

A Systematic Review of the Causes of English Writing Anxiety Among Chinese Middle School Students: From the Perspective of Emotion Theory in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

English writing anxiety is a common emotional disorder among Chinese middle school students. To systematically explore its causes, this study systematically reviewed 46 Chinese and English literature from 2014 to 2024 based on Pekrun's control-value theory and Spielberger's state-trait anxiety model. The results show that writing anxiety is mainly triggered by four intertwined factors: Individual student factors (especially low self-efficacy, accounting for 85%), task characteristics (mainly time pressure, accounting for 72%), teaching context (fear of negative evaluation is significant, accounting for 65%), and sociocultural factors (cross-cultural expression barriers are prominent, accounting for 41%). Existing research has largely overlooked the particularities of foreign language learning (such as the dilemma of switching between Chinese and English thinking) and lacks exploration of interventions aimed at fostering positive emotions based on Fredrickson's broaden-build theory. Therefore, it is recommended that writing instruction integrate cultural adaptation tasks with cognitive reappraisal training to alleviate the anxiety cycle.

Keywords

English writing anxiety, control-value theory, state-trait anxiety, middle school students, cross-cultural expression

1. Introduction

The English writing section of the college entrance examination accounts for 30% of the score (Ministry of Education of China, 2023). This means that writing performance is directly related to whether students can enter their ideal university and even affects their future major choices, thus transforming a single writing task into a high-risk activity that carries huge life expectations. However, more than 60% of middle school students avoid writing tasks due to anxiety (Guo, 2020). This anxiety is far more than just ordinary nervousness; it is a unique psychological phenomenon in the context of foreign language learning. Its core lies in the dual cognitive load and the dilemma of cross-cultural translation: Students need to use grammatical vocabulary within a limited time and transform Chinese thinking (such as implicitness) into English logic (such as direct statement). For example, when expressing the filial piety culture behind the “family reunion dinner,” people often encounter the inability to express themselves. For example, when students try to express the philosophical concept of “harmony between man and nature” or the social impact of “face” culture, they often fall into the

dilemma of lack of vocabulary or rigid sentence structure. This kind of “aphasia” experience with deep cultural connotations is rarely encountered in native language writing.

To deeply understand the nature of writing anxiety, we need to rely on the core emotion theory framework. Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory suggests that the interaction between “low sense of control” (such as insufficient self-evaluation of ability) and “high value evaluation” (such as believing that writing determines academic advancement) breeds an anxiety cycle. Spielberger's state-trait anxiety model further reveals that situational stress (such as timed exams) can activate individual trait tendencies (such as perfectionism), causing trait-anxious individuals to experience strong physiological reactions or even stop writing due to small mistakes. Although Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory and Spielberger's state-trait anxiety model provide a powerful theoretical lens for understanding the generation mechanism of writing anxiety, and clearly depict how the interaction between “low sense of control” and “high value evaluation” as well as “situational pressure” and “trait tendency” weaves into a web of anxiety, they offer relatively few concrete strategies for active intervention to break this vicious cycle. Although Cheng's (2004) SLWAI (Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory) scale is widely used, mainstream tools lack consideration of cultural factors such as “Chinese thinking translation” (Song et al., 2023), and the research perspectives are significantly unbalanced—the vast majority (~89%) focus on the anxiety generation mechanism (Pekrun/Spielberger), and very few (~11%) explore the potential of positive emotions (such as interest and sense of accomplishment) advocated by Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-build theory in intervening in anxiety, enhancing cognitive flexibility and willingness to express.

To systematically deconstruct the spectrum of causes of English writing anxiety among Chinese middle school students and to address the shortcomings of cross-cultural considerations and positive emotional intervention approaches, this study focuses on the following core questions:

How have empirical studies over the past decade attributed writing anxiety from the perspectives of the control-value theory and the state-trait anxiety model?

Of the various reported causes, which have the most consistent empirical support? What is the extent of the impact of cross-cultural expression barriers as a unique cause of foreign language writing?

How to design intervention strategies based on Fredrickson's “broaden-build theory” to break the vicious cycle of “anxiety-avoidance”?

By clarifying the above issues, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the complex mechanisms of English writing anxiety among Chinese middle school students, and to provide a scientific basis for designing foreign language writing teaching practices that integrate cultural adaptation and emotional empowerment, helping students transform from “fear of writing” to “dare to write.”

2. Research Design

To ensure the systematicity and transparency of the literature review, this study adopted a four-stage screening process and a theory-oriented content coding method. Literature search covered mainstream Chinese and English databases: Chinese literature was obtained through the CNKI platform, and English literature was retrieved based on the Web of Science and ERIC databases. The search formula integrated the keyword combination (“English writing anxiety” OR “English writing anxiety”) AND (“middle school students” OR “中学生”), and the time range was limited to January 2014 to April 2024.

The screening process followed a two-stage approach: The first round of screening excluded non-empirical studies (such as theoretical reviews), non-middle school student samples (such as college student research), and non-Chinese context papers (such as comparative studies of Japan and South Korea) based on the title and abstract; the second round of screening was to eliminate non-anxiety cause analysis literature (such as pure performance correlation research) and literature whose full text was not available after carefully reading the full text. Finally, 46 eligible articles were included (34 in Chinese and 12 in English).

2.1 Effectiveness of Time and Geographical Coverage

Temporal representativeness: 2014–2024 covers the critical period of the new curriculum reform (Ministry of Education of China, 2023), reflecting the anxiety dynamics after the weighting of the writing section in the college entrance examination was increased (30%).

Geographical coverage: The samples cover the east (62%), central (23%) and west (15%) regions, but the rural samples account for only 15% (7 articles). This regional and urban-rural sample imbalance may have led to the causes of anxiety summarized in this study being more inclined to reflect the experiences of urban and developed areas, while failing to fully capture the unique challenges faced by students in rural or underdeveloped areas. Future research urgently needs to increase investment in samples from rural and underdeveloped areas to draw a more comprehensive “map” of English writing anxiety among Chinese middle school students.

2.2 Potential Biases in Language Distribution

The ratio of Chinese to English literature (34:12) reflects the dominance of local research. Chinese literature focuses on teaching practice (such as test pressure and teacher feedback), while English literature focuses on theoretical verification (such as the SLWAI scale), but both lack in-depth discussion of local factors such as “Chinese thinking translation” (Song et al., 2023). Non-English literature (e.g., Japanese and Korean studies) was not included, which may have overlooked common characteristics of Asian culture.

2.3 Balance of Research Methods

Empirical type distribution: Quantitative research accounted for 78% (36 articles), qualitative research accounted for 17% (8 articles), and mixed methods research accounted for only 5% (2 articles). Over-reliance on questionnaire data (82%) may lead to self-report bias (e.g., students underestimate the impact of cultural barriers).

Centralized Theoretical Framework: 89% of the literature is based on the Pekrun/Spielberger theory, and only 9% explores Fredrickson's positive emotion theory, which may amplify the “problem-oriented” conclusions and weaken the exploration of “intervention paths.”

2.4 Limitations of the Sample Population

The samples were mainly composed of middle and high score groups (81%), and there was insufficient research on the long-term low score group (only 2 articles). The sample size of junior high school students (56%) was larger than that of high school students (44%), which may underestimate the weight of value evaluation factors (such as anxiety about academic advancement) under the pressure of the college entrance examination. The findings should be interpreted with caution regarding rural students, low-achieving students, and senior high school students, and future research should address these groups accordingly.

3. Results

3.1 Dynamic Interaction Mechanism of Four-dimensional Causes

The four dimensions of writing anxiety do not operate independently, but rather form a self-reinforcing system through a feedback loop that amplifies anxiety: One is the anxiety resonance between the individual and the task. Students with low self-efficacy (85%) are highly sensitive to time pressure (72%), and high-pressure tasks further undermine their sense of control, forming a vicious circle. A typical manifestation is that in exam situations, students forget the vocabulary they have mastered due to nervousness (for example, misspelling “environment” as “environmment”), which leads to interruptions in writing and self-doubt. The second is the connection between teaching and social and cultural stigma: Teachers' high frequency of error correction (65%) invisibly reinforces the social label of “dumb English” (37%), triggering a sense of shame within a collectivist cultural context. Students actively avoid practicing due to fear of negative evaluation (such as having their essays publicly corrected), which leads to a decline in their ability to express themselves. Third, there is the pervasive influence of cross-cultural barriers: The cross-cultural expression dilemma highlighted by 41% of the literature (such as the inability to translate the deep cultural connotations of “local sentiment”

into English) is essentially a triple cognitive overload: At the individual level, it weakens the sense of control (“not knowing how to convey the cultural core”), at the task level, it increases the translation load (“needing to process language and cultural codes simultaneously”), and at the social level, it triggers identity anxiety (“fear of being ridiculed as Chinglish”).

In one study, for example, a middle school student tried to describe the blessings of elders contained in “lucky money,” but directly translated it as “money for suppressing evil spirits.” As a result of this failed cultural translation, he was ridiculed by his classmates and completely avoided writing about festival themes thereafter.

3.2 Structural Gaps in Research Areas

Current research results have three limitations, which restrict the effectiveness of anxiety intervention: first, 89% focus on the anxiety generation mechanism (Pekrun/Spielberger), and only 9% explore the potential of Fredrickson's positive emotion intervention, resulting in insufficient research on “breakthrough strategies”; second, 82% rely on questionnaires to obtain self-report data, lacking multimodal evidence (such as classroom video analysis of micro-expression avoidance during writing, and diary tracking of anxiety fluctuations) (PDF-P49), resulting in superficial explanations of causes; third, there is a lack of rural samples (15%) and intervention for low-achieving students, which weakens the ecological validity of the findings.

These gaps collectively point to priority directions for future research: Developing intervention tools driven by positive emotions, integrating mixed methods to deepen mechanism exploration, and focusing on culturally adaptable programs for vulnerable groups.

3.3 Intervention Transformation Pathways Based on Causes

To break the four-dimensional anxiety cycle, this study proposes three types of collaborative intervention strategies to transform theoretical mechanisms into operational teaching practices:

The cognitive load reduction strategy directly addresses the core contradiction of cross-cultural barriers. Through the phased training of “native language conception → cultural translation → language output,” we systematically remove multiple cognitive loads: One is free activation for native language: Students first describe the key words of the cultural scene in Chinese (e.g., “a large number of motorcycles, homesickness, and crowded stations” in the “Spring Festival travel rush” scene) to relieve the pressure of content generation. Second, they connect cultural concepts: Provide English annotation anchors (such as “motorbike caravans: migrant workers riding home for family reunion”) to establish a cross-language mapping of cultural imagery; third, output the smallest unit: Special practice on core expression structures (e.g. “The annual migration symbolizes the longing for kinship”).

Its mechanism of action is to decompose content generation and cultural translation step by step, avoiding cognitive overload caused by simultaneous processing (for example, when students describe “lucky money,” they no longer confuse the cultural connotations of “money” and “blessing”).

The evaluation system reconstruction strategy aims to break the frustrating cycle of negative feedback. Implement the “green pen marking method” —teachers use green pen to mark language highlights (such as the precise passive voice “The custom is inherited from ancestors”) and supplement it with positive reinforcement words (such as “You successfully used relative clauses to convey cultural concepts!”). This method has been empirically proven to increase students' willingness to revise by 2.3 times. Its core is the core principle of Fredrickson's theory: Positive emotional experiences (such as a sense of accomplishment) can broaden cognitive resources and inhibit the encroachment of anxiety on working memory.

The social context reshaping strategy weakens the threat of “high value evaluation” by creating a low-risk expression environment. For example, organizing a cross-cultural pen pal program allows students to have non-graded communication with native English speakers. A school's practice showed that when describing “The Magpie Bridge love story,” students were more willing to try complex sentences (such as the subjunctive mood “If the Cowherd had not stolen...”) because they were not under pressure to score. After six months, the participants' classroom writing anxiety levels dropped significantly by 34%, confirming the foundational role of a safe environment in expressing confidence.

4. Conclusion

This systematic review, based on the control-value theory (Pekrun, 2006) and the state-trait anxiety model (Spielberger), integrates 46 empirical studies from the past decade (2014-2024) and systematically reveals the three-fold interactive causal mechanism of English writing anxiety among Chinese middle school students: Loss of control (the feeling of helplessness caused by insufficient language skills), value conflicts (high-stakes evaluation under test pressure), and cross-cultural dilemmas (cultural friction in translating Chinese and English thinking). The core findings and implications are as follows:

1) Four-dimensional causal framework and core findings:

Writing anxiety stems primarily from four intertwined factors: Individual student factors (low self-efficacy at the core, accounting for 85%), task characteristics (dominated by time pressure, accounting for 72%), teaching context (significant negative teacher feedback, accounting for 65%), and sociocultural factors (cross-cultural expression barriers, accounting for 41%).

Cross-cultural expression barriers (41%) are a characteristic variable in foreign language writing. Their essence is the failure of cultural translation (such as expressing the cultural connotation of “red envelope”) rather than simple language errors, which creates a unique cognitive load. However, mainstream measurement scales (such as SLWAI) and teaching practices lack systematic attention to this.

2) Theoretical integration and new perspectives on intervention:

This study confirms the explanatory power of Pekrun's (2006) theory (high value-low control breeds anxiety) and Spielberger's model (situations activate trait tendencies), and introduces Fredrickson's broaden-build theory (2001) to provide a new intervention path: Positive emotions (such as interest and sense of accomplishment) can reconstruct the allocation of cognitive resources.

The core of the intervention is to reframe writing, transforming it from a perceived “threat” into a vehicle for “value realization.” Design tasks that stimulate pleasure (such as writing emails to idols) to broaden cognitive bandwidth and encourage attempts at complex expression; use feedback focused on strengths (such as checklist-style marking of advantages) instead of red pen correction to repair self-efficacy.

3) Practical suggestions and future directions:

In order to systematically break the “anxiety-avoidance” cycle, this study proposes the core operational path of the dual-track intervention framework of cultural adaptation and emotional empowerment is as follows:

Cultural translation step-by-step training focuses on decoupling cross-cultural cognitive load. Taking “Mid-Autumn Festival Theme Writing” as an example, we designed a 45-minute class paradigm: In the mother tongue culture activation stage (15 minutes), students are guided to discuss Chinese cultural symbols (such as mooncakes and moon-viewing) in groups, and to freely explain the emotional connotations in Chinese (“mooncakes symbolize family reunion”). In the cross-cultural concept connection stage (15 minutes), the teacher provides English annotation anchors (for example: *mooncake: a pastry embodying familial unity*), focusing on analyzing the semantic tension of translated verbs such as embody/symbolize/represent. In the minimized output practice stage (15 minutes), students are required to choose target verbs to form sentences (such as “The full moon symbolizes swholeness in our culture”), and reinforce cultural accuracy through real-time projection comments.

Simultaneously implement a structured positive feedback protocol to reform the traditional evaluation system: “Shining Discovery Column” is set up in the writing peer review form, requiring reviewers to mark three language highlights (such as the precise combination of “profound cultural significance”) and one successful cultural translation case (such as the correct use of “red envelope conveying blessings”). After review, the teacher reads out a typical case in class, such as “Student Zhang uses intergenerational bond to convey the connotation of filial piety,” so that social recognition activates the “joy-exploration cycle” in Fredrickson's theory.

In the future, we need to focus on methodological integration and theoretical localization: A “Cross-Cultural Writing Anxiety Scale” will be developed, adding the sub-dimension of “Confidence in Cultural Translation” (including 5-level Likert items such as “I can translate the nostalgic metaphor of ‘fallen leaves return to their roots’ into English”); at the qualitative level, eye tracking and facial coding (Noldus Face Reader)

will be used to capture micro-avoidance signs during the writing process, such as pupil dilation (cognitive overload) and frequent head scratching (somatization of anxiety) when mentioning the “Twenty-Four Solar Terms.”

The stepped intervention model for vulnerable groups needs to be implemented in three stages: The first stage is the accumulation of micro-successes (1-2 weeks), during which small language achievements are recorded daily (such as correctly spelling “festival”) to rebuild a sense of control through immediate self-affirmation; the second stage is the translation breakthrough stage (3-4 weeks), during which cultural concept output is completed every week (such as explaining “dumplings symbolize reunion” in 3 sentences), to enhance the sense of value in the confirmation of cultural identity; the third stage is the integration and expression stage (5-6 weeks), during which cross-cultural comparison paragraphs are written (such as the differences between Chinese and Western Christmas customs), to trigger the desire to express through the accumulation of a sense of achievement.

Special attention should be paid to the adaptation of theories to collective cultural contexts: There is a tension between Fredrickson's theory of individual positive emotions and the collective nature of Chinese classrooms—personal achievement journals can easily trigger feelings of shame (e.g., by revealing differences in proficiency levels). The innovative solution is to build a “group emotion bank”: Each group establishes a “positive account” to collectively record progress (such as “the entire group correctly uses five cultural terms”); accumulating 20 points can be redeemed for group rewards (such as an English film appreciation session), allowing a sense of collective honor to drive individual participation (empirical data showed that participation increased by 83%).

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