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Understanding ESL Postgraduate Students' Dissertation Writing Challenges: The Interplay Between Second Language Writing Anxiety and Writer's Block

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ABSTRACT

No matter how hard they try, some ESL postgraduate students experience periods when they can produce, if any, little writing. When such periods last for a considerable amount of time, the student is said to have a writer's block (WB). Given the reciprocal connection between WB and second language writing anxiety (SLWA), more evidence is needed to determine the connection between the two factors in dissertation writing. Hence, this study aimed to investigate how challenges in second language (L2) postgraduate dissertation writing may heighten SLWA and WB, while also examining their interplay. In this mixed-method study, a total of 43 postgraduate students participated by completing an online survey to assess their levels of SLWA, while a subset of nine participants underwent semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis revealed that WB stems from: i) SLWA experience; and ii) challenges in the writing process, research conceptualization,

academic writing conventions, and academic reading. To overcome SLWA and WB, it is recommended that supervisors and language teachers provide specific suggestions to resolve writing issues, refrain from using anxiety to provoke performance, help break down the ultimate goal of dissertation writing into several obtainable goals, and foster open discussions about strategies for motivation and progress monitoring.

KEYWORDS: ESL postgraduate students, Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA), Writer's Block (WB), dissertation writing, mixed-method study

Introduction

Dissertation writing poses a significant challenge for postgraduate students with non-native English-speaking backgrounds, often due to factors such as low English language proficiency, underdeveloped critical reading skills, and insufficient knowledge of metadiscourse and academic writing (Al-Mukdad, 2019; Bitchener, 2018; Lin et al., 2021; Mohd Isa et al., 2018; Shahsavar et al., 2020). These students frequently struggle with various aspects of writing, including forming grammatically correct sentences, exercising authorial voice, maintaining coherence, and effectively synthesizing literature and arguments (Mohd Isa et al., 2018; Shahsavar et al., 2020). Their ability to produce high-quality text is often impeded by factors such as limited language proficiency and a lack of genre and textual knowledge (Hinkel, 2011). In response, many higher education institutions have implemented skill-based courses in postgraduate programs, focusing on areas like academic writing, research methodology, and supplementary English, to support students in completing their dissertations. However, despite these efforts, graduation rates within the expected time frame (iGoT) remain low, with the average iGoT for postgraduates falling below 50% (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016). This suggests that current interventions may not be sufficient to enhance students' dissertation writing performance effectively.

Moreover, the emotional aspect of postgraduate dissertation writing has received little attention, with societal norms often treating personal struggles as an inherent part of obtaining an advanced degree. However, a quantitative study involving postgraduate students revealed that a majority of participants experienced high levels of SLWA, with dissertation writing being the primary source of anxiety (Huwari et al., 2011). French (2018) argued that the severity of anxiety is closely tied to the perceived importance of writing tasks. Thus, SLWA, characterized by recurring negative and anxious feelings during writing (Woodrow, 2011), could significantly impact postgraduate students' writing performance.

Literature Review

In L2 settings, the connection between SLWA and writing performance appears to be particularly pronounced for several reasons. Firstly, past studies have consistently shown a negative correlation between SLWA and writing performance, indicating that students with higher levels of anxiety tend to achieve lower scores in writing tasks (Jin et al., 2021; Kafryawan et al., 2021; Rasuan et al., 2021). This negative relationship suggests that SLWA can significantly impact the quality of

written outputs, leading to lower levels of coherence and organization. Additionally, SLWA has been identified as both a consequence and a contributing factor to WB, a phenomenon commonly experienced by individuals when faced with writing tasks (Landman, 2016; Dela-Rosa et al., 2018). This reciprocal relationship between SLWA and WB underscores the complexity of anxiety's role in hindering the writing process, particularly in L2 contexts. Postgraduate students, in particular, may find themselves grappling with the challenges posed by SLWA, as it can manifest as psychological and physiological reactions that impede their ability to engage effectively with writing tasks (Choi, 2013; Woodrow, 2011). Overall, the evidence suggests that SLWA has a more pronounced impact on writing performance in L2 settings compared to other contexts (Teimouri et al., 2019). This heightened connection underscores the importance of addressing SLWA in language learning environments, especially for individuals undertaking academic writing tasks such as dissertations.

Moreover, SLWA experience appears to vary from one student to another (Wahyuni et al., 2017; Jawas, 2019). Some students may experience a high level of cognitive anxiety (Jafari, 2019; Jin et al., 2021; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018), a high level of somatic anxiety (Fitriada et al., 2018; Lau et al., 2014), or a strong tendency for avoidance behaviors (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2021; Solangi et al., 2021). It seems that trait SLWA (tendency to become anxious) may not necessarily reflect an individual's state anxiety (actual experience of anxiety). In his study, Rungruangthum (2011) reported a discrepancy between the results of the participants' SLWA self-assessment and the data from semi-structured interviews. It seems that a low trait SLWA level could manifest into state anxiety with varying intensity (Fajri et al., 2018). In other words, low or moderate trait SLWA could still affect writing performance (Cantina, 2016; Wahyuni et al., 2019).

Furthermore, past studies have explored how SLWA impacts not only students but also ESL/ELT teachers or instructors. Research has shown that teachers may play a crucial role in either exacerbating or alleviating students' anxiety levels through their teaching approaches and feedback methods (Di Loreto et al., 2014; Wan Osman et al., 2021). For instance, teachers who provide supportive and constructive feedback can help mitigate students' anxiety and foster a positive learning environment (Wang, 2021). Conversely, overly critical or insensitive feedback may heighten students' anxiety and impede their writing progress (Tsao et al., 2017; Wan Osman et al., 2023). Understanding the reciprocal relationship between student anxiety and teacher practices is essential for creating effective strategies to address SLWA in educational settings. Therefore, in order to comprehensively understand the challenges ESL postgraduate students, face in dissertation writing, this study aims to explore the different aspects of their writing experience that contribute to both SLWA and writing block, while also examining their interplay.

Following the above, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- a) What second language writing anxiety experience do the ESL postgraduate students face in dissertation writing?
- b) How does second language writing anxiety influence ESL postgraduate students' written output?

Method

The mixed method design, using an online survey and semi-structured interview, is viewed as the optimal research design to address the individual - and contextual-specific nature of SLWA, WB and dissertation writing process. The data integration allows the researchers to construct a comprehensive view of the research landscape through diverse research lenses and from different viewpoints (Shorten et al., 2017). Comparatively, a quantitative design appears less suitable as it relies on statistical analysis, linear attributes, and measurements (Stake, 2010).

Selection of Participants

The research participants, 43 postgraduate students, were purposefully sampled from various local universities via WhatsApp groups using an online survey. Selection criteria included English proficiency, academic writing experience, and dissertation progress, as these factors correlate with SLWA. All participants were ESL learners, chosen for their status as ESL learners writing dissertations in English (a mandatory requirement). Cheng (1999) cautions against selecting ethnolinguistically heterogeneous samples, as they may introduce various undocumented contributing factors. Subsequently, nine participants were selected for semi-structured interviews based on similarities and differences in these criteria. In summary, a careful selection process was undertaken to generate the findings.

The Instrument

The online survey includes a demographic questionnaire and Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). The first section gathers demographic data, including WB experience, past academic writing, dissertation progress, and perceived challenges. Cheng's SLWAI measures trait SLWA across three dimensions: cognitive anxiety (fear of negative evaluation, negative perception, and expectation), somatic anxiety (e.g., increased heart rate, breathing, stomach discomfort, sweating, and shaky hands), and avoidance behaviors (procrastination and avoidance of writing situations). Widely used in previous studies on SLWA with ESL students, the SLWAI is particularly suited for examining SLWA tendencies (Zabihi, 2018; Nazari et al., 2019). With a reliability coefficient of .91, it collects data on respondents' cognitive and somatic anxiety, and avoidance tendencies, providing insights into SLWA tendencies, WB experience, and perceived dissertation writing challenges.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research obtained ethics clearance from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). Data collection spanned six weeks, conducted concurrently with data analysis. Initially, the online survey link was distributed over three weeks, with responses subjected to descriptive analysis. Subsequently, participants for semi-structured interviews were selected based on this analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed for exploration and documentation of participants' feelings, goals, beliefs, and thoughts, which are neither observable (Merriam et al., 2016) nor predetermined. Interview questions were constructed based on existing literature findings, focusing on four aspects: participants' experience of SLWA in dissertation writing, the effects of SLWA on their dissertation writing, perceived sources of SLWA experience, and

challenges faced in dissertation writing. Two weeks after completing thematic analysis, the researcher recoded interview data to ensure consistency (Mackey et al., 2016). Essentially, the qualitative data provides essential insights into students' SLWA and dissertation writing experience.

Findings and Discussions

WB stems from SLWA experience

The frequency of WB among the respondents varies, as depicted in Figure 1, with some reporting multiple instances within a semester (28% of total respondents) and others experiencing it as frequently as during their dissertation work (23%). However, a minority reported no occurrences (9%). Yet, they noted being frequently stuck while tackling specific dissertation sections, such as the introduction (especially the problem statement), literature review, and findings and discussion chapters. This suggests that WB tends to manifest when grappling with issues related to research conceptualization, academic reading, and synthesizing information.

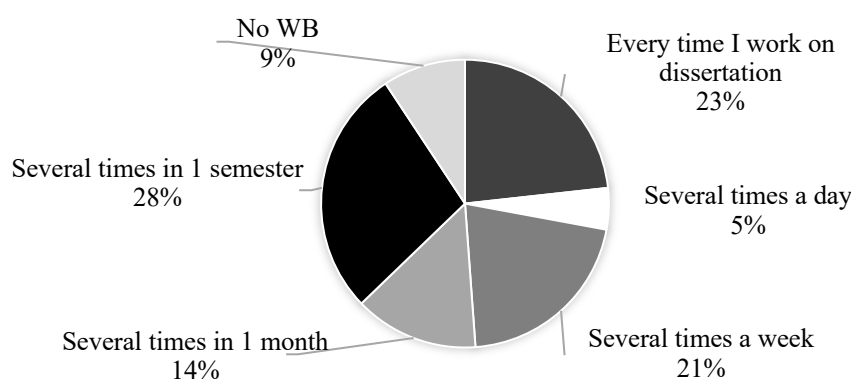


Figure 1. Frequency of Writer's Block

Upon closer scrutiny, respondents experiencing frequent WB also demonstrated elevated levels of trait SLWA. This aligns with the reciprocal relationship reported in existing literature (Landman, 2016). According to the SLWAI results, 51% displayed moderate trait SLWA levels, 33% showed high levels, and 16% exhibited low levels. However, trait SLWA levels may not always predict the actual state of anxiety during writing (Rungruangthum, 2011). As per Spielberger's (1966) Model of State and Trait Anxiety, anxiety possesses relatively stable trait and state qualities, which can vary in intensity and fluctuate over time. It is noteworthy that despite Adam having low levels, he experienced intense state SLWA during dissertation work. Adam recounted his SLWA experiences during the interview:

I always make sure I mean what I write? So, I'd have to double check everything... I have to go back to the books. It slows me down; it causes me anxiety. It makes the buzzing sound a bit louder at the back of my brain. (Adam)

Hence, even with moderate or low trait SLWA levels, students may undergo fluctuations in state anxiety during dissertation writing, particularly under anxiety-inducing circumstances. Consequently, they are susceptible to WB when confronting intense state SLWA. This underscores the intricate relationship between WB and SLWA, suggesting that heightened anxiety levels can exacerbate writing difficulties.

These findings carry significant implications for ESL/ELT educators. MacIntyre (2017) pointed out that previous research has struggled to provide clear and actionable guidance in dealing with SLWA. Understanding the interplay between SLWA and WB can aid educators in crafting targeted interventions to assist students in overcoming writing challenges. While some educators may instinctively recognize its symptoms, insufficient awareness may hinder its integration into teaching or communication considerations when interacting with students. Hence, by identifying potential triggers for WB, educators can deploy strategies to alleviate anxiety and cultivate a supportive writing environment. Furthermore, insights into the relationship between SLWA and WB can shape instructional practices aimed at enhancing students' writing skills and mitigating anxiety levels in L2 settings.

WB stems from challenges in the writing process, research conceptualization, academic writing conventions, and academic reading

Moreover, the chapters in dissertation writing where respondents tend to encounter difficulties align with the parts they perceive as challenging. As illustrated in Figure 2, regardless of their levels of trait SLWA and frequency of WB, each respondent struggled with aspects such as the writing process, adherence to academic writing conventions, research conceptualization, and critical reading of academic texts. Hence, it seems that the challenges they faced in the earlier stages of dissertation writing, such as academic reading and research conceptualization, may have snowballed and influenced other aspects of their dissertation writing.

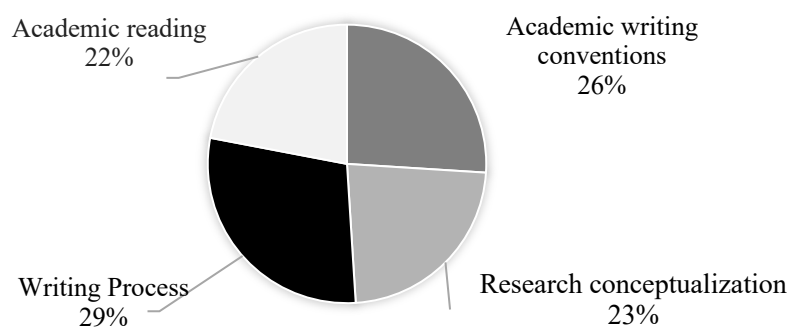


Figure 2. ESL Postgraduate Students' Dissertation Writing Challenges

These insights shed light on the specific areas where students encounter obstacles in their academic writing journey. By understanding the challenges faced by students, educators can tailor their instructional approaches to address these issues effectively. For example, educators can

incorporate targeted activities and resources to enhance students' critical reading skills and research conceptualization abilities. Additionally, educators can provide scaffolding and support to help students navigate through the writing process, thereby reducing anxiety and promoting a more conducive learning environment.

Such interventions are important because students may be able to read academic texts, but they may not derive significant benefits from their reading that can aid them in writing their dissertations. Proficient readers and writers have been observed to reflect on both reading and writing and capitalize on the existing connections to allow transfer between the two skill sets (Jackson, 2009). As a result, they can develop higher-order thinking processes in reasoning, synthesizing, and identifying organizational patterns in writing (Valeri-Gold et al., 2000). However, most L2 students are unable to effectively combine both reading and writing skills, not only to comprehend the materials but also to formulate content in writing (Grabe et al., 2013). Indeed, the respondents in this study seem to struggle the most in analyzing ideas and identifying the implications of reading (19%). Likewise, they also find it challenging to remember major ideas for later reference or future use (17%), compare and contrast ideas (15%), understand academic and discipline-specific vocabulary (14%), search for alternative sources of reading texts (13%), skim and scan to read more texts (12%), as well as determine the main idea or aspects of an article (9%). From this perspective, they appear to face difficulties in tasks requiring the integration of reading and writing, specifically inferencing, summarizing, synthesizing, and critically responding to a text (Grabe et al., 2013). Since opportunities to learn and practice reading and writing as integrated skills are not readily available in the classroom, students may not have developed the necessary reading and writing proficiency to thrive academically at the postgraduate level. Thus, underdeveloped reading skills or issues in academic reading may not only disrupt the writing process and contribute to students' SLWA and WB but also influence their written output.

In addition, issues in academic reading and insufficient reading could also contribute to problems in research conceptualization, as the respondents appear to have difficulty identifying the research gap (20%), determining the theoretical framework (18%), and selecting the appropriate research design (18%) for their study. They also struggle with conceptualizing research (17%) and constructing the conceptual framework (16%). Therefore, it is important for students to be equipped with academic reading skills that enable them to compare and contrast ideas, analyze ideas, identify implications of reading, and search for alternative sources of reading texts, in order to conceptualize their research successfully.

These findings underscore the critical role of academic reading skills in the research process and emphasize the need to integrate reading and writing instruction in ESL/ELT classrooms. By providing students with the necessary reading strategies and techniques, educators can empower them to engage more effectively with scholarly literature and gain a deeper understanding of their research topics. Offering students opportunities to practice these skills together can help bridge the gap between reading and writing proficiency. Additionally, educators can incorporate strategies to enhance students' critical reading skills, such as active reading techniques and vocabulary instruction, to support their academic writing endeavors. Furthermore, educators can offer guidance and support to help students navigate the research process, from identifying research

gaps to constructing conceptual frameworks, thereby fostering their research conceptualization abilities.

Without a solid empirical blueprint to guide their research, students may find dissertation writing particularly challenging. It is easy to become lost while navigating through a massive amount of literature and data when you do not have a clear idea of the research parameters and potential implications. This is reflected in the respondents' struggles to express their own authorial voice (17%), use academic and discipline-specific vocabulary (16%), maintain coherence and cohesion (15%), and organize their writing (14%). Consequently, they find it particularly difficult to produce quality written text when working under time constraints (17%), extensively locate relevant information resources (16%), and integrate and synthesize information from the literature (13%). Other challenges include organizing their writing to meet expected academic writing conventions (13%), providing relevant reasons and examples to support ideas (12%), avoiding plagiarism (12%), and writing concisely (10%). Given these points, when students struggle to write their dissertations, they may require more time and effort to make progress, as it could involve multiple layers of unresolved issues, such as research conceptualization and academic reading.

Furthermore, since their academic success hinges on their writing and language abilities to complete the dissertation, the lack of consistent progress may have led them to worry and fear possible negative outcomes. As expressed in the interviews, the lack of progress, stemming from unresolved writing issues, appears to have caused considerable cognitive anxiety.

Usually when I experience SLWA, I'll be anxious and I don't know what to write. But usually when I feel that way, I would google to search for articles or anything that I could like, you know, refer to so, that I could progress? So, I could move on with my writing. But if I couldn't find any then, I'll be anxious. (Elena)

The participants attributed their writing struggles to feelings of being lost and anxious due to not being able to see a clear direction to advance their dissertation writing. Consequently, they expressed many doubts in their own writing and research decisions, further exacerbating their cognitive anxiety.

Once I know what to do, I am okay; instantaneously, I'll be okay. Not knowing is what left me in the dark. I'd feel uneasy. (Sophia)

When I am lost, I'll be like, nervous. I don't know, so I'm anxious. I don't know what I should write or whether I am going into the right direction or not. (Elena)

Is this right? Is my writing correct? Am I answering the questions? Is it related? Am I writing what is required? Am I using the correct format? The language...do I need to rephrase it? Am I highlighting the main ideas? (Emma)

According to existing literature on perception, individuals often judge their ability based on the ease and effort required to perform a task (Proffitt et al., 2020). From this perspective, the lack of progress and/or perceived struggles in writing may have influenced individuals' perception of their

own ability to write well, particularly as highly apprehensive respondents tend to be preoccupied with performance. They constantly worried about maintaining language accuracy, ensuring coherence in their writing, and addressing the reader's needs. Therefore, the unresolved issues in dissertation writing that students faced may not only impede their writing progress but also influence their perception of their own writing skills and SLWA.

In such circumstances, SLWA may influence the dissertation writing process. Based on interviews with the respondents, they often found themselves struggling to maintain focus while writing. In some cases, this struggle could even lead to procrastination.

When anxiety sets in because my mind is exhausted from deciding which to focus first, that is when I start to procrastinate. If I force myself to choose and decide which one to do, I would become stressed. When I am stressed, I just cannot focus. (Rayqal)

It is slowing my progress because I usually can't focus 100% whenever I start writing. I'd start with a focus but after 10 to 15 minutes, I'll start thinking why... (Damia)

Since self-related thoughts such as self-doubt, anxiety, fear, and worries contain emotional content that occupies thought processes and sustains attentional engagement (Hajcak et al., 2016), they could gain more prominence than task-related thoughts when apprehensive students are writing (Eysenck, 1979). This could result in cognitive interference and less efficient cognitive performance (Zabihi, 2018). In such cases, SLWA could impede students' writing progress. These insights emphasize the importance of addressing students' writing anxiety and self-doubt in ESL/ELT classrooms. By providing students with strategies to manage their anxiety and build confidence in their writing abilities, educators can help alleviate cognitive barriers and promote a more positive writing experience. Additionally, educators can create a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing their concerns and seeking help when needed.

Limitations of the Study

Nevertheless, this study has its limitations. The number of the participants for the online survey and the number of respondents for the interview are considerably small and with a bigger group, the result may have been different. However, since the aim of the study is not generalization but transferability by exploring and describing the challenges and the different aspects of dissertation writing that could contribute to student's WB and SLWA, the study has managed to show how such writing issues could contribute to the affective phenomena and vice versa.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ESL postgraduate students often encounter difficulties when translating their research into writing, primarily due to unresolved issues in adhering to academic writing conventions, conceptualizing research, and comprehending academic texts. The findings suggest

that unresolved issues at the early stages of dissertation writing, such as in research conceptualization and academic reading, may contribute to subsequent problems as students progress in their writing. Not only do these issues impede writing progress, but they also contribute to students' WB and SLWA in dissertation writing. This cyclical nature, where emotional content in both cognitive and affective phenomena obstruct the writing process and, in turn, exacerbates existing writing issues, underscores the mental and emotional challenges that postgraduate students face as they strive to complete their dissertation writing.

In light of these findings, models of dissertation writing should place equal emphasis on both the affective and cognitive aspects of the writing process. It is imperative to consider what existing models promote about how individuals approach dissertation writing because postgraduate students may require more than just academic assistance to succeed. Supervisors and language teachers are encouraged to provide specific suggestions to resolve writing issues, refrain from inducing anxiety to provoke performance, break down the ultimate goal of dissertation writing into several obtainable goals that match students' current skills, and encourage open dialogue about problems and strategies to effectively monitor motivation and writing progress. In summary, addressing the affective aspect of dissertation writing is crucial for truly supporting students, as the emergence of SLWA highlights the necessity for such intervention.

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