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Words under Pressure: An Empirical Investigation of ESL Writing Anxiety and its Causes among Pakistani HSC-level Learners

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
<p>History: Accepted: 10 March, 2026 Available Online: 21 March, 2026</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: <i>Writing Anxiety</i> <i>Levels</i> <i>Causes</i> <i>ESL Learners</i></p>	<p>Purpose: Filling this gap in the existing literature, this empirical study examines ESL writing anxiety among Pakistani HSC-level learners. Additionally, it explores the causes of this skill-specific anxiety among 449 HSC-level Pakistani students. The participants were selected through purposive sampling from three public and two private colleges in Karachi, Pakistan.</p> <p>Design/Methodology/Approach: Drawing on CVT theory, the explanatory-sequential study uses the philosophical stance of pragmatism for the required investigation.</p> <p>Findings: The quantitative findings revealed: a) the majority of the respondents (N=280) experience a moderate level of writing anxiety, b) the smallest number of respondents (N=77) had a high level of writing anxiety, and c) 92 participants were found to have a low level of writing anxiety. Qualitative findings of the reflexive thematic analysis revealed that Pakistani HSC-level ESL learners experience anxiety due to evaluation pressure, cognitive overload, surveillance stress, underutilization of writing strategies, and ineffective instructional frameworks.</p> <p>Implications/Originality/Value: The research suggests enhancing learners' motivation to take part in writing activities. Moreover, it is proposed to take affective-motivational measures during the writing activities in L2 classroom environment with friendly behavior and tolerance. Furthermore, ESL learners should be utterly exposed to writing activities. The study recommends the research on other language skills at the HSC-level in future studies.</p>



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1. Introduction

Language, beyond any doubt, is the proper and systematic tool of communication between individuals of any society (Romaine, 2017). It is the tool with which he conducts his business: acquiring higher education, getting an appropriate job, and performing many other routine tasks. A language is significant because the people who speak it are significant economically, culturally, politically, socially, and commercially (Shin, 2017). The English language

holds a very important position in the world and has advanced to the point where it is the most widely understood language, with French as the runner-up (Phillipson, 2017). To meet the needs of the contemporary era, especially of education, effective communication in English is inevitably important (Mahboob, 2017). It is indispensable for educators to communicate effectively and persuasively, that is, through speech and writing, to make progress economically, socially, and educationally (Burns, 2017).

Competency in ESL writing skills is of paramount importance for literacy and higher education at all academic institutions, from schools to universities (Fareed et al., 2016). In the modern world, the English language has irrefutable significance. This significance goes beyond the ESL learners' professional and instrumental requirement. This is the reason that many countries have made it an essential and inseparable part of learners' academics (Reddy, 2012). In the current business world, English is evidently the most important common language. Similarly, good jobs require good understanding and speaking skills in English. Therefore, multinational companies hire graduates who are proficient and eloquent in English. People working in an international organization have to know English because the job is highly demanding, such as communication with foreign workers. In the contemporary era of widening horizons in the realm of science and technology, English has irrefutable importance all over the world (Pennycook, 2017). We need to know English, as it is the need of the hour, to study any science subject or computer language, because English is the main language used on the internet, in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.

On many grounds, the four fundamental language skills are all interrelated. To become an excellent conversationalist, expertise in all skills is essential, but the proficiency to write eloquently and spontaneously endows the communicator with many distinctive merits. In the Pakistani educational system, English is taught as a foreign/second (EFL/ESL) and possesses the prominent place (Ali & Pathan, 2017). It is the medium of instruction at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in most of the private institutions, whereas in public sector institutions, it is quite different, where even English is taught in Urdu (Manan et al., 2017).

Despite the immense significance of English language productive skills, such as writing skills, in all walks of life. Most of the Pakistani ESL learners have their writing proficiency level is well below the required standard (Fareed et al., 2021). Many students at public sector colleges are unable to write fluently (Khan et al., 2023). Furthermore, although the English language in Pakistan starts from nursery class in the syllabus as a compulsory subject, still, the intermediate level students are not able to excel in their writing skills (Zaki & Dar, 2012). Considering the ever-growing seriousness of the issue, that is, the intermediate college students in Pakistan face the difficulty in writing English fluently and correctly, yet no serious attempts have been made so far to address this issue (Siddique & Sarjit Singh, 2017). To address these issues, access to quality materials in the form of textbooks is the need of the hour for all ESL learners in the nonnative setting of Kachru's outer circle. Traditional teaching methods focusing on rote memorization rather than interactive learning limit students' ability to grasp the language's rudimentary nuances (Fareed et al., 2021; Rasool et al., 2023). According to Solangi et al. (2021), there is a great emphasis on achieving good grades, prioritizing test-taking strategies over holistic language acquisition. Grammatical complexities, vocabulary acquisition, cultural barriers, motivation and fear of making errors or being judged radiate learners' reluctance to actively engage in writing practice.

One of the main difficulties in learning writing skills is the learners' fear, hesitation and shyness, which do not permit them to learn English and restrict them from performing communicative acts properly (Khan et al., 2021). The students feel shyness, lack of confidence and hesitation when communicating in English. Emotional factors such as fear, hesitation, and reluctance to engage in communication give birth to second language anxiety, a dominant contemporary phenomenon all over the world (Richards, 2022) and likewise in Pakistan (Malik & Pervaiz, 2023).

Similarly, when Pakistani ESL learners, like other L2 learners, start writing in English, they experience anxiety due to their below-average proficiency in grammar and academic vocabulary (Fareed et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2023). ESL writing anxiety turns out to be a serious problem for Pakistani HSC-level ESL learners in learning English. It triggers among the learners because of inadequate language proficiency, excessive frequency of writing assignments, time constraints, fear of negative evaluation, peer criticism and insufficient exposure to writing (Fareed et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2023). The deadlines of specific assignments from the teachers' desks, the pressure of extraordinary performance, the Urdu medium educational background, and less exposure to free writing cause writing anxiety among learners.

There has been keen interest among language learners in second language writing anxiety over the ages. There is much research conducted in this field, too. However, issues of ESL writing anxiety still demand solemn efforts for not only for better ESL learning but for overall better academic performance. The contradictory results in the studies of writing anxiety and writing performance demand more research in the field. The researcher not only aims at bringing the nature of the relationship that exists between writing anxiety and writing performance of EFL undergraduate students enrolled on compulsory English in Pakistan, but also the levels of writing anxiety they suffer from, its causes and remedial measures too. Research on writing anxiety holds immense significance as it sheds light on the psychological, educational, and social impacts of these anxieties by determining the levels and explaining the causes of writing anxiety.

The main research questions that guided the current study are as follows:

- What are the ESL writing anxiety levels among Pakistani HSC-level ESL learners?
- What are the causes of writing anxiety among Pakistan HSC-level ESL learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Anxiety

Anxiety is a natural phenomenon differently defined by anthropologists, educationists, psychologists and linguists in their contexts, but they agree on the following characteristics of anxiety: fear, some distressing states of mind, threatening situations and uneasiness (Jiang & Papi, 2022). Brown (2008) defines anxiety as worry, frustration, discomfort, uneasiness, or self-doubt. Normally, the literature on the psychological phenomenon of anxiety categorises anxiety into three types (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Tallon, 2009). Being stable over time, trait anxiety includes personal characteristics of people who become nervous in a variety of situations. On other hand the momentary emotional situation of state anxiety contains feelings of apprehension experienced by people at a particular moment and changes over time (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 2017). Situation-specific anxiety examines a particular kind of anxiety linked with a particular situation in a single context. All types of anxieties related to basic language skills come under the heading of situation-specific anxiety, which is constant over time but changes across situations (Horwitz, 2001; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Tran, 2012). The research in the past displays that anxiety has both negative and positive impacts on language learners. Thus, it is categorized into debilitating anxiety and facilitating anxiety as well (Scovel, 1978). The debilitating anxiety is harmful for the learners, having negative effects, whereas the facilitating anxiety is highly helpful for the L2 (Scovel, 1978). Additionally, Gardner et al. (1992) relate that language learners are highly anxious; this state of being anxious builds a negative behaviour towards learning an L2 and hinders its learning. Learners facing debilitating anxiety skip classes, avoid their teachers and end up leaving their institutions (Chao, 2003).

2.2 Historical Perspective of Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety has been of great concern for researchers since 1940 (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). Since the mid-1960s, research scholars have started thinking that L2 anxiety could impede overall academic performance (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Piniel, 2013). After investigating the impact of anxiety on other affective-motivational constructs

of L2 learning, the scholars ended with more questions than finding their answers (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Smart et al. (1970) revealed that researchers in the field of language anxiety claim that intelligence and aptitude are the predictor variables. Scovel (1978) conducted a classic review of anxiety research, but the outcomes of his study were mixed and confusing. He was unable to find any clear answer on this particular association. Similarly, the other researchers of the time found a contradictory correlation between proficiency and language anxiety. Swain and Burnaby (1976) and Tucker et al. (1976) found that language anxiety influences children's proficiency significantly and negatively. Most of the researchers at that time reported significant correlation between L2 anxiety and performance. The studies on foreign or second language anxiety yielded contradictory results owing to difference in context, populations, research instrument and statistical techniques employed. Chastain (1975) conducted a comprehensive study on different foreign language students among German and Spanish students. They were taught by using conventional instructional framework, and a positive correlation was found between anxiety and language performance, whereas the research also yielded opposite results in the case of students who studied French as a foreign language using the audio-lingual method. Scovel (1978) emphasizes that there should be a clear-cut distinction made between facilitative and debilitating impact of anxiety in an attempt to resolve the contradiction in findings of these experimental studies.

Two approaches in the existing literature have been elaborated in the description of the psychological phenomenon of L2 anxiety (Horwitz & Young, 1991). The first approach includes anxiety, which is caused by fear and discomfort while communicating with others or appearing in the test. The second approach contains situation-specific anxiety that a learner faces while acquiring an L2, not during its performance. Initially, the investigation of language anxiety fell under the umbrella of the first approach. According to Tran (2012) and Tallon (2009), this perspective was utterly inappropriate to study skill-specific anxiety because L2 anxiety researchers believed that anxiety is not situation-specific. That is why the studies conducted on foreign language anxiety produced contradictory findings. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined anxiety with clarity and they affirmed that it has its deep roots in L2 learning context. The other problem that led to conflicting results was the unavailability of suitable research instruments to measure language anxiety, as the research tools employed to measure anxiety were derived from the field of psychology (Tallon, 2009; Tran, 2012). In the 1980s, the understanding of language anxiety was accelerated. During this period, the impact of L2 anxiety on L2 achievement and performance (Horwitz, 2010). Bailey (1983) was the first researcher to investigate language anxiety from the learners' point of view in his diary study. He found that the negative self-comparison of learners contributes significantly to language anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) developed a research tool for assessing the foreigner learners levels of anxiety. Since then, the research instrument has been accepted and employed in researching L2 anxiety (Tran, 2012). The researchers explored language anxiety from different perspectives. Its sequence in history was elaborated in a timeline of studies on L2 anxiety formulated by Horwitz in 2010. This sequence contains the influence of L2 anxiety on L2 acquisition and the reduction of L2 anxiety through instructional strategies. Moreover, the link of L2 anxiety with other affective-motivational factors in L2 learning with age, gender and socioeconomic status was researched in different contexts.

2.3 Writing Anxiety

In the existing literature, L2 writing anxiety means the feelings of fear, discomfort, and apprehension when expressing ideas or feelings in the mode of writing (Dar & Khan, 2015; Fareed et al., 2016; Rasuan & Wati, 2021). Pakistan L2 anxiety researchers often explore levels and causes, i.e. educational practices, cultural influences, language barriers, and individual differences. The recent research in Pakistani context on L2 writing anxiety are Ajmal et al. (2023), Ajmal and Irfan (2020), Dar and Khan (2015), Fareed et al. (2021), Jaleel and Rauf (2023), Kurd et al. (2023), Rasool et al. (2023), Sabir et al. (2022), Shehzadi et al. (2021), and Solangi et al. (2021). Among these research studies, only Dar and Khan (2015) and Solangi et al. (2021) explored the levels of writing anxiety among undergraduate Pakistani students. However, no study in the Pakistani context has been found that explores the levels of writing anxiety among HSC-level students. As per available data, there are only two studies that focus on the causes of writing anxiety at the university level in the local context. Jaleel and Rauf (2023) examined the causes

of English writing anxiety at the undergraduate level in the EFL context. A comprehensive study on the causes of English writing anxiety among Pakistani ESL students and the perceptions of students and teachers at the university level has been conducted by Fareed et al. (2021), too. The causes of writing anxiety at the HSC level in the Pakistani context have not been explored by any researcher, as per available data. The causes of writing anxiety need to be established for the solution of writing anxiety at any level. Kurd et al. (2023) explored factors causing English writing anxiety among undergraduate students of Balochistan, Pakistan. Rasool et al. (2023) examined the reasons for writing anxiety among pre-service EFL teachers at a public university in Multan. On the other hand, Shehzadi et al. (2021) conducted a study on the impact of motivation and self-efficacy on English writing anxiety and self-efficacy on English writing performance with the moderating role of English writing achievement. There are certain studies which examine the relation of other factors to writing anxiety. Sabir et al. (2022) examined the role of intrinsic motivation in reducing writing anxiety in English as a foreign language among undergraduates in Pakistan at a university in Multan. Khan et al. (2021) investigated the correlation between writing anxiety and English creativity in Pakistani ESL students at the University of Agriculture, Faisalabad. Despite recent research on writing anxiety, there remains a gap in determining the levels of ESL writing anxiety among HSC-level students and the relationship among levels of writing anxiety. This research aims to address this gap by exploring levels of ESL writing anxiety and the relationship between the levels and the causes of the writing anxiety at the HSC level.

3. Research Methodology

The present study examined the levels of Pakistani ESL learners studying at HSC-level. It also investigated the causes of writing anxiety among the respondents. The participants studied English as a compulsory subject at five public and private sector colleges in Karachi Pakistan. The philosophical worldview of pragmatism lays the theoretical foundation of this study. As an appropriate philosophical worldview for mixed-method research, it focuses on the problem in social science research from different perspectives (Morgan, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). While pragmatism provides the main underpinning of the study, the specific research method employed can best be described as the mixed method. The mixed-methods approach is due to the nature of this study, which best suited the nature and theoretical framework of the current research. According to Creswell (2008, p. 203), "There is more insight to be gained from the combination of both qualitative and quantitative research than either form by itself, and their combined use provides an expanded understanding of research problems". The present study employed the explanatory-sequential design. The researcher began with a quantitative research phase and investigated the levels of writing anxiety first. The data are then analyzed, and the information is used to build into a second qualitative phase.

3.1 Research Site and Participants

The quantitative data were collected from 500 HSC-level ESL learners from Karachi, Pakistan. The sample size was calculated on an online sample size calculator with a 95% confidence level of 95 and a 3% margin of error. In order to ensure the concurrent validity of the sample size, GPower was also used, which substantiated the calculation of the sample size. The students also differ in age, gender, region of origin and first language. The qualitative data were collected after determining the levels of writing anxiety of the students. Six students having high, moderate and low levels of writing anxiety were selected for the focus-group interview.

3.2 Research Instruments

The complete set of the writing anxiety questionnaire was adopted from Kutuk et al. (2020). The instrument comprised three components of writing anxiety dimensions, such as behavioural, emotional and cognitive. The Cronbach Alpha value of .78 shows the adequate statistical reliability of the instrument. Moreover, for its qualitative analyses, focus-group interview protocols were developed as per the recommendations of (Braun et al., 2012). The following table shows the data normalcy in distribution and the statistical reliability of the questionnaire, too.

Table 1*Descriptive results of the writing anxiety questionnaire*

	No of Items	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach Alpha
WA	6	2.46	.80410	.278	-.152	.781

4. Result

After running the data cleaning tests on SPSS 27 version, the mean score and standard deviation were calculated. Fifty-one multivariate outliers were identified in the dataset using the Mahalanobis distance value. The sample size for further analyses was reduced to 449 participants. The addition of the standard deviation to the mean score signifies the high level of writing anxiety among the respondents, whereas its subtraction from the mean score signifies the low level of writing anxiety. The range between the two ranges determines the moderate level of the construct under investigation. (For more details, see the table. 2)

Table 1*Criteria for Calculating the Ranges for Writing Anxiety Levels*

Latent Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level	Range
Writing Anxiety	3.3318	1.04683	High	≥ 4.37
			Moderate	2.29-4.38
			Low	≤ 2.28

4.1 Levels of Writing Anxiety Levels

The data analyses show that the majority of the respondents (N=280) experience a moderate level of writing anxiety, the smallest number of respondents (N=77) had a high level of writing anxiety, and 92 participants were found having low level of writing anxiety. Table 3 shows a clear picture of the writing anxiety among the research participants of the current study.

Table 3*Writing Anxiety Levels*

Levels	Ranges	Percentage of the Learners
High Level of WA	≥ 4.37	17.15%
Moderate Level of WA	2.29-4.38	62.36%
Low Level of WA	≤ 2.28	20.49%

4.2 Causes of Writing Anxiety

The focus-group data were analysed using NVivo. Reflexive thematic analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2019), was employed for the analyses. After the six-step analysis, it was found that Pakistani HSC-level ESL learners experience anxiety due to evaluation pressure, which is because of the fear of mistakes, fear of negative evaluation and peer criticism. Moreover, cognitive overload, surveillance stress, underutilization of writing strategies, and ineffective instructional frameworks cause writing anxiety among the participants. (For more details, see the Figure 1)

Figure 1

ESL Writing Anxiety



5. Discussion

The first research question of the current research is “What are the ESL writing anxiety levels among Pakistani HSC-level ESL learners?” The quantitative examination revealed that most of the participants experienced a moderate level of writing anxiety. These findings are well aligned with Dar and Khan (2015), who also found that 61.48 per cent of ESL learners at the university level experience a moderate level of writing anxiety.

The second research question of the present study is “What are the causes of ESL writing anxiety in Pakistani HSC-level ESL learners?” It was formulated to explore the causes that contribute to ESL writing anxiety among Pakistani ESL learners. The data analyses revealed that cognitive overload, evaluation threat, the pressure of perfection, instructional design and underutilisation of writing strategies are the main overarching causes of ESL writing anxiety among Pakistani ESL learners. These findings of the current study align well with those of Luo (2025), Quvanch and Si Na (2022) and Sabti et al. (2024). The results of all these study disclosed the L2 learners experienced ESL WA due to time constraints, cognitive overload, pressure of perfect performance, formal classroom settings, and feelings of negative evaluation, criticism by the teachers and peers, presence of others, thoughts of committing mistakes and lack of awareness in using writing strategies were highlighted as the main causes of the ESL WA. While taking part in the writing activities, learners had a mental block that resulted in the disorganisation of ideas in their mind and forgetting of the academic vocabulary they were completely familiarised. This causes ESL WA among the Learners’, which hinders their ability to plan, structure, and communicate their ideas in writing despite their good understanding of the subject matter. The fear of being negatively evaluated was reported by participants on multiple occasions, as they experienced discomfort if teachers went around the classroom, read drafts over the shoulders of students, or carefully monitored academic progress. The feeling of being watched contributed to a rise in anxiety and a disruption in attention. Even before receiving corrective feedback, learners felt that they were being evaluated. The students considered themselves inferior to others. They thought their peers were better writers, which further hampered their ability to generate ideas while writing. This emphasises that without the anxiety of being judged right away, learners require psychological space in which they can think, draft, and modify their work. The majority of the respondents believed that good writing skills are confined to grammatically correct and impressive language. Consequently, they did not focus on the content and substantial ideas for writing. The fear of making grammatical errors and incorrect use of words among the respondents caused their hesitation, and instead of writing fluently, they kept erasing and rewriting, which ultimately slowed down

their writing speed. Thus, pressure to achieve perfection led to the transformation of writing from an activity that was creative or communicative into a work that was oppressed with danger, where mistakes were seen as personal failures rather than opportunities for learning. The students were dissatisfied with the instructional strategies that placed a heavy emphasis on the memorisation of essays or formats without providing sufficient explanation or opportunities for practice. The learners had a lack of awareness of writing strategies. The participants with a low level of ESL WA revealed that they used these strategies, which resulted in a low level of ESL WA. They viewed writing as a skill that can be improved via additional practice. They acknowledged that making mistakes was an part of L2 learning. Criticism was nothing more than a means of reforming their writing skills. Hence, it may be said that found learners who developed adaptive strategies managed their stress and engaged with writing activities productively, even when they are subjected to judgmental settings.

6. Recommendation and Conclusion

This study recommends more research on examining the levels of anxiety related to other skills, i.e. listening, reading and speaking, at the intermediate level. The future studies should also collect qualitative data through observations, open-ended/ semi-structured questionnaires, observation, Field notes for further exploration the causes of speaking, listening and reading anxiety.

The present explanatory-sequential study formulated two research questions to examine the levels of ESL writing anxiety and explore its causes. The study in light of its findings concludes that the majority of the Pakistani HSC-level ESL learners experience L2 writing anxiety at a moderate level. While exploring the causes of the writing anxiety, it was found that evaluation pressure, such as the fear of mistakes and peer criticism, cognitive overload, surveillance stress, underutilisation of writing strategies, and ineffective instructional frameworks, cause writing anxiety among the participants.

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