

Gender Differences in Written Communication Anxiety among Libyan Postgraduates in Malaysia

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Abstract:

Writing represents an essential language skill. However, anxiety is often an obstacle to students' positive writing outcomes. In Libya, students face detrimental challenges in English writing due to factors such as a high level of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) which affects their written communication performance. This study, therefore, aims to examine gender differences in the level of written communication anxiety amongst Libyan postgraduates studying in Malaysian universities. The study employed a descriptive survey in which a self-administered questionnaire was used as a data-collection tool. The analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, including frequency and the Chi-square test. The findings revealed that most Libyan postgraduates in Malaysia experience a moderate level of writing anxiety, whereas none of them experience a low anxiety level. Additionally, no significant differences exist between male and female students regarding the level of written communication anxiety. It is hoped that this study could provide useful information that can be used by instructors to help students overcome writing anxiety and achieve positive learning outcomes. Nevertheless, this analysis is limited to gender differences in the level of written communication anxiety across gender and does not consider the types of anxiety experienced by Libyan postgraduates, which can be an important step for further investigation.

Keywords: Communication, foreign language anxiety, gender differences, Libyan postgraduate students, Malaysian universities, writing skills

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Introduction

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) represents a significant obstacle to successful learning outcomes for many learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In particular, writing is considered one of the most critical language skills (Casanave, 2003; Hassan, Abdul Rahman, & Azmi, 2021; Jahin, 2012; Almatarneh, Ab Rashid, & Yunus, 2018). However, anxiety is often an obstacle to students' positive writing outcomes (Al-Ahmad, 2003; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). According to Daly and Wilson (1983), anxiety refers to a feeling of fear or apprehension about something that may occur. In this regard, composing a piece of writing and having it evaluated by an instructor or colleagues is often a matter of worry among students. At times, "nervousness, frustration, self-doubt, and fears are associated with a person's tendencies to approach or avoid situations" (p. 327). As a result, students' self-efficacy might become low, which causes poor performance (Erkan & Saban, 2011).

Moreover, Wang (2021) reported that anxiety could significantly predict EFL students' creative writing performance, signifying that students who feel less anxious tend to perform better in written communication than those with a high level of anxiety. Therefore, as mentioned by Huerta, Goodson, Beigi, and Chlup (2017), "researchers interested in psychological factors affecting writers in higher education institutions, or academic writers, are concerned with internal variables affecting writing productivity" (p. 716), such as anxiety. Additionally, writing anxiety causes feelings of worry accompanied by reactions such as excessive sweating, heart beating, and negative expectations, as well as bad-adaptive behaviors of a learner's experience while performing a specific writing task at a given time and place (Erkan & Saban, 2011).

In Libya, English is regarded as a foreign language and becomes increasingly an important language for the citizens. Nevertheless, research shows that Libyan students face various English writing challenges due to factors such as a high level of FLA which affects their written communication performance (Elkali, 2018). Historically, English language education suffered from the government's nonchalant attitude, particularly between 1969 and 1996 (Maghur, 2010; Mohammed, 2005). Thus, most Libyan university students do not attain English proficiency even after graduation (Gadour, 2018). According to Gadour, this problem occurs perhaps, due to a lack of practice or dealing with the English language outside the classroom. Given this situation, research into how Libyan students can improve their English proficiency becomes crucial.

Recent previous studies have stressed the importance of gender in determining the level of FLA (Geçkin, 2020; Liu, 2021; Siahpoosh, Varghaei, & Khodadadi, 2022). According to Siahpoosh et al. (2022), the possible differences between males and females have been considered a crucial factor that could influence the level of communication anxiety among EFL students. Thus, examining gender differences in FLA can help students to overcome writing anxiety and achieve positive learning outcomes. However, studies that examined FLA among Libyan students focused on speaking apprehension (Aldarasi, 2020; Toubot & Seng, 2018) and have not considered gender as a variable. In essence, research into gender differences in Libyan students' FLA, particularly written communication, is either lacking or inadequate. Therefore, using a descriptive approach, this study investigates gender differences in the level of written communication anxiety amongst Libyan postgraduates studying in Malaysian universities. Specifically, this study aims to achieve the following objectives.

1. What are the levels of written communication anxiety among male and female Libyan postgraduates in Malaysian universities?
2. To what extent do the levels of written communication anxiety differ among the students in terms of gender?

Literature Review

The number of Arab postgraduate students in Malaysian universities has increased (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Najeeb, Maros, & Mohd Nor, 2012), perhaps due to several reasons, such as global educational recognition, affordability of tuition fees, reasonable cost of living as well as political and economic stability and safety (Najeeb et al., 2012). These students are typically expected “to submit dissertations in English” (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010, p. 107). However, while written communication plays a significant role in high education, Arab students face difficulties in using the English language due to several reasons, including the inference of their native language. According to Abdulkareem (2013), Arab postgraduate students “are incapable of using their own words or reformat sentences based on their own critical thinking and reorganize sentences to be more effective academically (p. 1553). Also, most of the students feel that the English language programs designed to prepare them for academic writing were inadequate.

A number of studies have investigated the use of English among Arab postgraduate students in Malaysian universities generally (eg. Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Najeeb et al., 2012; Sarwari & Wahab, 2018). For instance, Al-Zubaidi and Rechards (2010) investigated the cultural and language barriers faced by Arab postgraduate students in five selected Malaysian universities. According to the study, a significant number of Arab postgraduate students “were concerned about language barriers” (p. 126). Similarly, the study conducted by Najeeb et al. (2012) focused on politeness strategies employed by Arab postgraduates in their email writing. The study found that most Arab postgraduates who study in Malaysia face challenges in English written communication due to their poor English proficiency and lack of awareness about local cultural norms. Also, Abdulkareem (2013) used questionnaires and written tests to investigate speaking and academic writing errors committed by Arab postgraduates at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The study examined students from different Arab countries, including Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The findings revealed that Arab postgraduates who study at UTM face academic writing problems in terms of “sentence structure, vocabulary, and expressing ideas” (p. 1556).

Additionally, a study conducted by Sarwari and Wahab (2018) focused on the correlation between English Language Proficiency (ELP) and Intercultural Communication Competence (ICCC) amongst Arab students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels at a Malaysian public university. The findings revealed a significant correlation between the attributes of ELP and ICCC. This correlation means that the level of Arab students’ ELP determines their involvement in daily interaction with their fellow students who speak different languages, which tends to help them improve their ELP. A more recent study shows that “Arab students mostly preferred the use of YouTube, Facebook, and Skype for learning the English language” (Jarrah & Alzubi, 2021, p. 683), which can help them improve their communication competence.

Gender Differences in Foreign Language Anxiety

Anxiety in foreign language communication may pose several challenges to language learners as well as undermine their self-efficacy and personality, and as a result, affect learners' ability to communicate effectively (Li, 2007). Also, anxiety affects students' cognitive capability in situations that seem difficult to them while performing a task for specific language skills such as writing (Sabti, Mansor, Altikriti, Abdalhussein, & Dhari, 2016). Such cognitive interference often occurs as a result of learners' high levels of anxiety. Students' encounter with "writing block" on tests is a good example of cognitive interference at the output stage (Cheng, 2004). According to Alsalooli and Al-Tale (2022), FLA "has become an important study area in EFL learning and teaching" (p. 145).

A growing number of studies have focused on gender differences and their correlation with written communication anxiety in the foreign language context (Alsalooli & Al-Tale, 2022; Al-Kubaisy, Hummadi, & Turki, 2019; Gerencheal, 2016; Liu, 2021; Mulyono, Liestyana, Warni, Suryoputro, & Ningsih, 2020) and reported inconsistent findings. For instance, Gerencheal (2016) investigated the differences in the anxiety level of third-year EFL learners at Mizan-Tepi University, Ethiopia. According to the findings, females tend to have a higher anxiety level in English communication than males. Recently, Mulyono et al. (2020) used a survey design to determine the perceived level of writing anxiety among EFL Indonesian students across gender. The findings revealed that most students have a moderate level of communication anxiety. However, the students' writing anxiety is not influenced by gender.

Some studies focused on how gender affects students' FLA. In this regard, Geçkin (2020) examined the extent to which gender differences affect the foreign language anxiety of Turkish pre-intermediate EFL students at a preparatory school in Turkey. The study proved the influence of gender in determining the level of anxiety amongst the respondents. The findings also showed that females exhibited a higher level of language anxiety as compared with males. More recently, Alsalooli and Al-Tale (2022) investigated the level and causes of FLA among 69 first-year EFL learners at Bisha University in Saudi Arabia. The study revealed that gender does not affect the EFL learners' level of anxiety. In essence, the inconsistency of previous findings indicates the need to further investigate the relationship between gender and anxiety in the foreign language context.

Specifically, a few studies investigated written communication anxiety in the foreign language context (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2019; Elkali, 2018; Mulyono et al., 2020). For instance, Al-Kubaisy et al. (2019) reported a significant difference between males and females regarding writing anxiety with females experiencing a higher level of anxiety than males. Most previous studies examining FLA among Libyans focused on speaking apprehension at the undergraduate level (Aldarasi, 2020; Toubot & Seng, 2018). Also, these studies have not considered gender as a variable. Therefore, this study pays attention to gender differences in written communication, particularly among Libyan postgraduates studying in Malaysian universities. This is because, as mentioned by Geçkin (2020), understanding individual differences can be an important means through which instructors can help students to overcome FLA. The study can be an important step to help international students, who often face various challenges in a foreign land (Hassan, Gamji, Nasidi, & Azmi, 2021), overcome language anxiety.

Theoretical Viewpoint

The analysis is guided by the Theory of Foreign Language Apprehension (FLA) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). According to Trang, Moni, and Baldauf (2013), FLA is a widely accepted theory that has a significant impact on language anxiety research. A specific theoretical facet of this theory suggests that FLA is situation-specific anxiety that arises from the difficulty of foreign language learning rather than nervousness and may affect learners' performance negatively (Chen & Chang, 2004; Horwitz et al., 1986; Tran, 2012). Thus, FLA is considered "a distinct form of anxiety related to foreign language acquisition" (Zheng, 2008, p. 2). Horwitz et al. (1986) defined anxiety related to a foreign language as distinct complex self-perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors associated with language learning. According to Horwitz et al. (2001), these elements arise from the uniqueness of the language-learning process with a strong relation to the language-learning context. Against this assumption, the current investigation is intended to measure gender differences in written communication among Libyans in Malaysia.

Methodology

The study employs a descriptive survey to investigate gender differences in the level of written communication anxiety among Libyan postgraduates in Malaysia. A descriptive survey applies to large population samples and takes place in realistic contexts as well as enables researchers to make general inferences (Allen, Titsworth, & Hunt, 2009). According to Wimmer and Diminick (2003), the survey approach allows researchers to efficiently categorize variables and can be used to measure respondents' attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics. A detailed explanation of the methodological approach adopted in this investigation is provided in the following sections.

Sample Size and Data Collection Procedure

A sample of 384 respondents was drawn from the population of 568 Libyan postgraduates in the Kuala Lumpur area, obtained from the Libyan embassy in Malaysia. The students use English to write their thesis and dissertations in English as part of graduation requirements. The sample was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for sample size calculation as follows.

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{(n_0 - 1)}{N}}$$

$$n = \frac{384}{1 + \frac{(384 - 1)}{568}} = 229.35$$

Based on this formula, hence, 384 is the sample size, n_1 = sample size of population, population size: $N = 568$, confidence level: 95% - $CI = 0.95$, margin of error: 5% - $e = 0.05$, target proportion: 50% - $p = 0.5$. The students were selected randomly, which implies that each Libyan postgraduate in the Kuala Lumpur area has an equal chance of being selected for the study. The advantages of simple random sampling include its low cost and the ability to gather data in a short time and represent a large population (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire via a google form. The Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) questionnaire was adopted from Daly and Miller (1975) and modified to suit the purpose of this investigation. The test is a scale for standard writing that consists of 26 items dealing with students' tendencies not to write, attitudes toward writing tasks, and their feelings as they write. To ensure

validity, the questionnaire items were checked by experts, and subsequently, changes were based on the experts' remarks

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data, particularly the mean, standard deviations, frequency, and Chi-square test. Specifically, the mean and standard deviation were used to ascertain the students' written communication anxiety levels. Whereas the Chi-square test was employed to determine the extent to which students' anxiety levels differ in gender. To perform the analysis, inferences were set at an alpha of ≤ 0.05 via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 24.

Findings

A total of 384 questionnaires were administered to the respondents, of which 250 were returned and found valid for analysis. The demographic information shows that most of the respondents (48.8%) are between the age of 31 and 40 years, whereas 29.2% of them are above 40 years of age. Also, 220% of the respondents are between the age of 25 and 30 years. Additionally, more than half of the respondents are males (52.0%), while 48.0% of them are females. Also, most of the respondents (52.8%) are Master's degree students, whereas 47.2% are PhD students. The purpose of this study was to examine the level of anxiety and gender differences in written communication among Libyan undergraduates in Malaysian universities. This outcome is presented in Tables 1-3 as follows.

Table 1. *Level of foreign language writing anxiety*

Level of Anxiety	Number	Percentage (%)	Minimum score	Maximum score	Mean \pm SD
Low	0	-	-	-	-
Moderate	166	66.4	43	66	58.83 \pm 4.95
High	84	33.6	67	89	72.57 \pm 5.23
Total	250				63.45 \pm 8.23

Table 2. *Respondents' gender distributions and level of anxiety*

Counts	Level of Anxiety		Total
	Moderate	High	
Male Count	87a	43a	130
Within Gender	66.9%	33.1%	100.0%
Within the level of anxiety	47.6%	51.2%	52.0%

Total	34.8%	17.2%	52.0%
Female Count	79a	41a	120
Within Gender	65.8%	34.2%	100.0%
Within the level of anxiety	47.6%	48.8%	48.0%
Total	31.6%	16.4%	48.0%
Total Count	166	84	250
Within Gender	66.4%	33.6%	100.0%
Within the level of anxiety	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Total	66.4%	33.6%	100.0%

Table 3. Extent of gender differences in foreign language writing anxiety

		Degree of Freedom	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.033	1	.855
Continuity Correction	.002	1	.962
Likelihood Ratio	.033	1	.855
Linear-by-Linear Association	.033	1	.856
N of Valid Cases	250		

To achieve the objectives of this study, Table 1 shows the level of foreign language writing anxiety among the respondents. Whereas, Table 2 presents the respondents' gender distributions and levels of anxiety, while Table 3 depicts the extent of gender differences in foreign language writing anxiety among the respondents. The first objective of this study was to determine the levels of written communication anxiety among male and female Libyan postgraduates in Malaysian universities. As shown in Table 1, none of the respondents have a low written communication anxiety level. Whereas, 166 of the respondents, which amounts to 66.4% have a moderate level of anxiety, while 33.6% of them have a high anxiety level. These findings demonstrate that most Libyan postgraduates studying in Malaysia experience a moderate level of written communication anxiety.

The second objective of this study was to determine the extent to which the levels of written communication anxiety differ among Libyan postgraduates in Malaysian universities. As shown in Table 2, each subscript letter denotes a subset of the level of anxiety categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at a 0.05 level of significance. The cross-tabulation of gender and the level of anxiety, as presented in Table 2, reveals that 34.8% of male

respondents experience a moderate level of written communication anxiety, while 17.2% of them have a high anxiety level. Conversely, 31.6% of female respondents have a moderate level of writing anxiety, while 16.4% of them experience a high anxiety level. Additionally, the level of anxiety is distributed among 52.0% of male respondents and 48.0% of female respondents respectively. As depicted in Table 3, the Chi-square test reveals no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) in the level of anxiety of male and female respondents.

Discussion

Using descriptive analysis, this study has reached two significant outcomes. First, most Libyan postgraduates studying in Malaysia experience a moderate level of written communication anxiety. This outcome contradicts Elkali's (2018) findings that most Libyan students experience a high level of anxiety in their country. Nevertheless, this contradiction supports the theoretical presumption of FLA that language anxiety has a strong connection with the learning context (Horwitz et al., 1986). The level of anxiety is a major concern as most postgraduate students use English to write their theses and dissertations in Malaysian universities (Almatarneh et al., 2018). There might be various reasons for Libyan students' high levels of anxiety. For instance, English was introduced in the fifth grade in 1966 and later abolished in 1969 when the Libyan government focused on teaching standard Arabic in schools. However, in 1996, the Ministry of Education established several English training centers to address the shortage of English teachers. English instructors from various countries, including Egypt, Iraq, and Palestine, were hired (Mohammed, 2005).

Subsequently, private centers were established, and unqualified instructors were hired to teach English, regardless of their credentials, teaching experience, or majors (Maghur, 2010). As a result, attaining a high level of English proficiency among most Libyan graduates becomes a major challenge. Besides, the findings reported in this study revealed no significant difference in the level of anxiety of male and female Libyan postgraduates studying in Malaysian universities. This outcome indicates that gender is not a significant determinant of written communication anxiety among Libyan postgraduates in Malaysian universities. As such, male students are slightly more anxious than female students in this regard. This outcome concurs with the findings reported by Alsalooli and Al-Tale (2022) that gender does not have a significant effect on EFL learners' level of anxiety in the Saudi context. However, these findings contradict many previous studies on gender differences in FLA across different contexts (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2019; Geçkin, 2020). As mentioned earlier, this inconsistency indicates the need to further investigate the relationship between gender and anxiety in the foreign language context.

Conclusion

This study examined gender differences in the level of written communication anxiety amongst Libyan postgraduates studying in Malaysian universities. According to the findings, most Libyan students experience a moderate level of writing anxiety. As the findings of a previous local study revealed a high level of anxiety among Libyan students, the current investigation supports the hypothetical viewpoint of FLA that language anxiety relates to the learning context. Additionally, no significant differences exist between male and female students regarding the level of written communication anxiety. The significance of this study lies in its provision of empirical evidence on gender differences among international students' levels of written communication anxiety. Considering the information regarding students' demographic factors, such as gender differences, instructors and relevant authorities can help students to overcome writing anxiety and achieve

positive learning outcomes. However, this quantitative analysis is limited to the role of gender in determining the level of written communication anxiety among Libyan postgraduates in Malaysia and does not consider the types of anxiety. Thus, further research may look specifically into the types of anxiety experienced by Libyan students across gender. Additionally, further studies may consider undergraduates' levels of anxiety. Also, a qualitative study can be conducted to provide an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon.

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