing has been known to be efficient in reducing writing anxiety (Atendido & Tayao, 2018; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018).

According to Atendido and Tayao (2018), free writing provides a platform for the students to write continuously for a given short period of time without giving too much emphasis on grammatical accuracy. Students can be asked to write non-stop of anything that comes to mind with or without a given topic for a short period of time. It develops writing fluency in English essay writing among students both in terms of quality and quantity as ideas and arguments are internally generated and processed by the students themselves. Free writing is also instrumental in overcoming hurdles and challenges in writing

such as in generating and developing ideas and removing author blockage (Nguyen *et al.*, 2018). More importantly, it improves the students' confidence in writing English composition in terms of idea organization, content cohesion, language use, mechanics, and writing English essays about any familiar topics.

Nguyen *et al.* (2018) elaborated that free writing has a positive effect on students' productivity and on the quality of their argumentative texts. As a prewriting activity, it promotes idea generation in particular before the students begin writing. In addition, they found an additional effect of free writing on students' productivity as the use of the individual writing activity as a prewriting activity leads to more extended final composition compared to the application of group discussion as a prewriting task. This is supported by Kirubai (2018) that mentioned how free writing focuses on content and fluency over grammar and form. This then helps them to express their thoughts and ideas fluently, which inevitably eases anxiety and increases confidence in writing.

In sum, writing has long been identified as a language skill that learners find to be challenging. This further develops into anxiety in writing and subsequently poor overall writing performance. Realising the need to provide an optimal learning environment to students, especially in learning writing, language instructors and researchers have done ample studies on the matter. One of the means is to apply free writing as a pre-writing activity. As free writing emphasizes more on content and fluency of thoughts as well as internal reflections and arguments, it is believed that it can reduce writing anxiety and elevate students' confidence in writing.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section focuses on the quantitative approach applied to this study for the purpose of investigating whether the use of free writing materials can influence students' writing anxiety and also to study students' perceptions on free writing in helping them cope with their anxiety while completing writing tasks.

### Sampling

A total of 68 participants, 27 female students and 41 male students, taken from two groups of students from Faculty of Plantation and Agrotechnology and Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences in UiTM Melaka were used in this research. Purposive non-random sampling method was used to make sure that all respondents were taking the same English courses for that particular semester with the same English Language instructor. 31 semester two students from Faculty of Plantation and Agrotechnology and 37 semester two students from Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences were involved in this study. The participants had all acquired satisfactory English grades in their previous semester English papers. 20 students managed to score A, 13 students scored A-, 10 students scored B+, 10 students scored B, 3 students scored B-, while 12 students scored C. These participants were all Malay students between the ages of 18 to 21 years old.

### Instrument

The study was conducted using a free writing task given as pre-writing activity to 68 students. A questionnaire was also used for the research to assess their perceptions towards free writing. The questionnaire used was based on The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) by Cheng

(2004) as found in Genç and Yayli (2019). There were 22 statements in the questionnaire and five Likert scales were used. The free writing tasks were given to the students specifically to reduce their writing anxiety. The tasks required the participants to write freely about general topics such their hobbies, friends, and families before they began writing the main composition. This method is adapted and supported by previous studies from Nguyen et al. (2018) and Atendido and Tayao (2018).

## Procedure and Analysis

A short briefing was given to the students before the activity was carried out. This is to explain the process to the students and the lecturer involved. The free writing tasks were given as pre-writing activities to all students as their first activity for each writing class. Before starting the treatment, students were given a questionnaire and after four weeks of treatment, students were given the same questionnaire to measure how they felt after they did the pre-writing activity. Data collected were analysed using quantitative procedures.

## FINDINGS

An experiment was done followed by a distribution of a survey in order to measure participants' writing anxiety and to assess the use of free writing in overcoming said anxiety. Table 1 presents the mean score of the participants' responses gathered before and after the treatment that can be used to answer Research Question 1 which is *'Do the participants experience writing anxiety?'* Preliminary analysis revealed that the participants in this study reported that they had anxiety when it came to English Language writing based on their mean score in pre-treatment. Most of the mean scores for the items in pre-treatment were above 3.0 with the highest being anxiousness over their composition being evaluated (4.00), and having limited time to complete the writing tasks (3.85). It is also shown in Table 1 that their mean scores indicated a decline of writing anxiety after they were exposed to free writing tasks.

**Table 1 Pre-Treatment and Post-Treatment Mean Scores**

Items	Pre-Treatment		Post-Treatment	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	4.00	.914	3.37	1.158
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint.	3.85	.885	2.79	.955
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.	3.82	.897	2.91	1.047
4. I am afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	3.37	1.118	2.90	1.081
5. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.	3.35	.989	2.84	.956

6. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.	3.22	1.005	2.72	1.005
7. I am afraid that the other students would laugh at my English composition if they read it.	3.21	1.241	2.91	1.194
8. I often feel fear when I write English compositions under time.	3.12	1.100	2.75	.983
9. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.	3.06	1.091	2.71	.963
10. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write compositions.	3.03	1.119	2.44	.904
11. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.	2.91	1.181	2.32	.969
12. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.	2.54	1.057	2.41	1.054
13. I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure.	2.51	1.044	2.31	.935
14. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.	2.21	1.100	2.15	1.026
15. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when write English compositions.	2.21	.939	2.07	.997
16. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.	3.40	1.024	3.44	.968
17. While writing in English, I am not nervous at all.	3.35	.824	3.63	.913
18. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions.	3.18	.945	3.29	.847
19. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.	3.10	1.211	3.00	1.209
20. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.	2.60	.949	2.84	.987
21. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others.	2.37	1.208	2.60	1.317
22. I am not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.	2.16	1.087	2.43	1.201

The results also answered Research Questions 2, 'Does free writing influence the participants' writing anxiety?' Further analysis using a paired samples *t* test with an  $\alpha$  of .05 was administered to compare mean scores of participants' response to the survey of writing anxiety before ( $M = 3.0261$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ) and after ( $M = 2.7654$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ) the treatment they received which was the free writing tasks, as shown in Table 2. Meanwhile, Table 3 indicated that on average, the participants' post-treatment scores

were 0.26 lower than their pre-treatment scores, 95% CI [0.16, 0.36]. The difference is statistically significant,  $t(67) = 5.31, p < .001$ .

**Table 2 Paired Samples Statistics**

		<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
Pair 1	Pre-Treatment	3.0261	68	.45191	.05480
	Post-Treatment	2.7654	68	.45911	.05568

**Table 3 Paired Samples Test**

		<b>Paired Differences</b>			<b>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</b>		<b>t</b>	<b>Df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
		<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>	<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>			
Pair 1	Pre-Treatment – Post-Treatment	.26070	.40501	.04911	.16266	.35873	5.308	67	.000

To answer research question one, from the findings, it can be concluded that English writing activity causes students to feel anxious as it is deemed as an intimidating activity. As supported by previous researches in the literature review, this could be due to the complexity of writing that the students have to pay attention to (Khoii, 2011). Zheng (2018) also mentioned the intricacy of writing, which involves the competence and comprehensive quality of the writers. Such a demanding task creates anxiety in the students during writing activities since these students feel the need to produce perfect and error-free compositions. This is supported by Erkan and Saban (2011) students are afraid of making mistakes when writing in English; thus, this makes them anxious or uneasy when it comes to English writing. As a result, these factors contribute to learners' high inclination of developing writing anxiety as supported from the findings of this research. This negative emotion building up in these students even more because they lack vocabulary (Dirgeyasa, 2016) and low control over the English grammar (Wigati, 2014). Hence, they have difficulty to express themselves properly. Second language learners of English experience anxiety even more since their mother tongue or first language present as a barrier or obstacle during writing lessons. As mentioned by Nguyen et. al (2018), learners' anxiety amplifies because of the dissimilar of the English grammar rules, vocabulary and genre conventions to their first language. Learners are still struggling to understand these rules and having to apply these rules in writing tasks indisputably triggers high level of anxiety in them. In worst case scenario, some students with extreme level of writing anxiety would even resort to avoid writing all together (Cheng, 2004).

Limitation of time is also a cause of writing anxiety since students have to prepare for their writing assessments in such a short amount of time (Kruse, 2003). With anxiety intensifying, students are under intense pressure to complete a writing task within a few minutes. In similar case as stated in Oka and Fujita (2018) students in Japan also were not given sufficient opportunities for them to practice writing in English lessons during their high school years. Zheng (2018) also mentioned that the same scenario actually occurred in China, due to their examination orientation teaching strategies, students did



not carry out real writing tasks or even have time to read and think wide independently. Due to these circumstances, students' involvement in writing tasks are restricted; hence, they were not able to produce organised ideas and are usually short of ideas (Zheng, 2018). This is supported by Patwary and Sajib (2018) because these students lack of experience in writing in the target language and limited time, they face challenges when gathering and arranging ideas as well as composing sentences and expressions that are grammatically correct.

For the second research question, based on the data gathered for this research, it was found that free writing had a significant influence on participants' writing anxiety. As writing activity is perceived as challenging and difficult, free writing being given as a prewriting activity can help to reduce students' writing anxiety. This is supported by a research done by Atendido and Tayao (2018) and Nguyen *et al.* (2018), where free writing, among other activities, is known to be helpful in decreasing writing anxiety. This is because with free writing, students are able to write without giving too much attention on grammatical accuracy (Atendido & Tayao, 2018), thus not making them feeling anxious or concerned when writing in English. Students are presented with an opportunity for them to express themselves freely without judgements from others or themselves. This benefit is perceived to those with examination-oriented teaching methodology lessons as learners are given freedom to simply write their thoughts in English. As Nguyen *et al.* (2018) further mentioned free writing activity enables students to generate and develop ideas as well as remove author's blockage of ideas. This will in return boost their self-confidence in actual writing tasks and improve their proficiency in writing in English. Apart from that, free writing has a positive influence on students' productivity and also the quality of their argumentative essays as emphasized by Nguyen *et al.* (2018). Free writing as pre-writing activity helps in promoting idea generation before the students begin writing. Their anxiety level will dip and they will be more participative in class and even help other students when needed.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it was found that free writing is beneficial for students in reducing their writing anxiety. This research however is not without limitations. The sample size of this study could not be used to generalize to all learners namely in Malaysia; hence, further research needs to be conducted using bigger sample size. The study also only involves students of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Melaka. Future research could be conducted to observe it as a national issue. As this research also emphasizes on students' perceptions, other studies could also observe teachers' opinions and thoughts on the usage of free writing to help overcome writing anxiety. On the other hand, the study also revealed that the participants indeed experienced writing anxiety even though they had reached tertiary level of education and had already went through several years of English language learning. Many still felt anxious and apprehensive when it came to completing writing tasks, especially when their writing pieces were graded. The findings also exhibited that free writing can help reduce writing anxiety. The significant difference between the pre-treatment and post-treatment mean scores clearly indicated that the participants felt more at ease with writing after they were exposed to free writing as a pre-writing activity. Therefore, free writing can help students not only in reducing writing anxiety but also in building their confidence in writing.

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