

Foreign Language Writing Apprehension: Its Relationships with Motivation, Self-perceived Target Language Ability, and Actual Language Ability

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1 Introduction

Anxiety associated with first language writing has been investigated since the 1970s. Daly and his colleagues (1975) coined the term, “writing apprehension,” meaning writing-specific anxiety. Summing up the results of research in this field, Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert (1999) state that writing apprehension is negatively associated with the quality of the message encoded, an individual’s actual writing behavior, their writing performance, and their willingness to write or to take advanced writing courses. Although most studies on writing apprehension were conducted in first language writing situations, Cheng, et al. (ibid) studied writing apprehension in the English as a foreign language (EFL) learning context. They investigated its associations with speaking and writing achievement, and with self-perceived proficiency in speaking and writing among Taiwanese college students. Their findings were that anxiety was negatively related to speaking and writing course grades (more strongly to writing achievement), and to self-perceived speaking and writing proficiency.

I have researched general language anxiety in the EFL classroom in Japan and found that levels of anxiety among learners were highest when speaking the language. It may well be that in the English classroom, speaking is most anxiety-provoking, but writing is another situation in which learners become highly apprehensive, mostly because Japanese students are usually not trained to write English enough to be able to express what they want to say. In my previous study (2004), general language anxiety was negatively associated with motivational strength for learning the language. Writing-specific anxiety may well be negatively related to motivation, and it may discourage EFL learning. In another previous study of mine (2008), learners’ self-perception of English ability was negatively associated with general English learning anxiety. It was also positively related to strength of motivation. It may also be interesting to examine how writing apprehension relates to self-perceived overall language ability.

In their study, Chen et al. found a negative relationship between writing apprehension and class achievements (course grades), but they did not examine its relationship with the target

language proficiency. Class performance and language proficiency are two different concepts. While language proficiency is defined as a person's general level of ability in the target language, class performance is a person's achievement in the class. Hence, if writing apprehension is negatively related to class performance, it probably is impeding learners' learning of English in the class, but if it is negatively associated with proficiency, it may be rooted in the minds of learners. It is crucial to examine which of the language measurements is more closely associated with apprehension in order to shed light on its nature.

2 Research Questions

This study investigates writing apprehension among EFL learners in Japan. As variables which may be associated with anxiety, strength of motivation for learning English, self-perception of English ability, and class achievement, as well as English proficiency, will be investigated.

The research questions of the present study are: 1) Is writing apprehension negatively related to strength of motivation?; 2) Is writing apprehension negatively related to self-perceived English ability?; and 3) Is writing apprehension negatively related to English proficiency and/or class achievement?

3 Methodology

3.1 Subjects

The subjects were 139 Japanese students enrolled in an English course, 'English I' at a private university in Niigata, Japan. All of them were freshmen majoring in science: 86 males and 53 females ranging in age from 18 to 20. The average age was 19. The English course was a one-semester course starting in April and ending in July. It was required of all freshmen. The students were divided into four classes of 'English I' (approximate number of students was 35 in each class), and two Japanese teachers of English (one male and one female) taught two classes of the course. All the classes met once a week and lasted 90 minutes. All subjects were native speakers of Japanese and of Japanese nationality.

3.2 Measurement instruments

The data was gathered in the first semester in 2009. In June, a questionnaire including the Second Language Writing Apprehension Test (19 items), the Strength of Motivation Scale (7 items), and the Can-do Scale (15 items) was introduced to the students in all four classes during class time. All the scales were originally written in English, and translated Japanese versions of the scales were used. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire within 10 minutes. The questionnaire items are presented in Appendix A.

The Second Language Writing Apprehension Test (SLWAT) is a modified version of Daly and Miller's Writing Apprehension Test (Daly and Miller 1975). The original test was

designed to measure levels of writing apprehension in the first language. Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999) modified the test in order to use it in college English learning situations. An example of an item on the scale was "I'm not good at writing in English."

The Strength of Motivation Scale was developed by Ely (1986) for measuring motivational strength amongst university students in a foreign language classroom. This scale was slightly modified for use in the Japanese EFL classroom, such as replacing the term "foreign language" with "English language." An example of an item on the scale was "Outside the class, I almost never think about what I'm learning in class."

In order to measure self-perceived Japanese language ability in college learning situations in the United States, Kitano (2001) modified the Can-do Scale originally developed by Clark (1981). In the present study, Kitano's version was used. The term, "Japanese" in Kitano's scale was replaced with the term "English." An example of an item on the scale was "I can say the days of the week in English."

For the SLWAT and the Strength of Motivation Scale, a five-point Likert response scale was used for each item. A student's endorsement of "strongly agree" was equated with a numerical value of 5, "agree" with 4, "neither agree nor disagree" with 3, "disagree" with 2, and "strongly disagree" with 1. A higher score on the SLWAT and the motivation scale indicated a higher level of writing apprehension and motivation, respectively. These two scales included some reversed items, and for these items, the numerical values were reversed when computed. The possible scores on the SLWAT ranged from 19 to 95 (5×19) and on the motivation scale, from 7 to 35 (5×7).

For the Can-do Scale, a three-point Likert response scale was used for each item, a practice originally conducted by Kitano on the scale. A student's endorsement of "quite easily" was equated with a numerical value of 3, "with some difficulty" with 2, and "with great difficulty or not at all" with 1. A higher score on the scale indicated a higher level of self-perception of English proficiency. The possible scores on the scale ranged from 15 to 45 (3×15).

On completion of the data collection, first, all the scales were tested for reliability. After the reliability was established, a series of correlation analyses were performed amongst the scales and the two kinds of English ability measurements.

3.3 English ability measurements

A C-test (Takahashi 2004) was used in order to measure the English proficiency of the students. It consisted of five short passages chosen from three different textbooks (Heyer 1998, Hill 1998, and Hill 1974). In these passages, the second half of every second word beginning in the second sentence was deleted. The overall number of deletions in the test was 100. The test was administered to the subjects during their class of 'English I' in April, 2009: the students were asked to fill in the deletions in 15 minutes. The C-test is presented in Appendix B.

All the subjects took a final examination in July, 2009, and scores from this exam were

used as a class performance measure.

4 Results

The Second Language Writing Apprehension Test yielded internal consistency of .89 using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The internal consistency of the Strength of Motivation Scale was .75, and the Can-do Scale was .81. Table 1 shows the comparison of the reliabilities of the present scales and those of previous studies.

Table 1 Reliabilities of the scales in comparison with previous studies

SLWAT (19 items)	Present Study $\alpha = .89$, N=139	Cheng, et al., 1999 $\alpha = .94$, N=428	/
Motivation (7 items)	Present Study $\alpha = .75$, N=139	Takahashi, 2008 $\alpha = .79$, N=98	Ely, 1986 $\alpha = .86$, N=50
Can-do (15 items)	Present Study $\alpha = .81$, N=139	Takahashi, 2009 $\alpha = .84$, N=98	Kitano, 2001 $\alpha = .92$, N=212

* α =Cronbach's alpha ; N=number of subjects

The alphas of scales for the present study were not as high as those from previous studies. However, considering that the numbers of items in each scale were small, I regard these alphas as reasonably high.

The statistical data of the scales are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Statistical data of the scales

Scales	Mean average score	Standard deviation	Range (possible range)
SWLAT	67.32	11.75	30-95 (19-95)
Motivation	21.36	4.76	7-35 (7-35)
Can-do	21.95	3.66	16-35 (15-45)

The mean average score of the SLWAT was 67.32. Considering the middle point for the scale was 57.0, the subjects were experiencing high levels of anxiety in regard to English writing. The mean average score of the motivation scale (21.36) was slightly lower than the one from my previous research (22.40, standard deviation = 5.27, Takahashi 2008). The middle point for this scale was 21, and the results revealed that the subjects' motivational strength for learning English was moderate. The mean average of the self-perception scale amongst the present subjects was considerably lower than the middle point (30) of the scale

and that of my previous study (30.04, SD = 6.98, Takahashi 2009), indicating that the present subjects' overall self-perception of their own English ability was rather low.

After the reliability was established, in order to investigate relationships between writing apprehension, motivational strength, self-perception of English ability, actual proficiency, and class performance, a correlation analysis was performed amongst the scales, the C-test, and the final examination scores. Table 3 presents the results from the correlation analysis.

Table 3 Correlations

	Apprehension	Motivation	S-perception	Proficiency	Performance
Apprehension		-.472**	-.382**	-.295**	-.243**
Motivation	-.472**		.212*	.206*	.274**
S-perception	-.382**	.212*		.353**	(.138)
Proficiency	-.295**	.206*	.353**		.578**
Performance	-.243**	.274**	(.138)	.578**	

* **= $p < .01$; *= $p < .05$

Writing apprehension was negatively correlated with all the four variables, suggesting that students with higher levels of anxiety showed lower levels of motivation for learning English, perceived their English ability as being lower, had lower English proficiency, and scored lower on the final examination. Of all the correlations, the strongest one was between English proficiency and class performance ($r = .578$, $p < .01$), indicating that students with higher proficiency scored higher on the final examination.

In order to investigate particular attributes of writing apprehension, motivational strength, and self-perception, I carried out an item analysis of the scales.

The items which received the highest and the lowest endorsements were examined. For the writing apprehension scale, the following were the items with the strongest and lowest endorsements (the mean average endorsements are marked in parentheses):

Item 4: It's easy for me to write good English compositions (reversed item).

(4.48 [maximum score = 5.00])

Item 2: I don't think I write in English as well as most other people. (4.16)

Item 3: When I hand in an English composition, I know I'm going to do poorly. (4.11)

Item 18: I have no fear of my English writing being evaluated by the teacher (reversed item).

(2.23 [minimum score = 1.00])

Item 14: Expressing ideas through writing in English seems to be a waste of time. (2.40)

For the vast majority of the subjects, writing good English compositions was not easy (Item 4), most of them judged that others wrote better English (Item 2), and they did not have confidence in English writing (Item 3).

At the same time, most of them were not afraid of their English writing being evaluated by the teacher (Item 18), and they regarded writing their ideas in English was somewhat meaningful (Item 14).

For the Strength of Motivation Scale, the items with the highest and the lowest endorsements were the following:

Item 4: I want to be able to use English in a wide variety of situations.

(3.81 [maximum score = 5.00])

Item 7: I don't really feel that learning English is valuable to me (reversed item). (3.80)

Item 2: If possible, I would like to take a more advanced English course.

(2.30 [minimum score = 1.00])

No single item was endorsed strongly, as the highest average endorsement was 3.81. Items 4 and 7 were also the most strongly endorsed items in my previous study (Takahashi 2008). The present and previous subjects showed a desire to be able to use English (Item 4), and they felt English learning was valuable for them (Item 7).

Although they realized learning English was important for them, the students did not want to take more advanced courses (Item 2). No single item in my previous study received a low average endorsement of less than 2.50, but Item 2 received 2.30 in the present study. Judging also from the comparison of mean average scores of the motivation scale, the levels of motivation amongst the present students were somewhat lower than those of the previous subjects.

For the Can-do scale, only two items received an endorsement of over 2.0.

Item 1: I can say the days of the week in English. (2.90 [maximum score = 3])

Item 2: I can give the current date (month, day, year) in English. (2.22)

These two items were also strongly endorsed in my previous study (Takahashi 2009), indicating that the previous and present subjects at least had confidence in saying the days of the week and the date in English. In the present study, all the other items received an average endorsement of less than 1.7. Amongst them, items with the lowest endorsement were the following two:

Item 13: I can describe the educational system of my own country in some detail in English.

(1.01 [minimum score = 1.00])

Item 15: I can describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the

world market. (1.01)

These items also received the lowest endorsement in my previous study. Even for a non-native-English speaker who is fairly proficient in English, these two tasks may be difficult. Hence, it is not surprising that almost all the students endorsed them with 1.0.

5 Discussion of Findings

5.1 Relationship between writing apprehension and motivational strength

The negative relationship between general language anxiety and motivational strength has been confirmed in previous studies such as Muchnick and Wolfe (1982) and Takahashi (2004). The present study aimed to investigate whether or not this relationship applies to writing-specific anxiety and motivational intensity. The results showed that students who experienced higher levels of writing apprehension had weaker motivation towards learning the language, and the negative relationship between the two ($-.472, p < .01, N = 139$) was significantly stronger than the relationship between general language anxiety and motivation from my previous study ($-.37, p < .001, N = 308$ in Takahashi 2004). This relationship suggests that writing-specific anxiety may affect motivational strength more than general language anxiety does, making it a serious impediment to learning of the target language. At the same time, the negative relationship may be reciprocal, and low levels of motivation may increase writing apprehension. However, a longitudinal study needs to be done in order to explore the cause-and-effect relationship between the two.

5.2 Relationship between writing apprehension and self-perception of English ability

The negative relationship between general language anxiety and self-perceived language competence was found in previous studies such as Kitano (2001), MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan (2002), and Takahashi (2008). Results from this study support findings from the previous studies and shows that the negative relationship applies to writing-specific anxiety and self-perceived English ability. The negative correlation of the two ($-.382, p < .01, N = 139$) was stronger than the correlation between general language anxiety and self-perception I obtained in 2008 ($-.269, p < .01, N = 98$). This is an interesting finding because the self-perceived ability measured was not focused on writing. It may well be that when an English learner thinks his/her ability is higher than that of his/her classmates', he/she gains confidence in learning. The learner may also have positive attitudes towards learning, and motivation to learn the language may be high. These may contribute to decreasing levels of language anxiety in general. For Japanese university EFL learners, writing is probably the most difficult skill to obtain, and students who perceived themselves as having higher English ability probably had higher motivation for gaining writing skills, and this may contribute to decreasing apprehension about writing. This relationship may also be reciprocal: high levels of writing apprehension can impede gaining high English proficiency.

5.3 Relationships between writing apprehension and proficiency / class performance

In my previous study (2004), I investigated whether or not general language anxiety was related to English proficiency and class performance. Anxiety was found to be negatively associated with proficiency, but the analysis failed to find any relationship between general anxiety and class performance. On the other hand, in the above-mentioned study which focused on writing apprehension, Cheng, et al. (1999) found a negative relationship between apprehension and performance. Interestingly, in the present study, writing apprehension was negatively associated with both measurements, being more strongly so with proficiency. Students with better writing skills, who probably experienced lower levels of writing anxiety, had higher overall English proficiency. They may also have scored higher in the final examination. However, probably, the reverse relationship is not always the case. Students with higher English proficiency may have higher writing proficiency, and this may lead to lower apprehension. However, students who get good course grades are not necessarily good at writing English and may feel apprehensive about it. Students, regardless of their English ability, can attain more or less good marks in the final examinations because these tests usually cover what they have studied in the class, and therefore students can prepare for them. This hypothesis may explain the weaker association between apprehension and performance. Writing-specific anxiety may have a stronger negative link with proficiency than general language anxiety does.

5.4 Other relationships between variables

Other interesting relationships obtained were between: proficiency and class performance; self-perception and proficiency / class performance; motivational strength and proficiency / class performance.

In my previous study (2009), the negative relationship found between proficiency and achievement was weak ($r=-.211$, $p<.01$, $N=98$), indicating that the two are different concepts. Analysis of the present study found that the positive relationship between the two was stronger ($r=.578$, $p<.01$, $N=139$). Actually, it was the strongest correlation obtained in the present study. Although it is still too weak to consider the two measures as the same construct, some students who had higher English proficiency also scored higher in the final examination. It may well be that the final examination used in the study had some aspect of proficiency tests, and this is why its relationship to proficiency was somewhat strong.

Some students who perceived their proficiency was higher than others actually scored higher in the proficiency test ($r=.353$, $p<.01$), but not in the final examination ($r=.138$, $p>.05$). Although in my study of 2009, perceived competence was related to proficiency and class performance in the same degree, analysis of the present study found it to be associated only with proficiency. It is reasonable to assume that students with higher English proficiency perceive his/her proficiency higher than others. However, students who scored high in the final examination might not necessarily have perceived their proficiency higher than others. As I mentioned before, regardless of their proficiency, they can attain good scores in the final

examinations if they prepare well. Hence, the present finding seems more reasonable than the previous one.

Students who had higher levels of motivation tended to score higher in the proficiency test and their grades on the final examination were better. Interestingly, motivational strength was more strongly associated with class performance ($r=.274$, $p<.01$) than with proficiency ($r=.206$, $p<.05$). I found no relationship between motivational intensity and English proficiency in my previous study (2008). It may well be that motivational strength is related to class performance, but it may not have strong associations with language proficiency.

6 Conclusions

The present study investigated whether or not writing apprehension amongst Japanese EFL learners was related to strength of motivation, self-perceived language ability, and actual proficiency and/or class achievement. Writing apprehension was found to be negatively related to all the variables. Its associations with those variables were stronger than those of general language anxiety. This may suggest that writing English is a weakness amongst Japanese EFL learners, and it is one of the most unpopular, disliked activities in the classroom. Educators and teachers should be aware that some students become highly apprehensive about writing English, and this apprehension is positively associated with low motivation, low self-perceived proficiency, low proficiency, and low performance. It is important to find pedagogic ways of decreasing it.

One of the limitations of this study is that it used a general proficiency test instead of a writing proficiency test. Assessing writing proficiency is difficult, and this was the reason I used the test for overall English proficiency, but the result might have been different if I had used a writing proficiency measure. Also, an improvement could have been made to the 7-item Motivational Strength Scale. Increasing the number of items which reflect various aspects of English learning may have been useful in examining the nature of learning motivation.

In order to investigate the true nature of writing apprehension in the Japanese EFL classroom, a comprehensive study is warranted.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire Items

[1] Second Language Writing Apprehension Test (mean average endorsement)

- 1 I'm not good at writing in English. (3.99)
- 2 I don't think I write in English as well as most other people. (4.16)
- 3 When I hand in an English composition, I know I'm going to do poorly. (4.11)
- 4 It's easy for me to write good English compositions. (reversed item) (4.48)
- 5 I expect to do poorly in English composition classes even before I enter them. (3.91)
- 6 I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in an English composition course. (3.89)
- 7 People seem to enjoy what I write in English. (reversed item) (3.86)
- 8 I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas in English. (3.81)
- 9 Writing in English is a lot of fun. (reversed item) (3.40)
- 10 I like seeing my thoughts on paper in English. (reversed item) (3.72)
- 11 I enjoy writing in English. (reversed item) (3.53)

- 12 I look forward to writing down my ideas in English. (reversed item) (3.95)
- 13 I like to write my ideas down in English. (reversed item) (3.53)
- 14 Expressing ideas through writing in English seems to be a waste of time. (2.40)
- 15 I have no fear of my English writing being evaluated by people other than the teacher. (reversed item) (3.08)
- 16 I don't like my English compositions to be evaluated. (2.83)
- 17 I am afraid of writing essays in English when I know they will be evaluated. (2.91)
- 18 I have no fear of my English writing being evaluated by the teacher. (reversed item) (2.23)
- 19 Discussing my English writing with others is an enjoyable experience. (reversed item) (3.53)

[2] Strength of Motivation Scale (mean average endorsement)

- 1 Outside of class, I almost never think about what I'm learning in English class. (reversed item) (2.68)
- 2 If possible, I would like to take a more advanced English course. (2.30)
- 3 Speaking realistically, I would say that I don't try very hard to learn English. (reversed item) (2.80)
- 4 I want to be able to use English in a wide variety of situations. (3.81)
- 5 I don't really have a great desire to learn a lot of English. (reversed item) (3.24)
- 6 Learning English well is not really a high priority for me at this point. (reversed item) (2.74)
- 7 I don't really feel that learning English is valuable to me. (reversed item) (3.80)

[3] Can-do Scale (mean average endorsement)

- 1 I can say the days of the week in English. (2.90)
- 2 I can give the current date (month, day, year) in English. (2.22)
- 3 I can order a simple meal in a restaurant in English. (1.67)
- 4 I can ask for directions on the street in English. (1.67)
- 5 I can buy clothes in a department store in English. (1.47)
- 6 I can introduce myself in social situations, and use appropriate greetings and leave-taking expressions in English. (1.65)
- 7 I can talk about my favorite hobby at some length in English. (1.43)
- 8 I can describe my present job, studies, or other major life activities in English. (1.25)
- 9 I can explain what I did last weekend at some length in English. (1.39)
- 10 I can explain what I plan to be doing 5 years from now at some length in English. (1.06)
- 11 I can sustain everyday conversation in very polite style in English with a person much older than I am. (1.05)
- 12 I can sustain everyday conversation in casual style English with my native-English-speaking friend. (1.13)
- 13 I can describe the educational system of my own country in some detail in English. (1.01)
- 14 I can state and support with reasons my position on a conversational topic (for example,

cigarette smoking) in English. (1.03)

15 I can describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the world market. (1.01)

Appendix B: C-test (proficiency test)

A. Mary works at a bank. She beg___ working a___ eight o'cl___ in th___ morning. S stops wor___ at fi___ o'clock i___ the after___. At fi___ o'clock t___ bank clo___. Everybody go___ home. So___ people dri___ home. So___ people ta___ the tr___. Some people take the bus.

B. Jack and Ann are married. They are not happy together. Why not? They ar___ very diff___. Jack smo___. Ann doe___ smoke. Ja___ likes t___ watch base___ on T___. Ann doe___ like base___. Ann lik___ loud mus___. Jack doe___ like lo___ music. Ja___ snores a___ night. A___ can't sle___. One d___, Ann loo___ at t___ house ne___ door. It is for sale. Ann buys the house and moves in.

C. Camille was three years old. She lived in a small town in France. Her fat___ worked fa___ away i___ the ci___. Her mot___ worked i___ the ho___. One Satu___, Camille's mot___ fell do___ on th___ floor. H___ eyes we___ closed. Sh___ did n___ move. Cami___ father w___ home. H___ called th___ doctor o___ the telephone. The doctor came to help Camille's mother.

D. Mr. Jones was very angry with his wife, and she was very angry with her husband. For seve___ days th___ did n___ speak t___ each oth___ at a___. One even___ Mr. Jo___ was ve___ tired wh___ he ca___ back fr___ work, s___ he we___ to be___ soon af___ dinner. O___ course, h___ did n___ say anyt___ to M___ Jones bef___ he we___ upstairs. Mrs. Jones washed the dinner things and then did some sewing.

E. Early one morning, an old woman was walking from her village to the town, carrying a big sack of cabbages on her head. She wa___ taking th___ to t___ market, whe___ she ho___ to se___ them t___ the peo___ from th___ town. T___ road whi___ the o___ woman wa___ on w___ a nar___ one ov___ a moun___. There was a cliff on one side, and a wall of rock on the other.