

Fear of Writing and Motivation to Write among Engineering Undergraduates

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Abstract

Writing is difficult and takes motivation to succeed. Despite the increased requirement for English writing skills, many ESL engineering students fear and struggle with it. Lack of motivation to write might further hinder students' writing development. Writers need motivation to express themselves, communicate meaningfully, and fascinate their audience. This research examines learners' perspectives of their writing fear and motivation, as well as the link between the two. A purposive sample of 41 participants replied to the survey. A 5 Likert-scale survey was adapted based on SLWAI and SRW-Writing Motivation questionnaires. Results showed that students usually experience somatic symptoms and value English writing. Their desire to do well academically and satisfaction in their accomplishments show controlled motivation. The correlation analysis indicates a modest positive association between the fear of writing and the motivation to write. Further research could explore potential interventions aimed at alleviating anxiety and reducing students' fear towards writing.

Keywords: ESL Writing, Writing Fear, Writing Motivation

Introduction

Engaging in academic writing can be daunting and intricate task, filled with various emotional and psychological challenges that can hinder progress and erode confidence. These challenges frequently arise as feelings of unease or nervousness when it comes to writing, which can greatly impede a student's capacity to express their thoughts clearly. This can result in a cycle of self-doubt and delay, further intensifying the fear of not succeeding in writing (Aidit et al., 2023). In ESL contexts, these issues are especially noticeable, as students face the additional challenges of language proficiency and the importance of academic writing. In this context, their written work not only showcases their intellectual abilities but also plays a vital role in determining their competency. Since writing is a challenging task, it requires a certain effort of motivation to ensure its success. This motivation not only influences the

quality of writing produced but also affects the overall learning outcomes students achieve in their academic pursuits (Ouahidi, 2020).

In today's world, having a strong command of English as a Second Language (ESL) is essential for achieving academic and professional excellence. This is especially true for engineering students, who are required to create technical documents, research papers, and reports. Nevertheless, even though there is a growing need for proficient English writing abilities, numerous ESL engineering students often face considerable fear and unease when it comes to writing in English. This fear can arise from a variety of factors, including a limited vocabulary, worries about grammar, and the pressure to meet academic standards (Akhtar et al., 2020). Writing in a second language requires a deep understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, as well as the ability to use them effectively in challenging academic situations. The concern over making mistakes, whether they are related to grammar, vocabulary, or sentence structure, can be especially heightened in rigorous academic settings where accuracy is of utmost importance. This is supported by Campbell (2019), who asserts that proficiency in areas such as writing organization, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary is crucial for English language learners in academic writing.

Adding to this challenge is the absence of motivation to participate in writing tasks, which can further impede students' progress in enhancing their writing abilities. Having a strong sense of motivation is crucial for writers as it allows them to effectively express themselves, engage in meaningful communication, and captivate their audience (Chen, 2016). Student fear and loss of confidence are common challenges in ESL writing classrooms (Chandler, 2007). Comprehending the significance of the fear or worry associated with writing is essential for students, since it directly affects their learning process and the resulting written work.

This study is done to explore learners perception on academic writing. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

- How do learners perceive their fear of writing?
- How do learners perceive their motivation to write?
- What is the relationship between fear of writing and motivation to write?

Literature

Writing is a process that requires significant amount of effort to be completed. As writing is complicated, it becomes even more challenging when students need to write in another language. The writing process becomes a dreading experience and fearsome for some. Academic writing in particular remains a significant challenge for many ESL students, who often struggle with the complexities of constructing well-structured, cogent arguments in a language that is not their native tongue (Abbasi, 2022).

The conflicts that arise when students grapple with the challenges of academic writing undoubtedly play a role in the fears they express. These fears stem from the pressure to become proficient writers, which can be daunting for those who are still learning the ropes (Chandler, 2007).

Fear may be defined as anxiety, discomfort, or hesitation over one's capacity to generate high-quality academic writing (Abbasi, 2022). Anxiety is considered to be a significant emotional element that plays a crucial role in the acquisition of a second or foreign language (He et al., 2021, p. 1). Fear and anxiety among students may eventually have an impact on their performance in language classes (Soriano & Co, 2022, page 450).

Writing anxiety may arise due to various internal and external factors. The internal factor is influenced by the individual characteristics of the learners, while the external factor is shaped by the learning process itself when students engage in writing. According to Paramarti et al (2023), there are several factors that can contribute to writing anxiety. These include concerns about being negatively evaluated or performing poorly on tests, feeling rushed or under time constraints, lacking certainty about one's writing abilities, struggling with language difficulties, having a limited understanding on the topic, lacking knowledge or skills in writing, feeling pressured to produce flawless work, and being overwhelmed by a high volume of assignments. In Cheng's (2004), study, a thorough exploration of anxiety was provided, covering somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behavior. This framework examined both the physical and mental dimensions of writing anxiety, as well as its influence on writing practices and behaviors. In the current study, this classification is employed to identify the different types of academic writing fears experienced by EFL students.

According to Zhang et al (2021), motivation is a complex concept that is influenced by the cognitive, affective, social, and contextual characteristics of the individual. Given the complexity of writing, it demands a considerable amount of motivation to ensure its triumph. The motivation of students to write is an important factor in their success. Students who have a strong internal drive to participate in the writing process are more likely to overcome challenges and ultimately produce high-quality academic work (Boening et al., 2019; Wijaya & Mbato, 2020; Bergen et al., 2020). The level of motivation has a significant impact on the quality of writing and the academic achievements of students. In his work, Dörnyei (2001) discusses motivation as a dynamic process that is constantly evolving and plays a crucial role in achieving success in second language learning.

Existing research paints a concerning picture, suggesting that ESL students often have difficulties in sustaining the essential motivation and confidence needed for effective academic writing (Syafii & Miftāh, 2020). Students may be more motivated to write when they meet the expectations of their instructors and can use their writing to clearly and persuasively convey their ideas to the intended audience (Syafii & Miftāh, 2020). Unfortunately, some learners may view writing assignments as tedious, overwhelming, or even intimidating tasks, leading them to approach such activities with a sense of unease or reluctance rather than a spirit of enthusiasm and engagement (Ouahidi, 2020).

De Smedt et al (2020), proposed a two-factor model that categorizes motivation into two distinct types: autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation, regarded as the most effective form of motivation, is characterized by engagement in an activity driven by an intrinsic sense of enjoyment or personal significance. In contrast, controlled motivation refers to participation in an activity due to external pressures or internal obligations. In their earlier study, De Smedt et al (2016), found that

students who possess autonomous motivation have a propensity to generate texts of superior quality. In contrast, students who are motivated by controllable factors show far less success in their writing pursuits.

Prior research has extensively examined the occurrence of writing anxiety among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. In a recent study by Jasman et al. (2023), they investigated the extent of writing anxiety experienced by diploma engineering students at UiTM, together with the fundamental factors contributing to this issue. The study involved 172 graduates students from the Engineering Faculty. Two instruments were employed to determine the extent and factors that contribute to writing anxiety among the students. The results of the descriptive analysis indicated that the respondents' writing anxiety was most significantly influenced by somatic anxiety, with cognitive anxiety following closely behind. Avoidance behaviour had the least significant effect. The main factors contributing to writing anxiety were concluded to be poor self-confidence and apprehension of receiving comments from instructors, with inadequate language proficiency being ranked third. It is also highlighted that instead of evading anxiety-provoking circumstances, it is crucial for L2 instructors to prioritise the provision of students with the requisite abilities and information to proficiently handle their anxiety in various learning settings.

In a separate study, Anthoney and Wilang (2023), examine the levels of writing anxiety among students and explore potential differences in anxiety levels based on nationality and locality. Their study used a three-step mixed-methods method. At first, a writing anxiety test was changed to measure avoidance behaviour, somatic anxiety, and cognitive anxiety. The second step was for some students to sort the anxiety comments from the questionnaire. At least eight to ten statements about writing anxiety were put into groups of four to five: four to five statements that strongly agreed and five statements that strongly disagreed. To mitigate recall bias, this sorting was conducted with a two-week interval. Lastly, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the factors that contribute to their writing fear. This study successfully identified unique writing anxiety-inducing scenarios encountered by students at an international university in Thailand. Furthermore, students hailing from Southeast Asia, where English is not the primary language, are expected to encounter a greater degree of writing anxiety compared to their counterparts from the United States and Asia, where English is either a native or second language. Consistent with prior research, students who completed their education in rural areas experience higher levels of anxiety compared to those from urban zones. Furthermore, the analysis of the five cases yielded four indicators of writing anxiety: level of self-confidence, limited time availability, engagement in activities, and anxiety related to tests.

Many studies have explored how learners' motivations are associated with their academic achievement in ESL writing contexts. In a recent study by Latif et al (2024), they look at how genre-based instruction affects English writing performance and motivation of Saudi university student. Their study consists of 21 second year students majoring in English. Employing a quasi-experimental design with non-random sampling, the researchers implemented genre-based instruction to the cohort of Saudi students. Their primary focus was on argumentative and classification essays, while also utilising various scales to assess students' motivation. Data were collected through pre- and post-instruction assessments and an open-ended questionnaire. The research findings demonstrated that the implementation

of genre-based instruction had a notable impact on the students' writing abilities and their level of motivation. However, it is important to note that the extent of improvement varied depending on the specific aspects of writing quality and motivational factors being considered. The open-ended questionnaire responses further solidified the positive experiences in writing learning and motivation.

In another study conducted by Myhill et al (2023), the researchers highlighted the importance of the classroom environment in nurturing and sustaining motivation for writing. The study utilised a comprehensive research methodology, incorporating a randomised controlled trial and qualitative data from both the residential program and classroom settings. 32 educators from schools in South-West England, instructing classrooms with a total of 711 pupils aged between 7 and 14 years old were involved with the study. This study specifically focusses on conducting a qualitative analysis of 32 interviews with 16 student focus groups. According to the data analysis, a significant number of students reacted favourably to novel teaching methods that granted them more independence and options and fostered a more cooperative approach to work. Thus, there was a surge in both confidence and motivation to engage in writing. This study emphasises the significance of the classroom setting in facilitating and maintaining desire to engage in writing. It emphasises that motivation is not only an inherent trait of a person but is also influenced by the surrounding community of writers.

A prior study conducted by Graham et al (2021), aimed to analyse the writing proficiency and motivating attitudes of students who were officially recognised as English language learners by their school district. The study was conducted in an urban school district located in the Southwest region of the United States. The district caters to a heterogeneous student body with more than 74 distinct languages spoken. The study included a cohort of 880 pupils ranging from third to eighth grade, all of whom were designated as English Language Learners (ELL) by the school system. The instruments include writing test and a motivational survey that evaluate the intrinsic, extrinsic, and self-regulation incentives for writing among the students. In accordance with favourable literacy results, the study revealed that 61% of English Language Learners (ELL) are driven by intrinsic motivations in their writing. Conversely, a mere 38% of respondents appreciated self-regulatory incentives, maybe because of the restricted chances available at educational institutions. Furthermore, 53% of the participants were motivated by external motivations, although they are often less successful in promoting literacy. Contrary to expectations, there were no notable gender disparities in writing motivation, even though females are often more proficient writers. The research also observed a decrease in all forms of writing motivation among students in grades three to eight, highlighting a need for further investigation into these trends.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is based on two key theories: Foreign Language Anxiety Theory (FLA), which addresses the anxiety related to language learning, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes the significance of both autonomous and controlled motivation. The FLA theory proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope in 1986 has been extensively utilised in the field of second language acquisition, demonstrating its significant impact and influence. This study extends the work of De Smedt (2020) by applying a two-factor model grounded in the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explore writing motivation. De Smedt's model, which distinguishes between autonomous and controlled motivation, has been successfully used to understand the motivations behind both academic and recreational reading and writing. This conceptual framework posits that there exists a relationship between writing anxiety and writing motivation. These two constructs exert mutual impact on one other.

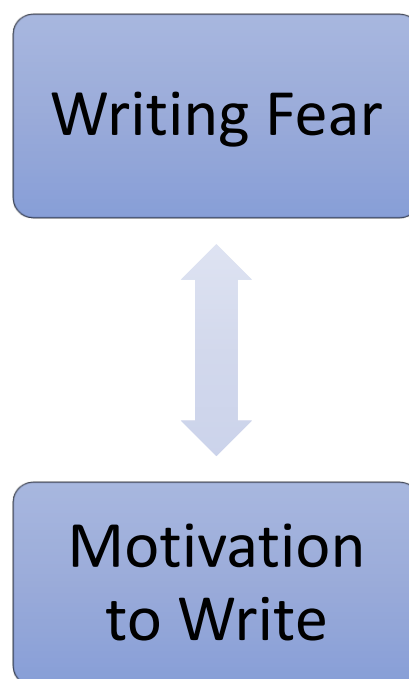


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study
The Relationship between Writing Fear and Motivation to Write

Methodology

This pilot quantitative study is done to Semester 3, Diploma Engineering students from Universiti Teknologi MARA. A purposive sample of 41 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from Cheng (2004) and De Smedt et al., (2018), to reveal the variables in table 1 below. The survey has 3 sections. Section A has items on demographic profile. Section B has 21 items on Writing Fear and Section C has 17 items on Writing Motivation.

Table 1

Distribution of Items in the Survey

PART	VARIABLES	NO OF ITEMS	CRONBACH ALPHA
A	Demographic Profile	5	
B	Writing Fear	21	.933
C	Writing Motivation	17	.859
	Total No of Items	38	.928

Table 1 also shows the reliability of the survey. A separate reliability test was done on the groups of items. Section B has a Cronbach alpha of .933. Section C and the total Cronbach alpha is .859. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .928 thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

Findings

Demographic Profile

Table 2

Demographic profile

Num	ITEM					
1	Gender	Male	Female			
	Percentage (%)	39% (16)	61% (25)			
2	Year of Study	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year		
	Percentage (%)	75.6% (31)	24.4 (10)	-		
3	Language Proficiency	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Fluent/Native	
	Percentage (%)	7.3% (3)	85.4% (35)	7.3% (3)	-	
4	Writing Experience	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	More than 10 years	
	Percentage (%)	2.4% (1)	12.2% (5)	14.6 (6)	70.7% (29)	
5	Frequency of English Writing	daily	weekly	monthly	rarely	Never
	Percentage (%)	9.8% (4)	22% (9)	41.5% (17)	26.8% (11)	-

Presented in Table 2 is the demographic profile of the respondents. 39% of the respondents were male and 61% were female. Most of the respondents are in their first year of study with 75.6%, while the remaining 24.4% are in their second year of study. Almost all respondents indicate that they have an intermediate level of language proficiency with 85.4% or equal to 35 out of 41 respondents. As for writing experience, 70.7% indicated that they have more

than 10 years of experience. And for frequency of writing, 41.5% said they do it monthly, and 26.8% said they do it rarely.

Writing Fear

This section provides the findings to address research question 1, which explores the perception of learners regarding their fear of writing. Within the framework of this study, the measurement encompasses three aspects: somatic, avoidance, and cognitive fear.

Table 3

Writing Fear, Somatic

Num	Item	Mean
1.	My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.	3.3415
2.	I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint.	3.3171
3.	I tremble when I write English compositions under time pressure.	3.2927
4.	I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint.	3.0732
5.	I usually feel my whole-body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.	2.7073
6.	I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.	2.9756
7.	My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.	2.9024

As indicated in table 3, a total of seven (7) items were used to describe the physical symptoms associated with fear of writing. The highest mean score is 3.3415 for item 1, indicating that respondents feel their thoughts become disorganised when writing English compositions with time constraints. These findings are closely followed by a sense of panic ($M = 3.3171$) and trembling ($M = 3.2927$) in similar circumstances. In addition, the data reveals a noteworthy physiological reaction, as participants reported experiencing an increased heart rate ($M = 3.0732$) when tasked with writing English compositions under pressure. Item 5 has the lowest mean value of 2.7073. Typically, the respondents do not experience a sense of rigidity or tension in their bodies while writing English compositions.

Table 4

Writing Fear, Avoidance

Num	Item	Mean
1	I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.	2.5366
2	Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions. (R)	3.6585
3	I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class. (R)	2.9512
4	I often choose to write down my thoughts in English. (R)	3.4878
5	Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write compositions.	2.7561
6	I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.	2.3902

The analysis of avoidance behaviour reveals interesting findings. As indicated in table 4, 6 items were used to describe respondents' avoidance behaviour towards writing in English. 3 items are reversed statements. The item with the highest mean score ($M=3.6585$) is item 2, indicating a significant preference among respondents to avoid English writing when given the choice. Next, item 4 ($M=3.4878$) reveals that respondents often choose not to express their opinions in English in writing.

Conversely, the respondents are least inclined to avoid circumstances that require them to write in English, as shown by the lowest mean score of 2.3902.

Table 5

Writing Fear, Cognitive

Num	Item	Mean
1	I worry about what other people would think of my English compositions.	3.4146
2	I am afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.	3.6585
3	I worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others'.	3.4634
4	'm afraid that the other students would mock my English composition if they read it.	3.1220
5	I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	3.2927
6	I am nervous when writing in English.	3.0976
7	I feel worried if I know my English compositions are being evaluated.	3.6098
8	While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.	3.3902

The data presented in Table 5 clearly demonstrates the cognitive aspect of writing fear among respondents. The highest mean score ($M = 3.6585$) indicates a widespread concern among respondents regarding the perceived quality of their English compositions. In addition, respondents showed considerable concern regarding the evaluation of their work ($M = 3.6098$) and expressed worry that their compositions might be inferior to those of others ($M = 3.4634$). Respondents expressed concerns about how their writing would be perceived by others ($M = 3.4146$) and felt uneasy about their work being selected as a class sample ($M = 3.2927$). However, the lowest mean score ($M = 3.0976$) suggests that respondents experience some nervousness when writing in English, but this anxiety is not as strong as their worries about being judged by others.

Motivation to Write

This section examines the data collected to delve into the second research question: How do students perceive their motivation to write? This study examines writing motivation by specifically analysing two main types: autonomous motivation and regulated motivation.

Table 6

Writing Motivation, Autonomous

Num	Item	Mean
1.	I enjoy writing.	3.4390
2.	I think it is very useful for me to write.	3.7317
3.	It's fun to write.	3.4878
4.	I really like it.	3.2927
5.	I think writing is meaningful.	3.5854
6.	I think writing is interesting.	3.6098
7.	It is important to me to write.	3.7317
8.	I think writing is fascinating.	3.4390

The data presented in Table 6 provides a comprehensive overview of the 8 items used to describe the autonomous motivation of respondents when writing in English. Two items demonstrate a similar outcome with an average of 3.7317, suggesting that respondents recognise the usefulness and importance of writing in English. In addition, writing is regarded as captivating and significant, with average scores of 3.6098 and 3.5854, respectively.

Table 7

Writing Motivation, Controlled

Num	Item	Mean
1.	I don't want to disappoint others.	2.9268
2.	That is what others expect me to do.	2.6829
3.	I will feel guilty if I don't do it.	2.5366
4.	Others will only reward me if I write.	2.0732
5.	I have to prove to myself that I can get good writing grades.	3.5366
6.	Others will punish me if I don't write.	1.9756
7.	I will feel ashamed of myself if I don't write.	2.8293
8.	Others think that I have to.	2.4146
9.	I can just be proud of myself if I get good writing grades.	3.4634

Table 7 displays the utilisation of 9 items to depict controlled motivation among the participants. Based on the findings, it is evident that the respondents recognise the importance of achieving high writing grades (M=3.5366). Additionally, they express a sense of pride in their ability to attain such grades (M=3.4634). A significant number of respondents expressed their disagreement with the notion that they would face consequences for not completing the writing task (M=1.9756).

Relationship between Writing Fear and Motivation to Write

This section presents findings to answer research question 3; What is the relationship between writing fear and motivation to write?

To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between Writing Fear and Writing Motivation, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in Table 8 below.

Table 8

Correlation between Fear of Writing and Motivation to Write

		FEAR_WRITING	MOTIVATION_TO_WRITE
FEAR_WRITING	Pearson Correlation	1	.440**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.004
	N	41	41
MOTIVATION_TO_WRITE	Pearson Correlation	.440**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	
	N	41	41

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 8 shows there is an association between fear of writing and motivation to write. Correlation analysis shows that there is a moderate significant association between fear of writing and motivation to write ($r=.440^{**}$) and ($p=.000$). According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a moderate positive relationship between fear of writing and motivation to write.

Summary of Findings and Discussions

This research aimed to investigate students' perspectives on their writing fear and motivation, specifically examining three aspects of writing fear: physical, cognitive, and avoidance, as well as two forms of motivation: autonomous and controlled. Results indicated that students mostly encounter somatic symptoms, such as disorganised thinking, when faced with time constraints when engaged in writing assignments. Consequently, there is a subsequent onset of panic and bodily manifestations such as shaking, which suggest a strong physiological reaction to the fear associated with writing. This result aligns with the experiences of Pakistani ESL learners who were primarily affected by psychological factors in their writing. These factors included time constraints, experiencing a mental block at the beginning of writing, feeling nervous or shaky while writing, having disorganised thoughts, feeling panicked, becoming mentally stuck, and feeling tense and rigid throughout the writing process in ESL classrooms (Ubaid et al., 2023).

From a cognitive perspective, students are primarily preoccupied with the quality of their writing and the way it will be interpreted by others, ultimately leading to their fear about writing. However, while students exhibit concern about being evaluated, the level of fear felt during the process of writing itself is somewhat less. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Jasman et al. (2023), which identified several factors contributing to students' fear of writing. These factors include concerns about receiving feedback from teachers, a lack of confidence, limited understanding of the subject matter, weak writing skills, and feeling pressured by time constraints.

When it comes to avoidance behaviour, the results indicate that participants frequently opt out of writing in English if given the option, indicating a notable amount of fear. This

inclination to refrain from writing is intensified by a hesitancy to express ideas in English, highlighting the widespread impact of writing fear. This discovery is consistent with the findings of Anthoney and Wilang (2023), who observed that students tend to favour their native language (L1) while formulating their thoughts in a writing assignment.

In term of motivation, students acknowledge the significance and practicality of writing in English, and they see it as both engaging and meaningful. Controlled motivation is evident in their desire to attain excellent writing grades, accompanied by a feeling of satisfaction in their achievements. Consistent with the results reported by Yeung et al. (2019), identified regulation, which is a subtype of extrinsic motivation, rather than intrinsic motivation, is a strong predictor of success in written composition.

The correlation analysis indicates a modest positive association between the fear of writing and the motivation to write. This indicates that while the fear of writing might impede performance, it also acts as a motivational element, compelling students to undertake writing assignments more profoundly in order to overcome their fears. This is akin to the research conducted by Khan et al. (2024), in which they concluded a substantial impact of writing anxiety on writing motivation. Furthermore, it was shown that elevated levels of anxiety led to improved performance in English writing.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has shown that ESL students have a tendency to evade writing and hesitancy to express opinions in English as a result of writing fear. Possible future investigations may focus on interventions targeted at mitigating this anxiety and easing students' fear about writing. Furthermore, future research may explore the effects of various teaching methods, feedback strategies, or social interactions on students' willingness to engage in English writing. Additionally, it would be beneficial to analyse writing anxiety in diverse educational environments or demographic groups to provide more extensive understanding.

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