

Investigation into students' performance in foreign language business writing and their attitudes toward it

Piriya Thaksanan 



Kasetsart University Chalermphrakiat Sakon Nakhon Province Campus, 59/6 Moo 1, Vor Por Ror Or 366 Road, Chiang Khrua, Sakon Nakhon, Thailand
peereeya.t@ku.th

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety can affect learners' performance in several ways. It can be a helpful motivational tool to assist students in learning a language. At the same time, anxiety can become a serious factor in hindering language acquisition. This study examines the relationship between students' writing performance and anxiety levels across three different proficiency groups of students. The participants were fifty EFL students enrolled in a Business English Writing course, and the target writing genre was inquiries and acknowledgments of inquiry letters. The two main instruments used to collect data were students' writing samples and closed-ended questionnaires. The data were analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson's coefficient correlation. This study showed a significant difference in writing anxiety between the high and the low-proficiency groups. In contrast, it was found that there were no statistically significant differences in anxiety between the high and the mid-proficiency groups. In addition, the study's outcomes indicated that the students' level of anxiety varied across the three groups of students. It was found that the students with a high level of anxiety performed less professionally than those with lower writing anxiety. The findings provide insights into teaching and learning writing, particularly into ways to decrease learners' anxiety and improve their learning outcomes.



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1. Introduction

Writing is a cognitive process that entails multiple factors combined to complete one task. To compose a piece of writing, a writer must have sufficient knowledge of the genre, language features, and writing process. Gass et al.'s (2013) substantial study discovers that writing is challenging and time-consuming due to many factors, such as insufficient knowledge of linguistics and non-language factors, including age, aptitude, motivation, attitude, and anxiety, all of which can influence learners' degree of success.

Among the possible factors that cause writing difficulty, anxiety, or apprehension, is one major cause attributed to affect writing performance, especially for learners who study English as a Foreign English Language (EFL) (Rui, 2022). Anxiety significantly influences writing performance, either in a good or bad way (Turgay, 2023). A high level of anxiety negatively affects learners' learning outcomes, meaning learners tend to perform better when their level of anxiety is reduced (Çocuk & Yelken, 2021; De Vleeschauwer, 2023; Zerey & Mújdeci, 2023). By understanding the levels and types of anxiety that affect learners' writing performance, educators can help anxious learners decrease their worries and improve their language learning.

In Thailand, English is taught as a foreign language, and the mainstream English class typically focuses on accuracy products (Chuanpongpanich, 2021; Sundrarajun, 2020). In most classes, students' writing abilities have been measured by looking at their language abilities in terms of the accuracy of the grammatical features they use rather than other skills, such as students' ideation, learning processes, and so on (Phothongsunan, 2018). Thus, the opportunity to compose a paragraph or essay is rare in a regular classroom setting. However, Sukanuma (2023) asserts that one of the biggest obstacles to writing is students' lack of chances to write and unpreparedness for academic writing. Hence, students' unpreparedness for writing can be one factor that increases anxiety and results in unsatisfactory writing performance.

The term affect has multiple meanings in different fields of study. In language acquisition, Gass, Behney, and Plonsky (2013) define the term affect as “feelings or emotional reactions about the language, about the people who speak that language, about the culture where that language is spoken, and about the language-learning environment” (p. 459). In language teaching and learning, affect consists of three factors influencing language learning: language shock and culture shock, anxiety, and social distance (Gass et al., 2013). According to MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012), affect can be seen as feelings of self-confidence and willingness to communicate anxiety, significantly impacting language learning. It can either enhance learning or interfere with second or foreign language acquisition. The significant benefits of understanding affect are that it can help teachers and practitioners select effective teaching techniques, reduce students' anxiety, foster in them positive attitudes toward the foreign language and foreign language culture, and increase their self-belief in their capacity to learn a foreign language (Dewaele, 2013).

Moreover, students understanding affect could enhance their motivation to become capable target language users. Variables regarding how affect is involved in language learning have been systematically studied, and they include factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, attitudes, and language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2007; Liu et al., 2019; Ardasheva et al., 2018). Of these variables, anxiety has been recognized as a negative interference impacting students' language learning journey.

Anxiety has been defined as “a term that encompasses the feelings of worry and negative, fear-related emotion associated with learning or using a language that is not an individual's mother tongue” (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 103). Studies examining how anxiety correlates with foreign language learning have found that students with high anxiety tended to earn lower scores than those who were less anxious about learning (Jin et al., 2021; Tahmouresi & Papi, 2021). For example, Jin et al. (2021) reported how positive emotion supports students' foreign language learning. Ninety-four Chinese students were enrolled in this study and were divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental group received a reminiscing approach to reducing their anxiety level. The findings revealed that Chinese students with low anxiety levels outperformed those students who could not properly manage their anxiety levels. The study indicated that students with low anxiety levels could develop a better awareness of their English language learning.

There have been attempts to measure learners' anxiety levels in various language skills. In second and foreign language writing, Cheng (2004) developed the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) to measure learners' level of anxiety in learning writing. The SLWAI employs a five-point Likert scale and comprises 22 items. Three anxiety variables involved in the inventory are somatic cognitive, physiological, and avoidance behavior. Following Cheng (2004), somatic cognitive anxiety includes anxiety-related physiological signs, such as sweat or a faster heart rate. Physiological anxiety is the mental and emotional side of anxiety, characterized by thoughts, concerns, and anxieties, mainly about how others see one. Lastly, avoidance behavior refers to the steps or behaviors people take to avoid a situation or something that makes them anxious.

Hussein's (2013) similarly sought to identify the causes of foreign language writing anxiety. Hussein's Sources of Writing Anxiety Questionnaire has been used to measure seven anxiety variables, namely test-related, cognitive, linguistic, teaching practices, evaluation, affective, and feedback factors. Hussein's questionnaire comprises 35 items and employs a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1 point) to strongly agree (5 points). It does not only understand the level of writing anxiety, as the inventory also seeks to determine sources that make students anxious when performing written tasks.

Oi (2023) conducted a study assessing first-year Japanese students' writing anxiety and how their anxiety levels changed over nine months of teaching. The students were divided into three proficiency levels, namely low, middle, and high. The primary instruments used in this study were open-ended questionnaires and the SLWAI. The findings of this study revealed that writing anxiety tendencies varied across different proficiency groups of students. It was found that writing anxiety could be influenced by English proficiency and that certain aspects of anxiety were somatic and cognitive. However, students' avoidance behavior persisted in all three groups of students.

Another, recent study, by Keyvanoğlu and Atmaca (2023) investigated the relationship between students' proficiency (A1, A2, and B1, from high to low) and their level of writing anxiety using Cheng's (2004) SLWAI. This study's findings indicated that most students had high foreign language writing anxiety levels. A further analysis showed that female students were more anxious than male students. The outcomes of the study indicated that the A1 group of students reported the highest level of writing anxiety compared to those in the A2 and B1 groups. According to this study, students' proficiency level and gender could both affect their writing anxiety.

Although many current studies have investigated anxiety and learners' language learning performance, studies have mostly considered academic writing. In contrast, other writing genres, especially writing in a professional setting, have seen little investigation. In addition, the issues of anxiety and language learning in the Thai context have primarily been researched in terms of speaking skills, while other skills, such as writing, have been of relatively minor concern. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by examining how anxiety affects students' Business English writing performance. Since business writing differs in style from academic compositions, it is worth investigating whether professional writing genres affect students' anxiety in different or similar ways. The outcomes of this study contribute to academic knowledge of the existing literature in that students' apprehension influences their writing performance regardless of types of writing genres. Moreover, it is worth investigating significant types of anxiety that can cause students problems when studying and producing writing tasks. This study's main research and research questions are presented next, followed by the literature review, method, findings, discussion and conclusion.

Research questions

1. What is the level of students' foreign language Business Writing anxiety in Thai EFL students?
2. What is the correlation between the students' foreign language writing anxiety and performance in writing across three proficiency groups (high, medium, low)?
3. What factors cause anxiety in foreign language writing across the three proficiency groups?

2. Methodology

This correlational research aimed to investigate the relationship between student performance in Business English writing, specifically writing an inquiry and acknowledging an inquiry letter, with their writing anxiety and sources of anxiety in writing.

2.1. Participants

This study involved fifty second-year English major students enrolled in the 01355252 Business English Writing course in the first term of the 2023 academic year. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit the participants. The students were selected because they had sufficient experience in English writing since it was essential for them to pass an Introduction to English Reading and Writing course. All the students also attended English Writing as another compulsory course.

2.2. Instruments

1) *Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)*

In order to measure the participants' overall second and foreign language writing levels, Chen's (2004) SLWAI was used. The inventory consists of 22 items and employs a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = agree, 5 = totally agree. The maximum score the participants could obtain was 110.

2) *Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety*

The Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety questionnaire developed by Hussein (2013) was adopted to examine the anxiety suffered by the participants in completing Business English writing tasks. The questionnaire comprises 35 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The questionnaire focuses on seven causes of writing anxiety, namely affective, cognitive, linguistic, teaching practice, feedback, evaluation, and test-related anxiety. The total scores the students could receive is 175.

The questionnaires were translated into Thai to facilitate students’ responses and avoid misunderstanding. The translated version was validated and checked by three experts who were English instructors. The questionnaires were revised after the comments. A pilot test was carried out with another group of English major students who were homogeneous to the participants of this study.

3) *Timed Writing Tasks (Letters of Inquiry and Acknowledging an Inquiry Letter)*

To measure the students’ performance in Business English writing, a timed writing task was organized. After finishing the instruction, regarding learning how to write an inquiry and acknowledging an inquiry letter, students took a written test with a one-and-a-half-hour time limit. The students wrote 100 pieces of writing, meaning 50 letters of inquiry and 50 replies to inquiries. The students’ written tasks were marked by two experts using the same scoring rubrics. The experts were English lecturers with over ten years’ experience teaching English writing. The total scores from the two raters were compared to ensure inter-rater reliability using a Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient.

2.3. Data Collection Procedures

The data consisted of the 100 completed tasks and the 50 completed questionnaires. The Thai version of the questionnaires was distributed to the participants, and the students had 40 minutes to complete them.

2.4. Data Analysis

The responses to the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For the SLWAI, five items (1, 4, 17, 18 and 22) needed the score to be reversed before summing all the points. The summed scores were used to allocate the level of the participants’ anxiety to one of three levels, i.e., low, middle, and high. Similarly, responses to the Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Students’ writing tasks were marked by two raters using the scoring rubrics. The maximum score for each piece of writing was 10; therefore, the highest score the students could achieve was 20. Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient was employed to ensure the inter-rater reliability. The participants were divided into three groups based on their performance, namely low, middle, and high proficiency. To determine the correlation between participants’ writing performance and their levels of anxiety, inferential statistics were used.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the main findings from the students’ Business English writing tasks, SLWAI, and Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety questionnaire. Firstly, the student’s personal information is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students’ demographic information

Gender	N	Percentage
Male	34	68
Female	11	22
Not Specified	5	10
Total	50	100

Table 1 shows that 50 students participated in this study, of whom 68 percent were male and 22 percent were female, while 10 percent were not specified.

3.1 Students' Business English writing proficiency across three groups

Students' performances in writing an inquiry and reply letter were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, S.D.). The maximum score which the students could attain was 20. The scores for the students' writing tasks are presented in [Table 2](#) below.

Table 2. Students' Business English writing performances across three proficiency levels

Students' Proficiency	N	\bar{x}	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum
High	17	16.53	1.50	15	20
Mid	22	12.	1.92	9.00	14
Low	11	4.18	2.09	.00	7.00
Total	50				

The data shows that the high-proficiency group attained an average score of 16.53 (S.D. = 1.50). The average score from the mid-proficiency group was 12 (S.D. = 1.92), and the low-proficiency group of students achieved an average score of 4.18 (S.D. = 2.09).

To compare the students' performance across the three proficiency groups, the average scores from all three groups were analyzed and compared using ANOVA. The results of this analysis are displayed in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Comparisons of students' performances across three proficiency levels

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P Value
Between Groups	1004.510	2	5002.25	148.58	.000
Within Groups	158.88	47	3.38		
Total	1163.38	49			

Multiple Comparisons

	(J) Family	(J) Family	Mean difference	S.D.	P-Value
LSD	High Proficiency	Mid Proficiency	4.39	.60	.000
		Low Proficiency	12.38	.72	.000
	Mid Proficiency	High Proficiency	-4.39	.60	.000
		Low Proficiency	7.99	.67	.000
	Low Proficiency	High Proficiency	-12.38	.72	.000
		Mid Proficiency	-7.99	.67	.000

[Table 3](#) shows that the student's average scores significantly differed across the three proficiency groups. The high-proficiency group of students significantly outperformed the students in the other two proficiency groups ($p = .000$). When comparing the mean scores of the mid-proficiency and the low-proficiency groups, the results show that the mid-proficiency group attained statistically significant higher mean scores than the students in the low-proficiency group ($p > .05$). Therefore, the findings of this study reveal that the students across the three proficiency levels were significantly different in terms of their business writing abilities.

3.2. Level of student anxiety across three groups

This section presents students' anxiety in writing derived from the SLWAI questionnaire to answer RQ1: What is the level of students' foreign language Business Writing anxiety in Thai EFL students? The questionnaire was analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics, and the results for the student's writing anxiety are presented in [Figure 1](#). The total scores range from 22 – 110. To interpret the anxiety level, 65 and above indicates high anxiety, a score of 51 – 64 indicates moderate anxiety, and a score of 22 – 50 represents a low anxiety level.

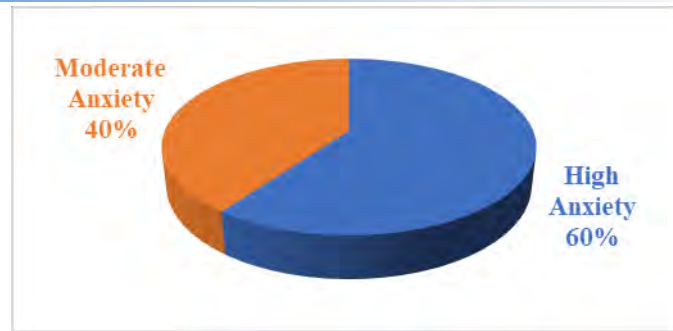


Fig. 1. Students' Second Language Writing Anxiety

Figure 1 above shows that only two writing anxiety levels were found in this study, namely the highly anxious and moderately anxious groups. Most students experienced high anxiety (60 percent).

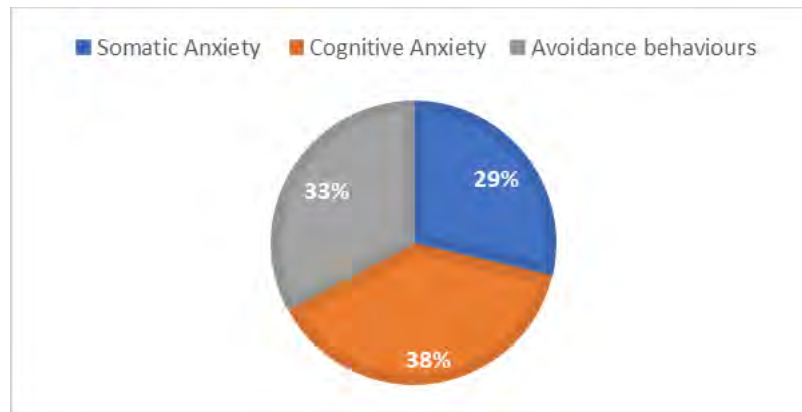


Fig. 2. Dimensions of Second Language Writing Anxiety

As seen in Figure 2, the students in this study were most anxious in the form of cognitive anxiety (38 percent). The second most common dimension regarding second language writing was avoidance behavior, with 33 percent. Finally, 29 percent of the students apparently experienced somatic anxiety.

This study explored students' anxiety levels and possible causes of anxiety in 50 English major students in Thailand. It also investigated the relationship between the participants' performances and anxiety levels, together with the causes of second language writing anxiety. The findings for RQ1, concerning the level of Thai EFL students' foreign language writing anxiety, indicate that more than half of the students in this study experienced high anxiety regarding business writing issues. Meanwhile, only some students experienced moderate anxiety in Business English writing. Besides, this study's outcomes revealed that most students were worried about cognitive anxiety. This aligns with previous studies (Hartono & Maharani, 2020; Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Avoidance behavior was found to be the second highest cause of anxiety in this study. The outcome of this study is different from that of Oi (2023) in that the proficiency group of students showed a low level of avoidance. In Oi's (2023) study, avoidance behavior tended to be stable over time. Although target students could develop reduced writing anxiety, particularly regarding cognitive and somatic anxiety, their avoidance behavior remained the same. This is likely because most of the students feared tests and evaluations, hence they might not be willing to take a writing test (Nawaz, 2021).

3.3. Students' second language writing anxiety and their Business Writing performance

Two raters marked 100 pieces of business writing, consisting of a letter of inquiry and a reply to an inquiry letter, against the scoring rubrics. The total scores from the students' writing tasks and the dataset retrieved from the SLWAL questionnaire were analyzed using the Pearson Correlation. The results answer RQ2: What is the correlation between the students' foreign language writing anxiety and performance in writing across three proficiency groups (high, medium, low)? The correlation between the students' writing anxiety and their writing performance is displayed in Figure 3.

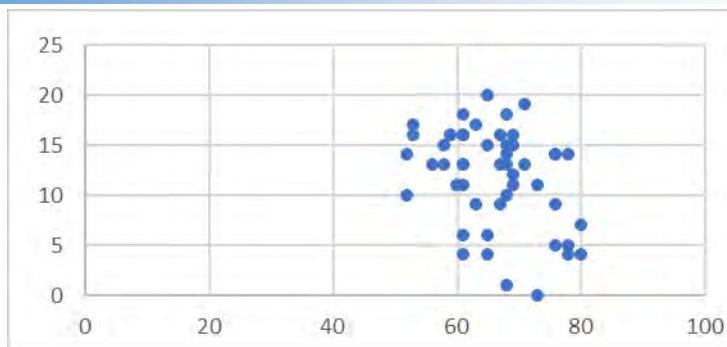


Fig. 3. Correlation between students’ second language writing anxiety and their writing performance

In [Figure 3](#), the scatter diagram for the students' second language writing anxiety and their performance in the business writing tasks shows a negative correlation between the two variables. The data in [Table 4](#) indicates that the relationship between the students’ second language writing anxiety and performance in Business English writing was a statistically significant negative one ($r = -.362, p = .010$).

Table 4. Correlation between the student's second language writing anxiety and performance in Business English writing

		Anxiety	Writing Scores
Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.362
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.010
	N	50	50
Writing Scores	Pearson Correlation	-.362	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	
	N	50	50

To answer RQ2, concerning the correlation between students’ foreign language writing anxiety and their performance in writing across three proficiency groups, the students’ writing scores and the information they provided in their responses to the SLWAI were analyzed. The findings demonstrated that the students’ performance in Business English writing and their level of anxiety were negatively correlated. In this respect, the target students tended to be more anxious when their Business English writing proficiency was lower. The results of this current study are consistent with previous research ([Güvendir & Uzun, 2023](#); [Khosravi et al., 2023](#); [Parichut & Chinokul, 2014](#); [Wang, 2021](#); [Zabihi, 2018](#))

3.4 Factors causing student writing anxiety across three proficiency levels

To answer RQ3: *What factors cause anxiety in foreign language writing across the three proficiency groups?* The students completed the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory questionnaires. The questionnaire comprises 35 items exploring seven aspects of writing anxiety: affective, cognitive, linguistic, teaching practice, feedback, evaluation, and test-related anxiety. The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, S.D.).

Table 5. Causes of second language writing anxiety

Anxiety Causes	\bar{x}	S.D.
Affective Anxiety	3.46	1.06
Cognitive Anxiety	3.48	1.13
Linguistic Anxiety	3.59	1.13
Teaching Practice	2.76	1.15
Feedback	2.72	1.22
Evaluation	3.27	1.30
Test-related	3.88	1.05

According to [Table 5](#), test-related factors contributed the highest to students' writing anxiety, with the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 3.88, S.D. = 1.05$), followed by linguistic factors ($\bar{x} = 3.59, S.D. = 1.13$). The third-highest mean score found in this study was cognitive anxiety ($\bar{x} = 3.48, SD = 1.13$). In

contrast, teaching practice and feedback were the study's two most minor anxiety factors, with mean scores of 2.76, S.D. = 1.15 and \bar{x} = 2.72, S.D. = 1.22, respectively.

Table 6. Causes of second language writing anxiety across three proficiency groups

Anxiety Causes	High Proficiency N=16		Mid-Proficiency N=23		Low Proficiency N=11	
	\bar{x}	S.D.	\bar{x}	S.D.	\bar{x}	S.D.
Affective Anxiety	3.51	1.11	3.35	1.21	3.74	.97
Cognitive Anxiety	3.31	1.17	3.47	1.10	3.73	1.11
Linguistic Anxiety	3.65	1.19	3.50	1.14	3.69	1.00
Teaching Practice	2.69	1.12	2.55	1.10	3.32	1.11
Feedback	2.73	1.35	2.48	1.01	3.20	1.32
Evaluation	3.63	1.32	2.92	1.25	3.47	1.20
Test-related	4.02	1.00	3.57	1.05	4.33	.96

Table 6 displays the factors causing students' writing anxiety across the three proficiency groups (high, mid, and low proficiency). The high-proficiency students were apprehensive about the test-related factor, with the highest mean score of 4.02, S.D., 1.00, followed by the linguistic anxiety (\bar{x} = 3.65, S.D. = 1.19), and the evaluation anxiety (\bar{x} = 3.36, S.D. = 1.32). Similarly, the results show that test-related anxiety was the highest anxiety as rated by the mid-proficiency students, with a mean score of 3.57, S.D., 1.05, followed by linguistic anxiety (\bar{x} = 3.50, S.D. = 1.14), and cognitive anxiety (\bar{x} = 3.47, S.D. = 1.10). Regarding the low-proficiency group, the highest mean score was for test-related anxiety, with an average score of 4.33 (S.D. = .96). Following that, cognitive anxiety was the second highest factor for the low-proficiency group (\bar{x} = 3.73, S.D. = 1.11). The students in the low-proficiency group were also anxious about affective anxiety, with an average score of 3.74, S.D., .97. Interestingly, the findings in Table 6 indicate that the students from all three proficiency levels were less anxious about the teaching practice and feedback they received from the teacher.

The results of RQ3: concerning which factors cause anxiety in students' foreign language writing across the three proficiency groups, demonstrate that the students experienced high test-related anxiety. Further analysis indicated that the students in the low-proficiency group experienced the highest level of anxiety compared to the high- and middle-proficiency groups). The second most common anxiety factor found in this study was linguistic anxiety. In this area of anxiety, the students in the high- and the low-proficiency groups tended to have similar levels of anxiety. This means there was no statistically significant difference between these two groups of students' levels of linguistic anxiety. Since most students perceived that their writing performance would be measured against their accurate use of linguistics in EFL, the high-proficiency group might worry a lot about their accurate use of linguistics in writing. Similarly, students in the low-proficiency group might perceive writing assessment in the same way as the high-proficiency students do. Consequently, the low-proficiency group, owing to their more limited linguistic knowledge, likely worried over having to demonstrate their linguistic knowledge in writing. Next, cognitive anxiety was the third factor that the students most feared. This study's findings indicate that the students in the low-proficiency group experienced the highest level of cognitive anxiety, followed by the middle- and the high-proficiency groups of students.

Based on this study's outcomes, students' different proficiency levels require different guidance to reduce student anxiety. This finding is similar to that of Oi (2023), indicating that writing anxiety varies across different proficiency-level Teachers should understand the anxiety factors associated with student writing abilities to help students manage their worries and improve their writing performance (Wang, 2021). It is suggested that the factor causing the most student anxiety should be prioritized. This present study showed that test-related anxiety was the most dominant anxiety experienced by the target groups of students regardless of their proficiency level. To this end, teachers could use the scoring rubrics to help reduce student test-related anxiety. To do so, students should be involved in designing the rubrics and fully understand how the rubrics will be used (Arindra & Ardi, 2020; Wahyuni, et al., 2019; Nawas, 2020).

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the outcomes of this study confirm the findings of previous studies in that anxiety negatively influences foreign language learning. The main finding reveals that students with high anxiety levels attained low scores in the writing inquiry and acknowledging an inquiry letter tasks. In contrast, the low anxiety level group of students obtained significantly higher scores than the students with high levels of anxiety. In addition, the results from the analysis of the causes of second language writing anxiety suggest that the students in this study most experienced test-related, linguistic, and cognitive anxiety. To better understand students' degree of anxiety and the types of anxieties they have, teachers and practitioners can carefully design teaching techniques and provide supportive feedback to students. With appropriate instruction and anxiety management, students can be more confident and have more positive attitudes toward learning and writing in a foreign language.

It should be noted that the participants involved in this study might not represent the entire population of EFL students in Thailand. In addition, the target writing tasks were limited to a business writing genre. Further study should explore other writing genres to better understand whether different target writing tasks, including different writing media, might affect student writing anxiety levels. Moreover, this study only assessed the students' overall abilities in writing an inquiry and replying to an inquiry letter. Further study on writing anxiety and writing features, such as content, organization, and linguistic features, should be undertaken.

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- Ethics declaration** : The authors acknowledge that this study adheres to ethical research standards set by the university and that the necessary permissions were obtained from the relevant institution for data collection. The authors support the English Language Teaching Educational Journal (ELTEJ) in maintaining high standards of personal conduct and practicing honesty in all our professional practices and endeavors.
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