English Language Teaching; Vol. 9, No. 9; 2016
ISSN 1916-4742 E-ISSN 1916-4750
Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education

Learning Strategies in Alleviating English Writing Anxiety for English Language Learners (ELLs) with Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

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Received: April 10, 2016 Accepted: July 2, 2016 Online Published: July 24, 2016

doi: 10.5539/elt.v9n9p52 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n9p52

Abstract

This study utilized the Oxford Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and an English writing anxiety scale to examine the relationship between learning strategies and English writing anxiety in 102 university-level English language learners (ELLs) with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) in a university in Taiwan. Kruskal Wallis Test results revealed no significant association between learning strategies and English writing anxiety. The common learning strategies utilized by participants were compensation, social, memory and mixed strategies. The interview data indicated that ELLs suffered considerably from writing anxiety. Coping strategies of highly anxious ELL of each learning strategy group is also reported. However, further studies of larger populations and comparison of different ethnic groups as well as quantitative statistics analyses are needed.

Keywords: writing anxiety, learning strategies, limited English proficiency

1. Introduction

According to a 2015 report of Educational Testing Service (ETS) scores (ETS, 2015), the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores of Taiwan was 536 (p. 5), well below Asian country's average 567 (p. 4). Globalization has increased the importance of English skills. The demand for employees with English proficiency increased after Taiwan became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Public and private universities in Taiwan must begin to establish minimum English proficiency requirements to maintain competitiveness.

Although the number of universities in Taiwan has doubled in this decade, quality has not improved. The need to master English to meet a graduation or job requirement may cause foreign language anxiety in university-level English language learners (ELLs) with limited English proficiency (LEP). Other than studies by Young (1990, 1991, 1992), Kondo and Yang (2004) and Ariza (2002), few studies have examined methods of reducing foreign language anxiety. This study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the relationships between learning strategy and English writing anxiety in university-level ELLs with LEP. The researchers attempted to identify deficiencies in the teaching process and to test the effectiveness of journal writing combined with the use of movies for teaching English. The analytical results are then compared with studies in other Asian countries, and some suggestions are offered. This study also offers an opportunity for the Taiwan Ministry of Education with a reappraisal of the effectiveness of English instruction in higher education.

The term "English Language Learners (ELLs)," that has acquired some of the same negative connotations of "limited English proficiency," is identified as people who are born in countries in which the national language is other than English have limited English language proficiency or are born into non-native English speaking families living in English-speaking countries (Houk, 2005). Although ELLs can learn English within one or two years, many ELLs need 5 to 8 years of English learning in order to achieve academic proficiency (Lake & Pappamihiel, 2003). Some researchers have even suggested that ELLs need six to ten years to acquire grade-appropriate reading and writing proficiency in English (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). The rapidly increasing number of ELLs in Taiwan is expected to encounter difficulties with academic English because of their lack of advanced English reading and writing skills (Scarcella, 2002).

1.1 Foreign Language Anxiety

According to Gardner & MacIntyre (1993), language anxiety is the fear or apprehension experienced by a learner who is expected to use a second or foreign language. Moreover, foreign language anxiety refers to a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the unique features of the language learning process (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). This definition was used to develop the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). This scale is a 33-item, self-report questionnaire that uses a Likert scale to assess learners' symptoms of foreign language anxiety.

Anxiety is one of the best indicators of performance in second language classes (Saito & Samimy, 1996). Most studies of student anxiety have also demonstrated a negative relationship between anxiety and academic success (Aida, 1994; Young, 1986; Ganschow et al., 1994). Horwitz et al. (1986) pointed out that foreign language anxiety includes communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Young (1991) further suggested the following six potential sources of anxiety in the second language classroom: personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interaction, classroom procedures and language testing. Students who suffer language anxiety may have continuing difficulty in language learning and language success (Oxford, 1999).

1.2 Foreign Language Anxiety and Learning Strategy

Learning strategy is defined as the specific actions or techniques used by students, usually intentionally, to improve their progress in developing second language (L2) skills (Green & Oxford, 1995). Gardner & MacIntyre (1992, 1993) classified the many factors that might explain individual differences in second language success into cognitive and affective variables.

A study by Oxford and Ehrman (1995) revealed that, in the complex association between anxiety and learning strategy, anxiety may actually be facilitative. Of the extensive research in language learning, the Oxford (1990) study of language learning strategies theory is the most comprehensive that classified language learning strategies as direct and indirect. Therefore, the current study adopted the Oxford (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) survey of learning strategies in ELLs with LEP. Oxford (1994, cited in Grainger, 1997) acknowledged that a disadvantage of SILL is its lack of capability to determine recommended language-learning strategies related to specific tasks and the need to develop different SILL versions appropriate for different countries and cultures. However, the SILL is still considered the most comprehensive tool for classifying learning strategy, this instrument was used in this study (Bremner, 1999; Foong & Goh, 1997; Green & Oxford, 1995; Grainger, 1997; Woodrow, 2005). According to one estimate, the SILL has been employed in forty to fifty major studies of 8000-8500 language learners globally (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). In summary, learning strategies have an important role in language learning and positively promote acquisition of the four major language skills.

The SILL contains fifty items in six categories of direct and indirect strategies. The direct strategies are those employed by learners using the language itself in tasks such as memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies are those employed by learners manage learning, which involves metacognitive, affective and social strategies (Oxford, 1990).

Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) argued that the SILL is merely a language learning strategy tool that has been widely verified for reliability and validated in multiple ways. Reliability (Cronbach α) for the SILL is reportedly .93 to .98, depending on whether students take the SILL in their own language or as a second language (Green & Oxford, 1995). According to various studies SILL scores correspond well with superior language achievement as revealed by grades, scores on other tests, self-ratings and teacher ratings (Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

1.3 Foreign Language Anxiety and Journal Writing

Journal writing is an effective method of EFL instruction which encourages students to engage in critical thinking by applying concepts and theories learned during class (Hooey & Bailey, 2005). Journal writing has also proven effective for improving student interaction, communication and participation (Peyton, 1990; Peyton & Reed, 1990). Also, when the lecturer is the respondent, he or she can offer positive and constructive comments regarding the journal entries, which can also help reduce writing anxiety and improve fluency (Harada, 2001).

Young (1986) noted a negative correlation between student anxiety and performance in speaking and writing tasks. Likewise, Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999) found that writing performance significantly and negatively correlates with foreign language anxiety, but perceived second language (L2) writing competence is a better predictor of L2 writing anxiety than L2 writing success (Cheng, 2002). Several other studies have also

noted the existence of writing anxiety in language learners (Onwuegbuzie, 1998; Kasper, 1998; MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1991). In sum, substantial data indicate that journal writing correlates strongly with foreign language anxiety.

This study investigated the relationship between learning strategy and English writing anxiety in university-level ELLs with LEP. For this purpose, the following research questions were addressed:

1) Is learning strategy significantly related to English writing anxiety in ELLs?
2) What learning strategies are most frequently employed by ELLs?
3) What are the manifestations of anxiety in ELLs? What are the causes?
4) How do strategies for coping with anxiety differ between ELLs who use different learning strategies?
5) What coping strategies do students in the mixed-group employ to relieve their anxiety?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The 104 subjects (seventy-four males and thirty females) were juniors and seniors in a university in Taiwan. Questionnaires from two participants who were consistently absent were excluded from analysis. All participants enrolled in a practical English course during the semester. Their age range was 18 to 25 years (mean age, 21.5 years).

The study included 102 participants (seventy-four males and twenty-eight females). The majors of the participants were as follows: six safety and environmental engineering majors, two engineering majors and ninety-four information management majors. The participants in the writing course were required to watch American movies. They were then separated into groups based on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and were required to make weekly journal entries in a relaxed atmosphere.

2.2 Procedure

The whole procedure took nine weeks. At the beginning, all participants completed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and an English Writing Anxiety Survey. At the same time, researchers asked students to describe their English writing anxieties while learning English. Students were then grouped according to the SILL results with different learning strategies. Hence, the students were divided into memory group, cognitive group, compensation strategy group, metacognitive group, affective group, social strategy group and mixed group, which included students whose learning strategies had the same mean.

During the experiment, participants watched one hour of an American movie weekly. The three movies used for English instruction were *Blood Diamond, Night at the Museum* and *Transformers*. After watching the movies, each group discussed the plot of each movie. The discussion was followed by a free writing session. Because the students had difficulty beginning their journal entries, the researchers provided writing samples and an English-Chinese list of useful sentences. After the journal writings, students were then given 30 minutes to work cooperatively to draft a one-paragraph dialogue, which each student then copied into a journal. Each group was required to complete one dialogue each week.

For the first six weeks before they became comfortable with the cooperative learning process, students were allowed for late or incomplete submissions, but the researchers formally implemented the process during the seventh and eighth week of the class. During the ninth week, each participant was again asked to complete the English Writing Anxiety Survey.

2.3 Measures

Two instruments in this study were the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and the English Writing Anxiety Scale.

Each SILL package included a short set of directions to the student with a sample item, the 50-item instrument, a scoring worksheet on which students recorded their answers and calculated their scores for each strategy subscale and their overall average, a summary profile showing their scores and instructions for interpreting the scores and a strategy graph to help students analyze their SILL results. A background questionnaire was used to document age, gender, language experience, motivation and other data (Oxford, 1990).

The English Writing Anxiety Scale included twenty-two items, each with five possible responses (Appendix A). This English Writing Anxiety Scale was adapted from both Chien's and Howie's studies (Chien & Mo, 2006; Howie, 2005). Reliability (Cronbach α) for the English writing anxiety scale is reportedly .906. In order to

maintain the expert validity to measure content-related validity, researchers invited three experts to offer suggestions and evaluate the appropriateness of each question in the English writing anxiety scale. The three experts were professors from universities in southern and central Taiwan. In accordance with suggestions by the experts, twelve of the twenty-four items in the English writing scale were amended. Since the correlation of questions 8 and 16 were both below 0.3, these two questions were deleted. The final English writing scale included twenty-two questions. Reliability (Cronbach α) for the English writing anxiety questionnaire was .872. The 22 items of the scale can be divided into five categories of anxiety: content of journal, scores on writing rules, common errors in writing, vocabulary, and grammar.

2.4 Interview

One researcher interviewed participants from each learning strategy group based on SILL. The exact number of interviews were as follows: fourteen participants from the memory group, four participants from the cognitive group, thirty-six participants from compensation strategies group, four participants from the metacognitive group, ten participants from the affective group, twenty participants from the social strategies group and fourteen participants from the mixed group (this group had the same score for two different learning strategies).

Each student received a gift for participating in each 8 to 12 minutes interview. All data were recorded and micro-analyzed by the researchers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Also, pattern coding was employed to recognize emerging themes and organize them into meaningful groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

2.5 Data Collection and Analysis

This study used data from the English writing anxiety scale for quantitative analysis and interview data for qualitative analysis. Data analysis was conducted using Kruskal-Wallis analysis and interview.

1) Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance by ranks was the method of analyzing responses to the first research question: "Is learning strategy significantly related to English writing anxiety in ELLs?

2) Interview was the method of data analysis for the second research question: "What learning strategies are most frequently employed by ELLs?"

3) Interview was the method of data analysis for the third research question: "What are the manifestations of anxiety in ELLs? What are the causes?

4) Interview was the method of data analysis for the fourth research question: "How do strategies for coping with anxiety differ between ELLs who use different learning strategies?"

5) Interview was the method of data analysis for the fifth research question: "What coping strategies do students in the mixed-group employ to relieve their anxiety?"

3. Results

Research Question #1: Is learning strategy significantly related to English writing anxiety in ELLs?

This study investigated the relationship between learning strategy and English writing anxiety in ELLs with LEP. As Table 1 shows, a Kruskal-Wallis test showed that there was not a statistically significant difference in English writing anxiety between the different learning strategy groups, $\chi^2(2) = 4.768$, $p = 0.574$, with a mean rank of 32.00 for Memory group, 22.00 for Cognitive group, 25.61 for Compensation group, 37.50 for Metacognitive group, 25.00 for Affective group, 27.30 for Social group, and 17.7 for Mixed group.

Table 1. Kruskal Wallis Test Results Ranks

Learning Strategy Group	N	Mean Rank
Memory (1st group)	14	32.00
Cognitive (2nd group)	5	22.00
Compensation (3rd group)	36	25.61
Metacognitive (4th group)	5	37.50
Affective (5th group)	10	25.00
Social (6th group)	20	27.30
Mixed group (7th group)	12	17.71
Total	102	

Note. Mixed group refers to groups containing participants who had the same SILL score for two different learning strategies

Test Statistics (a, b)

	Order
Chi-Square	4.768
df	6
Asymp. Sig.	.574

Note. a :Kruskal Wallis Test.

b: Grouping Variable: Learning Strategy Group.

Research Question #2: What learning strategies are most frequently employed by ELLs?

Table 2 presents the most common learning strategies mentioned in interviews with ELLs. The finding indicated that compensation strategy used by thirty-six participants (35%), was the most common. Other common learning strategies by participants were compensation (35%), social (19%), memory (14%) and mixed strategies (12 %).

Table 2. Learning strategies employed by ELLs

Group No.	Learning strategy	n	percentage
1	Memory	14	14%
2	Cognitive	5	5%
3	Compensation	36	35%
4	Metacognitive	5	5%
5	Affective	10	10%
6	Social	20	19%
7	Mixed group	12	12%
		102	100%

Research Question #3: What are the manifestations of anxiety in ELLs? What are the causes?

Table 3 reveals that listening, speaking and writing comprised 16%, 31% and 2% of total anxiety, respectively, whereas writing comprised 51% of total anxiety. These survey results demonstrated that most ELLs with LEP experience substantial writing anxiety.

Table 3. Common causes of anxiety experienced by ELLs

Anxiety	n	percentage
Listening anxiety	16	16%
Speaking anxiety	32	31%
Reading anxiety	2	2%
Writing anxiety	52	51%
	102	100%

As Table 4 shows, the main reasons for listening anxiety were “speaking too fast” and “inability to comprehend.” “Inability to construct a sentence”, “fear of incorrect pronunciation” and “too nervous to remember vocabulary” were the three main causes of speaking anxiety. “Limited vocabulary” was the main

cause of reading anxiety. “Limited vocabulary and knowledge of English phrases” and “difficulty using vocabulary” were the two main causes of writing anxiety.

Table 4. Causes of anxiety in ELLs

Anxiety	Reason	n
Listening	A. speed is too fast	6
	B. juncture	2
	C. did not listen to English very often	2
	D. inability to comprehend	6
Speaking	A. cannot pronounce some vocabulary	4
	B. inability to construct a sentence	6
	C. don’t speak very often and don’t know how to start	2
	D. fear of incorrect pronunciation	6
	E. too nervous to remember vocabulary	6
	F. don’t know many vocabulary	4
	G. don’t know grammar very well	2
	H. afraid of making error	2
	I. English proficiency is low	2
	J. lack practice	2
	K. wrong-spelling of pronunciation	2
Reading	A. limited vocabulary	2
Writing	A. cannot express their ideas in English	2
	B. limited vocabulary and knowledge of English phrases	28
	C. cannot spell vocabulary	6
	D. have difficulty in using vocabulary	18
	E. did not read the original text	4
	F. don’t know how to write	2
	G. inability to construct a sentence	8
	H. afraid of using wrong words	4
	I. afraid of making error in writing	2
	J. don’t know how to start to write	2

Research Question #4: How do strategies for coping with anxiety differ between ELLs who use different learning strategies?

Table 5 presents coping strategies of ELLs in the six learning groups as follows: six participants watched movies; fourteen listened to music; two played games; four exercised; two sought a comfortable environment; two went outdoors; four adopted avoidance; two studied grammar books; two read English novels and two requested assistance from others. Of these coping strategies, the top three were listening to music (fourteen students), watching movies (six students), avoidance (four students) and exercise (four students).

Table 5. Anxiety and coping strategies used by ELLs using different learning strategies

No.	Learning strategy	Anxiety	Coping strategy
1A-2	memory	writing	watching movies and listening to music
1B-2	memory	writing	playing games and listening to music
1C-2	memory	writing	requesting assistance from others
1D-2	memory	writing	seeking a comfortable environment
2A-1	cognitive	speaking	exercise
2A-2	cognitive	speaking	watching movies
2B-1	cognitive	speaking	avoidance
2B-2	cognitive	speaking	listening to music
3A-1	compensatory	writing	watching movies and listening to music
3A-2	compensatory	speaking	listening to music
3B-3	compensatory	writing	watching movies and listening to music
3B-4	compensatory	speaking	exercise
3D-1	compensatory	writing	listening to music and going outside
3D-2	compensatory	writing	avoidance
3E-1	compensatory	writing	studying some grammar books
3E-2	compensatory	writing	watching movies
4A-1	metacognitive	speaking	avoidance
4A-2	metacognitive	writing	watching movies and listening to music
4A-3	metacognitive	writing	seeking a comfortable environment
4A-4	metacognitive	speaking	exercise and listening to music
5B-1	affective	speaking	avoidance
5B-2	affective	writing	studying some grammar books
5B-3	affective	writing	listening to music and going outside
5B-4	affective	speaking	exercise and listening to music
6B-1	cognitive	reading	reading English novels
6C-3	cognitive	listening	listening to music
6C-4	cognitive	writing	requesting assistance from others
6D-1	cognitive	writing	playing games and listening to music
6D-2	cognitive	listening	listening to music

Research Question #5: What coping strategies do students in the mixed-group employ to relieve their anxiety?

As table 6 shows, coping strategies reported by ELLs in the mixed group were as follows: six participants listened to music; two performed deep breathing; four exercised; four watched movies; two practiced writing; two reviewed examples of writing and two logged onto the Internet. Of these coping strategies, the top three learning strategies used by the mixed group of ELL students were listening to music (six students), watching movies (four students) and exercise (four students).

Table 6. Coping strategies used by mixed-group

No.	Learning strategy	Anxiety	Coping strategy
7A-1	memory & social	listening	listening to music
7A-2	memory & metacognitive	speaking	listening to music, watching movies and surfing on Internet
7A-3	affective & social	listening	exercise and watching movies
7A-4	compensatory & social	writing	practice writing
7B-1	compensatory & social	writing	some examples of writing as reference
7B-2	memory & compensatory	speaking	listening to music, watching movies and surfing on Internet
7B-3	memory & affective	speaking	listening to music and exercising
7C-1	memory & social	listening	exercise and watching movies
7C-2	memory & metacognitive	speaking	deep breathing
7C-3	affective & social	listening	listening to music
7C-4	compensatory & social	writing	practice writing
7D-1	compensatory & social	writing	some examples of writing as reference
7D-2	memory & compensatory	speaking	deep breathing
7D-3	memory & affective	speaking	listening to music and exercising

4. Discussion

The analytical results in this study of the relationship between learning strategy and English writing anxiety in ELLs with LEP revealed no significant relationship between learning strategy and English writing anxiety.

This study was consistent with the findings of Grainger (1997) that SILL may be an inappropriate reporting strategy for university-level ELLs with LEP in Taiwan. However, the following issues need further investigation.

First, the survey results of this study indicated that the top three learning strategies utilized by participants were compensation, social, and memory strategies. This finding confirmed those of a study by Grainger (1997), who reported that students of Asian background tend to prefer group strategies of “compensation” and “learning with others”. However, the order of the top three learning strategies used by low proficiency Chinese EFL students is, in order of importance, metacognitive, compensation and affective (Foong & Goh, 1997). Therefore, further research is needed to determine whether or not Asian students prefer to use memory strategies. Further studies may also examine the SILL and more data to provide further insight into the language learning process.

Second, English courses are often the most unpopular college courses. Most students regard English courses as a nightmarish experience. Compared to speaking and writing, which are productive skills, these students tend to prefer listening and reading, which are receptive skills. The interview findings in this study confirm this view. Another important inference is that ELLs with LEP are most anxious about writing. Hence, further studies are needed to explore barriers in the process of teaching English writing.

Third, the findings regarding the causes of listening, speaking, reading and writing anxiety suggest that it would be beneficial for educators to offer remedial instruction to help students to overcome their anxiety.

Fourth, regarding coping strategies used by highly anxious ELLs in the six learning groups, fourteen participants listened to music, six watched movies and four attempted to avoid anxiety. These findings confirmed the research results of Woodrow (2005) that language learners with limited oral proficiency tend to watch television as a coping measure. Likewise, listening to music and watching movies were the two most common coping strategies employed by the mixed-group. Therefore, listening to music and watching movies were the two most common coping strategies of all highly anxious ELLs in the six learning groups and the mixed group.

Fifth, the results of the current study require further confirmation in a larger population of students from different Taiwan colleges and universities. The participants in this study included only six safety and environmental engineering majors, two construction engineering majors and ninety-four information management majors in Taiwan; restated, eight were college of engineering students, and ninety-four were college of management students. Therefore, the extent to which the data in this study can be generalized to larger populations is limited.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between learning strategy and English writing anxiety in university-level ELLs with LEP. Although the relationship revealed no statistical significance, the findings suggest that the Taiwan government should review the effectiveness of English education in Taiwan technology institutes and science and technology universities. However, more research is needed to elucidate learning strategies in different learning environments and contexts.

This study analyzed only 102 participants from a single science and technology university in one Asian country**,** and all participants were vocational school graduates. Therefore, the findings should be cautiously generalized to other populations or settings.

In sum, the researchers examined possible deficiencies in the teaching process and suggest that the Taiwan government should review the effectiveness of English education in Taiwan technology institutes and science and technology universities. Additionally, causes of anxiety in ELLs, anxiety and coping strategies used by ELLs using different learning strategies are also analyzed. However, these findings require further verification by quantitative statistical analysis of larger populations and different ethnic groups.

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APPENDIX A

The English Writing Anxiety Scale

Class:

Student ID#:

Name:

5 Strongly Agree

4 Agree

3 Neither agree nor disagree

2 Disagree

1 Strongly Disagree

a. Content of the journal 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

If I have no idea to …

1.___ write topic sentences, I feel upset.

2.___ write elaborative sentences, I feel upset.

3.___ write conclusion, I feel upset.

4.___ combine topic sentences, elaborative sentences, and conclusion into one essay, I feel upset.

b. Scores on writing rules 1. 2. 3. 4. 5

When I write sentences and they are …

5.___ not coherent and earned a low grade, I feel upset.

6.___ not unified and earned a low grade, I feel upset.

7.___ not variant and earned a low grade, I feel upset.

c. Comment errors in writing 1. 2. 3. 4. 5

I worry that the teacher will think … in my essay.

8.___ my sentences are not complete

9.___ subjects and verbs lack of agreement

10.___ segmentations and run-on sentences

11.___ parallel structure errors in my sentences

12.___ rhetoric misplacement

13.___ errors on using comma

d. Vocabulary 1. 2. 3. 4. 5

When I write an essay,

14. ___ I am nervous because I cannot write complete sentences due to lack of vocabulary.

15. ___ I am nervous because I don't know which vocabulary can be used.

16. ___ I am nervous because I don't know which synonym can be used.

e. Grammar 1. 2. 3. 4. 5

When I am writing, I have difficulties on …

17. ___ countable and uncountable nouns.
18. ___ articles and indefinite articles.
19. ___ tenses.
20. ___ sentence structures.
21. ___ conditional sentences.
22. ___ punctuation.

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