

Second Language Writing Anxiety of Thai EFL Undergraduate Students: Dominant Causes, Levels and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

Using a mixed-methods research design, this study explored the dominant causes, levels, and coping strategies of second language writing anxiety among 55 second-year Thai EFL undergraduate students majoring in English for International Communication. Data were collected from the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) questionnaire developed by Rezaei and Jafari (2014), the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004), and a stimulated recall interview. Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the data obtained from CWAI and SLWAI, while thematic analysis was used to identify themes from the stimulated recall interview. The results revealed that the predominant cause of writing anxiety was writing assignments, affecting 77.09% of students, followed by linguistic difficulties and fear of writing tests, each affecting 70.09%. Additionally, the study found that the level of writing anxiety among these students was high according to the writing anxiety questionnaire. Furthermore, during the stimulated recall interview, participants revealed five strategies typically used to manage their writing anxiety, namely positive self-talk, starting with a plan, relaxation techniques, goal setting, and seeking social support.

Keywords: second language writing anxiety, Thai EFL undergraduate, causes, levels, coping strategies

1. Introduction

Anxiety is thought to impede the learning of languages because language classrooms are seen as environments that inherently threaten one's sense of self. These environments place demands on learners to grasp and apply a narrowly defined language code (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 91). Consequently, anxiety specific to language learning is identified as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), a type of anxiety linked to the unique challenges of learning a language in a classroom setting. FLA is defined as one's self-perception, beliefs, emotions, and actions related to learning a language in class, influenced by the distinct nature of the language learning process (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128).

Since the 1970s, anxiety's impact on language learning has been investigated across various language skills: reading (Elkhafaifi, 2005), listening (Brantmeier, 2005), speaking (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2011), as well as vocabulary (Chen, 2015) and grammar (Van Patten & Glass, 1999). It has consistently been identified as a significant impediment. Moreover, within the field of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), there has been a growing interest in recent years regarding the role of anxiety specifically in EFL writing (Cheng, 2004; Hassan, 2001).

Writing anxiety, as described by Daly and Miller (1975), manifests as a persistent sense of unreadiness or inadequacy in writing tasks. Horwitz et al. (1986) define foreign language anxiety more broadly, encompassing self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors specific to classroom language learning, shaped by the unique challenges of learning a new language. According to Hjortshoj (2001), writing anxiety encompasses various apprehensive and pessimistic feelings about writing, but these feelings are not necessarily pervasive across a person's entire writing experience; they are often situational. This type of anxiety arises particularly from negative or challenging past experiences with writing (Al-Sawalha & Chow, 2012; Hjortshoj, 2001). It is widely acknowledged that writing in a foreign language poses a significant challenge for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students (Blasco, 2016; Cheng, 2002; Daud, Daud, & Kassim, 2005; Kurt & Attay, 2007; Latiff, 2007). However, some of the difficulties EFL students encounter in writing stem from their proficiency in English, which is heavily influenced by their competence in their native language (Silva, 1993).

Second Language Writing Anxiety is divided into three main categories according to Cheng (2004): cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior. Cognitive anxiety involves the mental aspects of anxiety experienced by learners, such as negative expectations, excessive concern about performance, and worries about how others perceive their abilities. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) suggest that cognitive anxiety depletes cognitive resources because anxious learners engage in negative self-related thoughts, such as anticipating failure (“I will never be able to do this.”) and self-criticism (“I am just no good at this.”). Somatic anxiety refers to the physical manifestations of anxiety. Learners experiencing somatic anxiety may notice increased autonomic arousal, leading to physical symptoms like sweating, shaking, elevated heart rate, headaches, and rapid breathing. These physiological responses contribute to feelings of nervousness and tension. Avoidance behavior pertains to the behavioral aspect of anxious learners. Learners exhibiting avoidance behavior may actively seek to avoid situations where they need to write in English, or they may avoid compositions outside of the classroom setting altogether. This behavior stems from their discomfort and anxiety about writing in a second language.

Writing anxiety can stem from several causes, as identified in various studies. Jawas (2019) highlighted three primary causes: difficulties in organizing ideas for essay development, specific types of essay assignments (especially individual assignments in class with topics chosen by the lecturer and under time constraints), and the classroom atmosphere, particularly the lecturer’s influence. Among these, organizing ideas for essay content development was noted as the most anxiety-inducing aspect of the writing process. Selma Kara (2013) identified two key reasons contributing to writing anxiety: students lacking a habitual writing practice and being unfamiliar with expressing themselves in writing. Zhang and Zhu (2012), in their study of English majors, pinpointed five main causes of ESL writing anxiety: language difficulties, inadequate writing practice, fear of test writing, limited knowledge, and lack of self-confidence. Bai (2017) categorized writing anxiety into two sources: individual factors and aspects of the writing process itself. Young (2009) and Dewaele et al. (2008) emphasized that the learning environment significantly influences foreign language learning anxiety, a perspective echoed by other researchers. Additional factors contributing to writing anxiety include fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety, language proficiency challenges, insufficient topical knowledge, time constraints, high frequency of assignments, low self-confidence, inadequate writing techniques, lack of experience or practice, and pressure to produce flawless work (Zhang, 2011; Rezai & Jafari, 2014; Hassan, 2001; Cheng, 2004; Gunge & Taylor, 1989; Bloom, 1981). Overall, writing anxiety arises from a complex interplay of psychological, situational, and environmental factors that vary among individuals and educational contexts.

Based on previous research, numerous studies have delved into the causes of anxiety among writers. While second language writing anxiety (SLWA) has gained attention from researchers and educators, there remains a gap in understanding its prevalence among Thai undergraduate students. In the Thai context, existing research primarily focuses on approaches, techniques, and learning strategies to manage foreign language anxiety in writing. For instance, Jindapitak and Intaraprasert (2017) explored coping strategies employed by Thai university students to address SLWA. Their findings revealed that students utilized various methods such as seeking assistance from teachers, practicing writing, and using dictionaries and translation tools. Moreover, students who adopted multiple coping strategies tended to report lower levels of anxiety. Similarly, Tepmongkol and Tepsuriwong (2018) investigated factors contributing to SLWA among Thai university students. They identified writing apprehension, lack of writing experience, and negative attitudes toward writing as significant contributors to anxiety. Another study by the same researchers in 2019 measured SLWA levels using the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (Cheng, 2004), finding that a majority of Thai university students experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety. In conclusion, Thai university students encounter significant challenges related to writing anxiety, including apprehension about writing, limited experience in writing, and negative perceptions toward the writing process. These factors underscore the need for further research and targeted interventions to alleviate SLWA among this student population.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Second Language Writing Anxiety

Second language writing anxiety refers to the specific type of anxiety experienced by individuals when writing in a language that is not their first language. It is the apprehension, fear, or stress that arises when attempting to write in a second or foreign language. Second-language writing anxiety can be characterized by self-doubt, concerns about making grammatical errors, fear of being misunderstood, and a lack of confidence in expressing ideas effectively. It is a common challenge faced by language learners, particularly when they are required to write academically or in professional settings. This anxiety can hinder the writing process, negatively impact fluency and creativity, and decrease writing performance.

2.2 Causes of Writing Anxiety

Writing anxiety occurs due to some causes. Based on previous research, there are some possible causes of writing anxiety, namely fear of the teacher's negative comment, fear of writing tests, time pressure, low self-confidence, insufficient writing technique, linguistic difficulties, lack of topical knowledge, lack of experience or insufficient writing practice, pressure for perfect work, high frequency of writing assignments.

2.3 Levels of Writing Anxiety

Writing anxiety can be experienced at different levels of intensity, ranging from low to high. This literature review examined research on high, mid, and low levels of writing anxiety. High levels of writing anxiety are typically characterized by intense negative emotions, self-doubt, and fear of failure. Individuals who experience high levels of writing anxiety may struggle to begin writing, or they may have difficulty completing writing tasks. Mid-levels of writing anxiety are less severe than high levels but can still interfere with writing performance. Individuals who experience mid-levels of writing anxiety may feel nervous or uncertain about their writing abilities. Low levels of writing anxiety are characterized by minimal or no negative emotions associated with writing. Individuals who experience low levels of writing anxiety may feel confident in their writing abilities and can easily write. Overall, research has shown that levels of writing anxiety can vary depending on the individual and the writing task at hand. Understanding the different levels of writing anxiety can help individuals and educators develop appropriate coping strategies to manage anxiety and improve writing performance.

2.4 Coping Strategies for Writing Anxiety

Coping strategies for writing anxiety is a topic of interest for many researchers, particularly in the field of writing studies and education. Writing anxiety is a common experience among writers of all levels, from novice to expert, and can negatively impact the quality and quantity of writing produced. As such, understanding effective coping strategies for writing anxiety can be helpful for writers, writing instructors, and researchers alike. Research on SLWA has also focused on coping strategies that learners can use to manage their anxiety. Some studies have examined the effectiveness of specific coping strategies, such as self-talk (e.g., Zhang & Li, 2011) and teacher feedback (e.g., Lee, 2010). Other studies have investigated more general coping strategies, such as mindfulness (e.g., Matsuda & Gobel, 2004) and cognitive-behavioral interventions (e.g., Kormos & Trebits, 2012). Overall, this research highlights the importance of developing effective coping strategies for managing SLWA and supporting learners' writing development.

While numerous studies have explored second language writing anxiety (SLWA) within the Thai EFL context, there is a noticeable gap concerning its investigation among Thai undergraduate students enrolled in international programs within Thailand. For international university students, especially those whose native language is not English, English writing anxiety presents a common challenge. The pressure to produce high-quality academic papers in a foreign language often induces feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and apprehension about making errors. There is a pressing need for further research to delve into the causes, levels, and coping mechanisms of writing anxiety among these students. Therefore, this study was designed to investigate writing anxiety specifically among Thai undergraduate students pursuing their bachelor's degrees in English for International Communication, an international program. In addition to employing a writing anxiety questionnaire, the study utilized stimulated recall interviews to explore how participants coped with writing anxiety immediately after completing assigned writing tasks. This research aimed to provide valuable insights and guidelines for EFL writing instructors on creating supportive classroom environments conducive to alleviating writing anxiety among international university students in Thailand. This approach is expected to contribute to better understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by these students in their academic writing endeavors.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

Mixed-method designs combine qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods in a single investigation or research effort (Creswell, 2014). Instead, "multimethod research" is employed when numerous qualitative or quantitative data (e.g., interviews, observations, surveys, databases) are analyzed. Mixing methods assume the pragmatic belief that qualitative and quantitative methods are compatible and complementary for producing scientifically meaningful and socially beneficial knowledge (Morgan, 2007; Feilzer, 2010). This study used qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data. Quantitative data were obtained from CWAI and SLWAI whereas qualitative data were obtained from a stimulated recall interview.

3.2 Participants and Setting

The participants of this study were 55 second-year undergraduates majoring in English for International

Communication. They enrolled in an introductory university writing course titled *English Writing for Communication* in the second semester of the third academic year 2022. They were 19–21 years old with varied English competence. They had learned English for 12 years. This study recruited the participants through purposive sampling. They mostly spoke Thai (L1) at school and outside. They wrote in English nearly exclusively in English classes, especially for communication. This English writing course taught students about paragraph rules, structures, types, and procedures. Types of paragraphs included expository, narrative, descriptive, and persuasive writing. This study took place at a northern Thai government university.

3.3 Research Instruments

3.3.1 Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) Questionnaire

The Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) by Rezaei and Jafari (2014) was used to investigate the causes of the participants' second-language writing anxiety. The items in CWAI included 10 causes of writing anxiety, namely fear of the teacher's negative comments, topic choice, writing tests, insufficient writing practice, pressure for perfect work, linguistic difficulties, time pressure, a high frequency of writing assignments, insufficient writing techniques, and low self-confidence. CWAI used a Likert-type 5-choice response format: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). Each Inventory item has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87, which is reliable.

3.3.2 Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) Questionnaire

The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) was adopted to investigate the levels of writing anxiety among the participants. This questionnaire included demographic information and 22 questions about English writing anxiety experienced by the participants. Correlation and factor analysis have shown its reliability and validity (Cheng, 2004). Each Inventory item's Cronbach's Alpha is 0.89, which is reliable. The questionnaire used five Likert-type responses: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree).

3.3.3 A Stimulated Recall Interview

A stimulated recall interview revealed the participants' coping techniques when engaged in a writing task. While writing, stimulated recall interviews asked the participants to reflect on the strategies used to cope with their writing anxiety. Using a stimulated recall interview, the researcher gained deep insight into the participant's ideas, emotions, and cognitive techniques. Before the interview, the researcher asked four participants to spend 30 minutes writing an essay of about 100 words about the topic "My Idol". Then, they were asked to participate in a stimulated recall interview. To ensure comprehension, the interview was conducted with the participants using their native language which was Thai.

3.3.4 Data Analysis

To answer research question 1, the quantitative data obtained from The Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) Questionnaire was analyzed using percentage (%). The higher the percentage of cause items, the higher the degree of agreement among the students on the cause items. To answer research question 2, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) questionnaire was analyzed using percentage (%), mean, and standard deviation (S.D.). According to Cheng (2004), the mean score above 65 points indicates a high level of writing anxiety, the mean below 50 points indicates a low level of writing anxiety, and the mean score between 50 and 65 points indicates a moderate level of writing anxiety. To answer research question 3, content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the stimulated recall interview. Firstly, the researcher familiarized herself with the data, transcribed data, read and re-read them, and noted down initial ideas. Secondly, the researcher coded salient features of the data across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code initially. Then, the researcher collated codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Next, the researcher conducted an ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis told, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Finally, the researcher combined and classified the data and summarized it in detail.

4. Results

4.1 Causes of Writing Anxiety

Descriptive statistics of the CWAI (Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory), a 10-item questionnaire, are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the CWAI

Number	Causes	percentage
1.	A high frequency of writing assignments	77.09%
2.	Linguistic difficulties	70.90%
3.	Fear of writing tests	70.90%
4.	Low writing self-confidence	66.90%
5.	Insufficient writing practice	66.18%
6.	Time pressure	65.81%
7.	Insufficient writing technique	47%
8.	Fear of the teacher's negative comments	60.36%
9.	Pressure for perfect work	60%
10.	Problems with topic choice	57.45%

It appears from Table 1 that writing assignments is identified as the primary cause of writing anxiety, affecting the highest proportion of students (77.09%). Similarly, linguistic difficulties and fear of writing tests are also significant stressors, reported by exactly 70.9% of students. Insufficient writing practice and low self-confidence in writing follow closely behind, with nearly identical percentages (66.9% and 66.18% respectively). The lack of language proficiency contributes to low self-confidence, which in turn discourages students from writing. Approximately 65.81% of students indicated that time pressure exacerbates their anxiety, while 47% expressed frustration due to inadequate writing techniques hindering their ability to write effectively. Fear of receiving negative feedback from teachers and the pressure to produce flawless work were reported as causes of anxiety by 60.36% and 60% of students, respectively. In contrast, problems related to choosing a suitable topic were identified as the least common cause of writing anxiety, with 57.45% of students indicating this issue. This breakdown underscores the multifaceted nature of writing anxiety among students, highlighting the various challenges they face in the process of academic writing.

4.2 Levels of Writing Anxiety Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the SLWAI (Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory). It indicates that Thai EFL undergraduate students experience a high to moderate level of ESL writing anxiety. According to Cheng (2004), a mean score above 65 points suggests a high level of writing anxiety, a score below 50 points indicates a low level of writing anxiety, and a score between 50 and 65 points indicates a moderate level of writing anxiety.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the SLWAI

	Number	Percentages	Minimum score	Maximum score	Mean
High Anxiety	40	72.73%	66	94	74.02 \geq 65
Moderate Anxiety	15	27.27%	53	65	60.13 \leq 65
Low Anxiety	-	-	-	-	-
Total mean:	67.08				

Table 2 shows that the overall mean score of 55 EFL undergraduate students at a Thai university who participated in the survey is 67.08 in second language writing anxiety. The student's overall second language writing anxiety is at a high level. It also shows that students' second language writing anxiety is generally high. There are 40 participants (72.73%) whose second language writing anxiety level is high, while 15 participants (27.27%) whose second language writing anxiety level is moderate. On the other hand, there is no low level of second language writing anxiety.

4.3 Coping Strategies

The stimulated recall interviews included four students, two from each category of high anxiety and moderate anxiety levels. The researcher aimed to understand the students' coping strategies for writing anxiety based on their perspectives. Participants were asked to write an essay on the topic "My Idol." Following this task, they responded to questions probing the contexts and situations that induced anxiety when writing, as well as the specific difficulties they encountered when writing in English. The data gathered from these interviews highlighted the viewpoints and experiences of participants in the high and moderate anxiety groups, focusing primarily on their methods for managing writing anxiety. The students employed various strategies to alleviate anxiety when

writing in English, such as positive self-talk, initiating with a structured plan, relaxation techniques, goal setting, and seeking social support.

4.3.1 Positive Self-Talk

The first strategy identified was positive self-talk, which participants perceived as effective in alleviating their writing anxiety. In the context of writing, positive self-talk helps writers overcome self-doubt and fear of failure, which are common triggers for writer's block and procrastination. This finding aligns with Meijden's study (2014), which found that positive self-talk was beneficial in reducing writing anxiety and enhancing performance among Dutch primary school students. All four respondents—Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, and Student 4—mentioned positive self-talk. Student 1 believed that reframing negative expectations as challenges would aid in improvement, while Student 2 expressed a focus on personal growth rather than external judgments. Student 3 emphasized the importance of dismissing negative thoughts and maintaining a positive mindset, stating "I'm the best." Student 4 viewed writing as fulfilling her responsibilities. Below is an excerpt illustrating the participants' perspectives:

"For me, reframe negative expectations as challenges and opportunities for growth and focus on my personal goals and motivations for writing rather than others' perceptions." (Student 1)

"I never mind because I accept the responses of other people because everyone has their thoughts and I can do nothing. I just want to improve myself." (Student 2)

"Trying to think that we are doing our job is enough. Whatever is bad, just let it go and forget about it. Think that I will do my best." (Student 3)

"I always thought that I had to be good at English. So, I have tried to learn and write to improve my skills." (Student 4)

The excerpts above demonstrated that practicing positive self-talk during writing could contribute to increased self-efficacy, enhanced persistence, and improved writing quality. Moreover, adopting positive self-talk enabled them to embrace risks, experiment with new writing techniques, and develop confidence in their skills. Overall, integrating positive self-talk into writing practices proved to be a potent strategy for writers grappling with anxiety or uncertainty about their abilities.

4.3.2 Start with a Plan

The second strategy was starting with a plan, which reduced their writing anxiety. Starting with a plan proved to be an effective strategy for reducing writing anxiety and enhancing writing performance. By planning out the structure, content, and organization of their writing, writers could mitigate the uncertainty and ambiguity that often cause anxiety and procrastination. Moreover, having a clear plan in place helped writers maintain focus and progress effectively, particularly when tackling longer or more intricate writing tasks. Previous studies (e.g., Cumming, 1989; Hayes & Flower, 1986; Hayes et al., 1987; Sasaki, 2000) have consistently shown that expert writers employ more effective planning and revising strategies compared to inexperienced student writers. Three out of four respondents—Student 1, Student 2, and Student 4—mentioned the importance of starting with a plan. Student 1 emphasized that organizing ideas from the outset helped maintain focus during writing. Student 2 highlighted the significance of grouping ideas into categories or themes. Student 4 underscored the value of reviewing and revising the outline to ensure cohesive idea integration. The following excerpt illustrates the students' perspectives:

"I start by organizing ideas and then write down any ideas that come to mind. And I also take time to focus on it." (Student 1)

"I usually take time to group them into categories or themes. This will help me see how ideas fit together and identify any gaps or areas that need more development." (Student 2)

"I usually take time to review and revise my outline as I go. Don't be afraid to make changes as you work through your ideas and start to see how they fit together." (Student 4)

The excerpts above illustrated that writers who started with a plan tended to experience higher levels of self-efficacy, greater confidence in their writing abilities, and improved overall writing performance compared to those who did not plan ahead. By dedicating time to planning their writing, writers were able to mitigate the stress and anxiety typically associated with the writing process and enhance their likelihood of achieving success.

4.3.3 Relaxation Techniques

The third strategy was relaxation techniques, which helped reduce their writing anxiety. One effective relaxation technique proven to alleviate anxiety is deep breathing. By practicing slow, deep breaths, writers can lower their

heart rate and induce feelings of relaxation and calmness. This finding aligns with research by Kondo & Ying-Ling (2004), which suggests that relaxation strategies focused on emotional regulation can reduce the physiological stress associated with emotional arousal during preparation, thereby enhancing effective performance in learning contexts. All four respondents—Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, and Student 4—mentioned using relaxation techniques. Student 1 believed that deep breathing and relaxing his body would aid in improvement. Student 2 emphasized the importance of concentrating and calming her thoughts. Student 3 mentioned the benefit of clearing his mind to facilitate flow. Student 4 planned to relax before starting to write. The following excerpt presents the participants' perspectives:

“First, I take deep breaths and relax my body. Next, write down my thoughts and feelings in a journal, to help me process and clarify them. Sometimes I practice writing regularly to build confidence and improve my skills.” (student 1)

“First, I have to concentrate and then I slowly thought calmly as a picture when I thought like this It makes me figure it out.” (student 2)

“Try not to be too stressed, clear my brain as much as possible, and then my brain will flow to figure it out.” (student 3)

“For me, when I feel stressed or tense about my writing, I will relax before writing, like going out with friends, listening to music, or watching a movie.” (student 4)

The excerpts above showed that writers who used relaxation techniques before and while writing tended to feel less anxious, wrote better overall, and felt like they had more control over their writing. By incorporating relaxation techniques into their writing routine, writers were able to diminish the negative effects of anxiety and had a better, more productive time writing.

4.3.4 Goal Setting

The fourth strategy for dealing with anxiety was setting goals. Goal setting proved to be an effective strategy for reducing writing anxiety and enhancing writing performance. By establishing specific and attainable goals for their writing, writers could boost their motivation, concentration, and sense of control over the writing process. This approach is particularly beneficial for writers grappling with anxiety or self-doubt, as clear goals help alleviate uncertainty and ambiguity. This finding aligns with research by Fiedler and Hänggi (2016), which highlighted that goal setting was effective in reducing writing anxiety and improving research productivity. Three out of four respondents—Student 1, Student 2, and Student 3—mentioned utilizing goal setting. Student 1 emphasized focusing on personal goals and motivations to make achieving goals more feasible. Student 2 emphasized the importance of setting clear goals and having a defined target to provide purpose and direction. Student 3 believed that setting goals was beneficial, especially during stressful or uncertain times. The following excerpt reflects the students' perspectives:

“I focus on my personal goals and motivations for writing, rather than others' perceptions. First, I identify the root cause of avoidance behavior and try to break it. Then set an achievable goal for me.” (Student 1)

“When I set goals, I create a clear target for myself to work towards, which can give me a sense of purpose and direction.” (Student 2)

“I usually set goals before writing because I think it helpful during times of stress, anxiety, or uncertainty, when we may feel overwhelmed or unsure of what to do next.” (Student 3)

The excerpts above showed that writers who set specific, challenging goals tended to have higher levels of motivation, greater persistence, and better overall writing performance than those who did not set goals. By setting goals for their writing, writers were able to overcome feelings of anxiety and self-doubt and had a more positive and productive writing experience.

4.3.5 Social Support

The last strategy for dealing with anxiety was social support. Social support proved to be an effective strategy for reducing writing anxiety and enhancing writing performance. By seeking support from others, writers could alleviate feelings of isolation and strengthen their sense of belonging and connection within the writing community. This is particularly beneficial for writers struggling with anxiety or self-doubt, as social support can offer encouragement and validation. One way to access social support is by participating in a writing group or community. These forums provide opportunities for writers to share their work, receive feedback, and connect with peers who may be facing similar challenges. This approach is supported by research by Silvia (2007), which highlighted that discussing writing challenges with others and receiving feedback and encouragement can help

reduce anxiety and boost confidence. Two out of the four respondents—Student 1 and Student 4—mentioned seeking social support. Student 1 mentioned that spending time with friends helped her alleviate anxiety. Student 4 emphasized that talking to others who had experienced similar writing anxieties fostered camaraderie and reduced feelings of isolation. The following excerpt reflects the students' perspectives:

“I like hanging out, listening to music, and watching movies with friends. It helps me chill and reduce anxiety.”
(Student 1)

“I usually chat with others who've dealt with similar writing stresses. It helps us feel like we're in the same boat and less alone.” (Student 4)

The excerpts above illustrate that writers who receive social support tend to gain more confidence in their writing abilities and achieve better overall writing performances. By seeking out social support, writers can effectively overcome feelings of anxiety and self-doubt, fostering a more positive and connected writing experience.

In conclusion, a study involving four students with varying levels of writing anxiety identified five key coping strategies: positive self-talk, planning, relaxation techniques, goal setting, and seeking social support. Positive self-talk helped students reframe negative thoughts and focus on personal growth. Planning the structure and organization of their writing reduced anxiety and procrastination. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, helped calm their minds and bodies. Setting achievable goals enhanced motivation and sense of control. Finally, seeking social support provided confidence and a sense of community, thereby reducing feelings of isolation. These strategies collectively underscore the importance of psychological, organizational, and social approaches in effectively managing writing anxiety.

5. Discussion

5.1 Dominant Cause of Thai EFL Undergraduate Students' Writing Anxiety

The study revealed that the primary cause of English writing anxiety among Thai EFL undergraduate students was the frequent assignment of writing tasks. This finding aligned with the findings of Rezaei and Jafari (2014), who also noted a strong correlation between the high frequency of writing assignments and increased writing anxiety in second language learners. The study showed that frequent writing assignments could elevate anxiety levels for some students by imposing pressure to meet deadlines and maintain consistent performance. For instance, Student 1 and Student 2 both reported increased anxiety due to the overwhelming nature of constant and high-stakes writing tasks, respectively.

Contrarily, frequent writing assignments could be beneficial for some students by helping them develop a habit and improve their writing skills through regular practice. Student 3, for example, described how a balanced distribution of writing tasks throughout the semester allowed them to manage their workload effectively without feeling overwhelmed, thereby enhancing their writing confidence and proficiency. This suggests that while frequent assignments can be anxiety-inducing, a well-structured and balanced approach to assigning tasks can mitigate these effects and even promote better writing outcomes. Supporting studies further corroborate these findings. El-Koumy and Al-Awadi (2018), Cheng and Wang (2019), Liu and Shi (2020), and Safitri and Fitriyani (2021) all reported that frequent writing assignments increase writing anxiety due to the associated workload and deadline pressures. However, these studies also indicate that individual differences and the nature of the writing tasks play significant roles in influencing writing anxiety. Therefore, while high assignment frequency is a major contributing factor, other elements must also be considered to fully understand and address writing anxiety in students.

5.2 Levels of EFL Writing Anxiety

Responding to Research Question 2, participants were divided into two anxiety level groups based on their summed-up scores collected by SLWAI. According to Cheng (2004), the mean score above 65 points indicates a high level of writing anxiety, the mean below 50 points indicates a low level of writing anxiety, and the mean score in between 50 and 65 points indicates a moderate level of writing anxiety. After analyzing the data, the researcher found that 70.23 percent of students had a high level of anxiety, 60.13 percent had a moderate level of anxiety, and no student had a low level of anxiety. Based on these data, the dominant level experienced by students is a high level of anxiety. The finding aligned with previous studies which found that the participants had a high level of second language writing anxiety (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Wern, 2021).

5.3 Coping Strategies

5.3.1 Positive Self-Talk

The finding suggested that the participants used various strategies to cope with their second language writing

anxiety, namely positive self-talk, starting with a plan, using relaxation techniques, setting goals, and social support. Several previous studies have also mentioned coping strategies to overcome second language writing anxiety which were similar and different. For example, Kaya and Çakir (2015) investigated the coping strategies employed by Turkish ESL learners to manage writing anxiety and found that the participants employed various coping strategies, including seeking social support, engaging in self-reflection, using positive self-talk, and employing time management techniques. Cheng (2016) explored the coping strategies used by a Chinese graduate student in managing writing anxiety and found that the participants employed strategies such as planning and organization, seeking feedback from peers and instructors, utilizing online resources, and engaging in self-reflection to cope with writing anxiety. Furthermore, Xu and Liu (2017) examined the coping strategies employed by Chinese EFL undergraduates to alleviate writing anxiety. The findings revealed a range of coping strategies, including seeking social support, employing cognitive strategies (e.g., positive self-talk, setting realistic goals), using writing strategies (e.g., brainstorming, outlining), and utilizing technology tools for writing assistance. He (2019) explored the coping strategies employed by Chinese graduate students to cope with writing anxiety. The findings identified strategies such as seeking support from peers and instructors, using online resources, engaging in pre-writing activities, seeking revision assistance, and engaging in self-reflection as effective coping mechanisms.

Based on the findings, they suggested that the participants utilized various coping strategies when encountering second language writing anxiety. By identifying and understanding these strategies, educators, and learners can develop effective interventions and support systems to alleviate writing anxiety and promote a positive writing experience.

5.4 Conclusion

To conclude, investigating dominant causes, levels, and coping strategies all affect students' writing anxiety. In terms of causes of writing anxiety, high frequency of writing assignments, linguistic difficulty and fear of a writing test, insufficient writing practice, low self-confidence in writing, time pressure, insufficient writing techniques, fear of a negative comment from a teacher, pressure for perfect work, and a high frequency of topic choice problems were the main causes of writing anxiety. The results of this study also indicated that a high frequency of writing assignments is the most influential cause for Thai EFL undergraduate students when writing English. The current study also found that the overall mean score of 55 Thai EFL undergraduate students who participated in the survey was 40 out of 55 in writing anxiety, which indicated that Thai EFL undergraduate students experienced a high level of writing anxiety. From the result, some suggestions for teachers were put forward to help students reduce writing anxiety and improve their English writing. Instructors should be aware of the detrimental effect of worry on learners' writing in their second language and avoid attributing it to a lack of enthusiasm, skills, or boredom. Finally, positive self-talk, starting with a plan, relaxation techniques, goal setting, and social support strategies, can help resolve writing issues.

While this research offers valuable pedagogical implications, several limitations need addressing. Firstly, the sample size is limited. This study only involved 55 Thai EFL undergraduate students, which restricted the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of Thai undergraduate students. Increasing the sample size by randomly selecting participants from other Thai universities could enhance the study's effectiveness. Secondly, this research was conducted exclusively within the EFL context of Northeast Thailand. Therefore, it is crucial to replicate this study nationwide to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of second language writing anxiety among Thai EFL undergraduate students across the entire country. Finally, this study focused on investigating second language writing anxiety among third-year undergraduate students majoring in English for International Communication. As such, the findings may be constrained to this specific group of learners. Future research could explore second language writing anxiety among Thai undergraduate students across various majors to provide a broader perspective on the topic.

The findings of this study could have significant implications for language and teacher education programs. Educators should understand that anxiety can negatively impact learners' writing abilities in their second language, even among experienced EFL teachers. Instructors need to recognize this potential hindrance before attributing students' writing challenges to a lack of interest, skills, or boredom with the lesson. Implementing anxiety-relieving activities can help students manage the negative emotions they experience in foreign language classes. Teacher training programs or seminars could be valuable in teaching educators how to effectively motivate students to write, select appropriate error correction strategies, and create a supportive classroom environment where students feel safe to express themselves without fear of ridicule. Additionally, teachers can enhance student engagement by introducing stimulating and relevant topics or incorporating themes that resonate with students' interests (Rankin-Brown & Fitzpatrick, 2007).

In conclusion, students who experience writing anxiety can benefit from a range of strategies and supportive practices aimed at reducing anxiety and enhancing their writing skills. Educators play a crucial role in providing encouragement and guidance to help students overcome their writing anxiety and achieve their writing objectives.

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Authors contributions

Assoc. Prof. Somkiat Poopatwiboon and Dr. Pilanute Phusawisot were responsible for study design and revising. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Appendix A

Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI)

Demographic information Name:

Gender:
 Academic Year:
 Date:

Instruction

Read the following statement and express your degree of agreement/disagreement by ticking (√) the appropriate column.

Check the appropriate column.

Note that SA: Strongly Agree (5)

A: Agree (4)

U: Uncertain (3)

D: Disagree (2)

SD: Strongly Disagree (1)

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
When I write English essays:					
I worry about the negative comments and evaluation of the teacher.					
I’m afraid of writing tests.					
I have lack of sufficient English writing practice which makes me feel anxious.					
I don’t have a good command of English writing techniques which makes me feel anxious.					
I don’t know what to write on the topic given by the teacher, so I feel upset.					
I often encounter some linguistic problems such as inadequate mastery of vocabulary, sentence structures, grammatical errors, etc.					
I’m under pressure to offer a perfect work which makes me upset.					
I feel anxious due to the high frequency of writing assignments.					
I feel worry when I have to write under time constraints.					
I have a low confidence in English writing.					

Appendix B
Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)

Demographic information Name:

Gender:

Academic Year:

Date:

Instruction

Read the following statement and express your degree of agreement / disagreement by ticking (√) the appropriate column.

Check the appropriate column.

Note that SA: Strongly Agree (5)

A: Agree (4)

U: Uncertain (3)

D: Disagree (2)

SD: Strongly Disagree (1)

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. While writing in English, I'm not nervous at all.					
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraint.					
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.					
4. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.					
5. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.					
6. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.					
7. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others'.					
8. I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure.					
9. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.					
10. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.					
11. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint.					
12. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write composition.					
13. I often feel panic when I write English compositions under time constraint.					
14. I'm afraid that other students would deride my English composition if they read it.					
15. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.					
16. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.					
17. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.					
18. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.					
19. I usually feel my whole-body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.					
20. I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample to be discussed in class.					
21. I'm not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.					
22. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions.					

Appendix C
The task in a stimulated recall interview

Demographic information Name:

Gender:

Academic Year:

