

Exploring Writing Anxiety during Writing Process: An Analysis of Perceptions in Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners

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Abstract

Writing anxiety has been identified as a significant obstacle for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in China, with previous studies indicating that it can negatively affect writing performance. Despite this, most research on writing anxiety in the Chinese EFL context has focused on the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance, with limited attention paid to exploring writing anxiety during the writing process and its sources in depth. This study applied a qualitative method to explore Chinese EFL learners' writing anxiety in the writing process. Thematic analysis was used for analyzing data collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 Chinese EFL learners. The results revealed seven primary themes, including lack of knowledge about the writing topic, inexperience with the genre, challenges with brainstorming or coming up with ideas, trouble with structuring or arranging information, difficulty with integrating sources, linguistic difficulty, and negative or no feedback from instructors. The findings indicated that writing anxiety accompanies throughout the writing process. EFL learners need strategies to alleviate writing anxiety, including clear instructions on how to approach writing tasks, provision of appropriate resources, individualized feedback, and a supportive learning environment.

Keywords

Writing anxiety, writing process, writing strategies, learners' perceptions, Chinese EFL learner

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Explorando la Ansiedad por la Escritura Durante el Proceso de Escritura: Un Análisis de las Percepciones en Estudiantes Chinos de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE)

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Resumen

La ansiedad por escribir es un obstáculo significativo para los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) en China, afectando negativamente su rendimiento según estudios previos. Sin embargo, la mayoría de la investigación se ha centrado en la relación entre la ansiedad y el rendimiento, descuidando explorarla durante el proceso de escritura y sus fuentes. Este estudio usó un enfoque cualitativo para analizarla en estudiantes de ILE chinos. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con 18 estudiantes y se aplicó análisis temático a los datos. Los resultados revelaron siete temas principales: falta de conocimiento sobre el tema, inexperiencia con el género, dificultad para generar ideas, problemas de estructuración, integración de fuentes, dificultad lingüística y retroalimentación negativa. La ansiedad por escribir está presente en todo el proceso. Se necesitan estrategias para aliviarla, como instrucciones claras, recursos adecuados, retroalimentación individualizada y un entorno de aprendizaje de apoyo.

Palabras clave

Ansiedad por la escritura, proceso de escritura, estrategias de escritura, percepciones de los aprendices, estudiante chino de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE)

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English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing anxiety is regarded as an important non-intellectual emotional factor that to a certain extent determine the attitude and experience of writing learning and restricts the effort, engagement, and language achievement of EFL learners (Sun & Fan, 2022; Waller & Papi, 2017; Zarrinabadi & Rahimi, 2022), and playing a crucial role in EFL writing learning. While certain forms of writing anxiety, such as situational and trait anxiety, may enhance EFL learners' task performance (Nodoushan, 2015), overall, writing anxiety negatively impacts their writing performance (Morali & Boran, 2021). This is because writing anxiety, characterized by tension, nervousness, and worry experienced during the writing process, leads to unpleasant writing experiences, boredom, and diminishes the quality of their writing tasks (Wern & Rahmat, 2021). Writing anxiety stems from concerns about how their writing will be perceived by others who read it (Rasuan & Wati, 2021). Inadequate opportunities to practice writing, apprehension about receiving unfavorable feedback, inadequate grasp of writing techniques, insufficient language proficiency, and difficulties with linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, and diction all contribute to writing anxiety. EFL learners also experience stress due to the pressure to produce flawless essays, a lack of confidence, and time constraints (Kafryawan et al., 2021). Writing anxiety significantly impede the EFL learners' writing progress, resulting in various writing difficulties and psychological barriers (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2021).

Surveys like the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (Cheng, 2004) were either adopted (Quvanch & Si Na, 2022) or adapted (Rasuan & Wati, 2021) to investigate the level, types, and causes of writing anxiety. Results indicated cognitive anxiety as predominant, alongside linguistic problems, time pressure, perfectionism, and fear of negative instructor evaluation. Qualitative methods, including think-aloud protocol, interviews, diaries and portfolios, were employed to explore writing anxiety and its influence on EFL writing (Aripin & Rahmat, 2021; Aula Blasco, 2016; Fathi et al., 2023; Yastıbaş & Yastıbaş, 2015). Research suggests that portfolios can help reduce writing anxiety in EFL learners (Fathi, 2023), while peer feedback can reduce writing anxiety and also boost confidence (Yastıbaş & Yastıbaş, 2015), and instructors should be proactive in recognizing learners' writing anxiety during their writing process to develop more effective instructional strategies (Aripin & Rahmat, 2021), and EFL instruction should aim at reducing factors that may cause writing anxiety (Aula Blasco, 2016).

In the Chinese EFL context, research corroborates similar findings. Factors such as fear of writing assessments, time constraints, and language difficulties (Wern & Rahmat, 2021; Yan, 2019), along with low confidence, apprehension about writing evaluation, and fear of negative feedback (Chen, 2023), adversely affect Chinese EFL learners' writing performance. Additionally, cultural and external variables (Yu & Zhou, 2022) further contribute to these challenges.

Existing literature reveals that research in the Chinese EFL context predominantly centered on how writing anxiety affects EFL writing performance, with limited attention paid to exploring writing anxiety in the writing process and the sources in depth. Based on the above considerations, this study, with the background of College English in China, attempts to explore EFL writing learners' perception of writing anxiety in the writing process and its sources.

With the intention of achieving the objectives, the present research aimed at addressing the following questions:

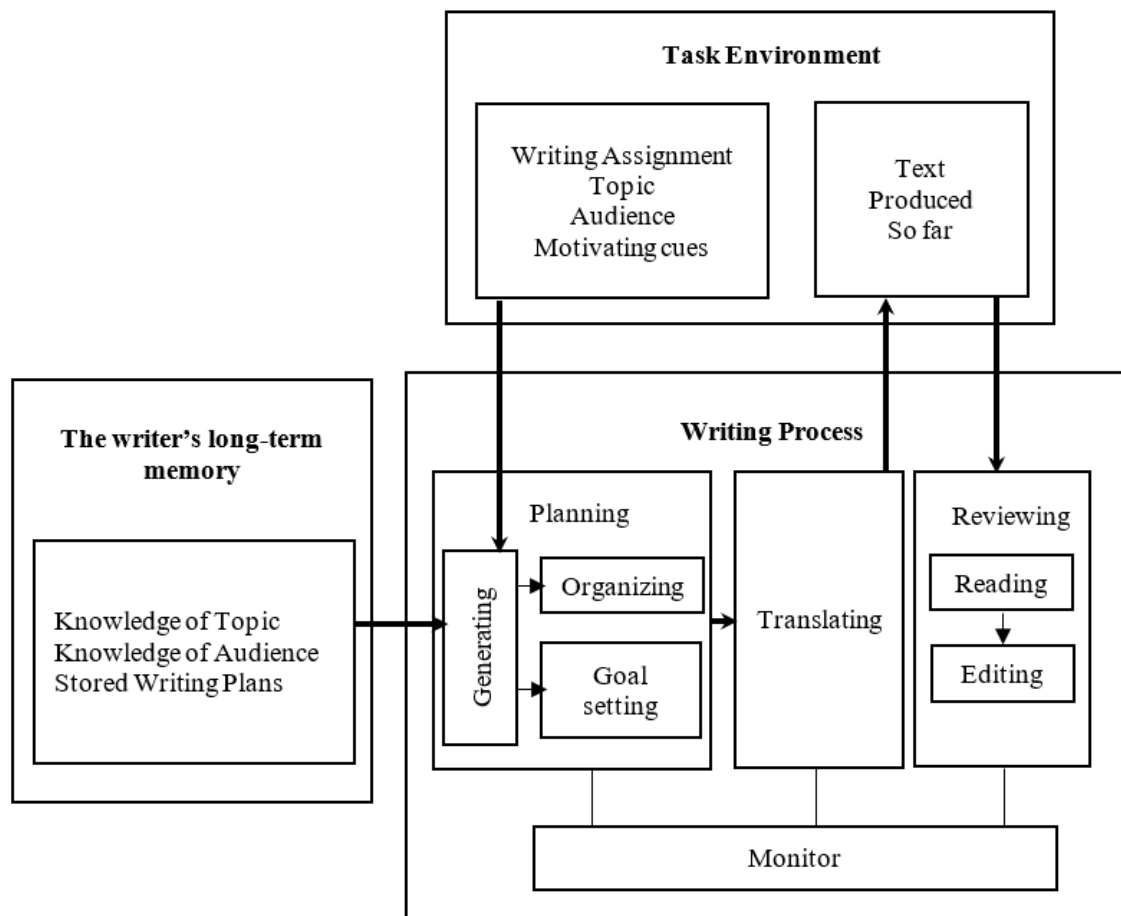
1. What is EFL learners' perceptions towards writing anxiety during their writing process?
2. What is EFL learners' perceptions towards the sources of writing anxiety during their writing process?
3. What implications do their perceptions have for EFL writing teaching and learning?

Theoretical Framework

Hayes and Flower (1981) provided a systematic framework for understanding the writing process, emphasizing phases such as planning, conveying material, and evaluation. The current study on writing anxiety among Chinese EFL learners follows this paradigm, with an emphasis on barriers within certain phases (see Figure 1). The model emphasized several key aspects: a. writing processes are highly embedded, b. writing is driven by specific goals, c. writing stimulates the discovery of new goals, d. writing processes play an important part in creative thinking. Other researchers expanded Hayes and Flower's stages into four more widely recognized phases: pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing (Graham & Sandmel, 2011; Muamaroh et al., 2020). Flora, Cahyadi and Sukirlan (2020) enhanced the model using a modified roundtable technique and conducted a quantitative study on Indonesian high school learners. They found that this technique created a conducive environment for learners to communicate and share ideas in English effectively. As a result, learners improved their writing skills by understanding content selection, structure organization, and language use through various stages of writing. Similarly, Firoozjahantigh et al. (2021) found that the process-based approach can help EFL learners in developing writing skills.

Figure 1

The Writing Process According to Hayes and Flower (1981)



Methods

This research applied a qualitative research method to explore the perceptions of EFL learners regarding writing anxiety during the writing process. The use of in-depth interviews as a qualitative data source is primarily intended to capture the thoughts and beliefs of EFL learners and acquire a comprehensive understanding of their perceptions (Patton, 2015). Therefore, a semi-structured interview in English was conducted from September 12 to October 6, 2022, to obtain data and answer research questions. The researchers asked participants how they felt about their EFL writing learning process, what anxiety they encountered while writing and how they coped with it, and their perceptions of their writing performance.

Thematic analysis, a commonly used qualitative data analysis, will be applied in data analysis. It involves providing a richly detailed organization and description of the data set but often extends beyond this to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It ensures a comprehensive account of the complete dataset, enabling readers to grasp the prevalent or significant themes (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

Participants

Purposive sampling was applied in the current research. This sampling methods involved deliberate selection to achieve representativeness of the settings and individuals (Patton, 2015), allowing for the effective collection of data from participants and the acquisition of valuable new information (Lakens, 2022). The inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in Table 1. All participants are non-English majors who have completed College English courses at the university level and have taken either the College English Test Band 4 (CET4) or the College English Test Band 6 (CET6), which are national English proficiency tests in China. Among them, four participants did not pass CET 4, and their English proficiency level is categorized as below CET 4. The primary rationale behind selecting them is that, as senior learners, they are expected to possess a certain level of proficiency in English writing. The participant demographics are shown in Table 2. Before the interview, participants were informed that all information is confidential, participation is voluntary, and the interview, including recording, won't affect their studies.

Table 1
The Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Participants

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1. EFL learners from various academic majors	1. English majors
2. Full-time undergraduate learners	2. Learners not enrolled in either 2020 or 2021
3. Learners aged between 19 and 22	3. Learners not within the 19-22 range
4. Learners with diverse English proficiency levels, including CET 6, CET 4, and below CET 4	4. Learners not completed College English course

Table 2
Participant Demographics

	Gender		Major			Time of enrollment		English Proficiency			Total
	Male	Female	Theoretical Physics	Applied Economics	Science of Law	2020	2021	CET6	CET4	Below CET 4	
Number	9	9	6	6	6	9	9	4	10	4	18
Percentage	50%	50%	33%	33%	33%	50%	50%	22%	56%	22%	100%

Instruments

The researchers provided 5 questions to follow up and ask individuals to explain their ideas in more detail or to elaborate on what they have said (Creswell, 2014). The exact phrasing and sequence of the actual questions posed are adjusted based on the language proficiency level of the participants, with the aim of understanding their writing process, anxiety, and experiences. To maintain the confidentiality of participant information, a number between P1 and P18 was assigned to each participant, allowing their responses to be referenced in the current research.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the six steps of thematic analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006): 1. familiarizing the data, 2. generating initial codes, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining and naming themes, and 6. producing the report.

Firstly, the data was transcribed into a Word document to prepare for data analysis. After multiple readings of the data to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's perceptions, the researcher decomposed all the transcribed content from the interviews into ideational units as analysis units. An ideational unit is a clause or sentence that presents different meanings and their justifications. To analyze the data, a process of induction was used to search for prominent and recurring ideas from the data. In this way, the researchers attempted to group similar codes together to arrive at categories or themes.

During this process, as emphasized by Creswell (2012), to ensure the reliability of the coding, all data went through two rounds of coding. Initially, a single coder performed the coding of all the data. Subsequently, another coder carried out a second round of independent coding on all the studies. The two sets of coding results were then compared. The two researchers discussed and negotiated until a final consensus was reached.

Findings

The data from participants' interviews is scrutinized to identify significant and recurring concepts. After developing the codes, the researchers grouped them together to extract categories or themes. In social sciences, it is tradition for themes to be emerged during the analysis of data (Creswell, 2014). The coding scheme is specially designed to focus on writing anxiety in the EFL writing process (see Table 3).

Table 3

Coding Scheme for an In-Depth Interview

Writing process (Hayes & Flower, 1981)	Coding	Anxiety sources
EFL learners' long-term memory	Theme 1	Lack of knowledge about the writing topic
	Theme 2	Inexperience with the genre
Planning	Theme 3	Challenges with brainstorming or coming up with ideas
	Theme 4	The trouble with structuring or arranging information
	Theme 5	Difficulty with integrating sources
Translating	Theme 6	Linguistic Difficulty
Reviewing	Theme 7	Negative feedback from others

Learners who lack sufficient knowledge of the writing process and its various elements may encounter challenges in composing their written work. This, in turn, can lead to increased anxiety and difficulty as they try to navigate the complex and demanding nature of writing

(Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Wahyuni & Umam, 2022). The following themes emerged from the data analysis.

Themes of EFL Learners' Long-Term Memory

Theme 1 Lack of Knowledge About the Writing Topic

Some participants believe that they have insufficient information or a limited understanding of the topic they need to write about. As noted by P7, *“It’s hard to think about things I don’t know much about, especially when I don’t have enough information or resources to write about them”* and P11 *“I think my writing skills are limited because I don’t have a wide enough knowledge, so it’s difficult to fully express my ideas in writing.”* This is primarily because they lack personal experience or knowledge of the topic. As a result, they struggled to create a cohesive and informative writing that effectively conveys the intended message. They encountered difficulties in arranging their thoughts and ideas, locating relevant information to incorporate, or expressing their arguments or opinions clearly.

Theme 2 Inexperience with the Genre

Participants experienced a sense of unfamiliarity with the norms, attributes, and anticipated standards of specific writing genres. As noted by P2, *“Each different style of writing has its own unique pattern. Without knowing this, it’s hard to write because I don’t know what to do.”* As a consequence, they encountered difficulties with various aspects, including tone, style, and structure, all of which are fundamental constituents of a given type of writing. For example, while drafting an argumentative essay, learners must recollect their prior knowledge of the genre, elaborate and justify the topic, and finally analyze and evaluate the presented information (Noroozi et al., 2022).

Themes of Planning

Theme 3 Challenges with Brainstorming or Coming up with Ideas

Writing entails more than just stringing words together to form a sentence or a paragraph. It involves arranging and structuring ideas in a logical, informative, and accurate manner to produce a well-organized composition (Qvanch & Si Na, 2022). Generating ideas is a crucial source of their anxiety and a demanding task for some participants, as noted by P14: *“There is nothing in mind when starting to write. It caused anxiety, or even I feel exhausted.”* They experienced a lack of inspiration or find themselves in a creative rut, hindering their ability to generate innovative ideas and resulting in confusion and a sense of aimlessness. This is highlighted by P1 *“I am OK when the task is to polish the sentences, but it is actually very difficult when I need to do original writing especially when there is no idea”* and P9 *“I feel empty when writing in English, I do not know what to write, and where to start.”* EFL learners experience writing anxiety, influenced by their struggles with organizing information and generating new ideas (Wern & Rahmat, 2021).

Theme 4 Trouble with Structuring or Arranging Information

Effective writing requires abilities such as organizing thoughts cohesively and expressing them with precision in the development of ideas and information so that it helps to eliminate any ambiguity in meaning and forms a whole (Derakhshan & Karimian Shirejini, 2020). Attaining proficiency in writing necessitates the mastery of appropriate structure, content, mechanism, and organization. However, participants encountered anxiety when endeavoring to organize their ideas or information. This is underscored by the statement that “*I’m not very good at organizing my thoughts in writing. Such anxiety often makes me think that I am inferior to others (P3)*” and “*I feel that writing is the transmission of ideas. However, I am unsure how to use this information to express my ideas clearly and I have difficulty in organising the structure of my writing (P17).*”

Theme 5 Difficulty with integrating sources

Another challenge participants face is their inability to effectively use and incorporate resources into their written work, as mentioned by P18 “*I don’t know how to blend two or more resources that have the same meaning with each other.*” When learners are required to collate various perspectives and then incorporate them into their writing, they can feel overwhelmed and anxious (Teng, 2020). P10 and P13 remarked this by stating “*Some writing tasks need sufficient reasons, proof., information, and ideas. But for me, I am rather lacking in the ability to find appropriate materials and collect them. It made me feel so anxious,*” and “*I feel disappointed because I gathered a variety of quotes and expressions during my learning, yet I didn’t know how to use them to make my writing vividly.*”

Themes of Translating

Theme 6 Linguistic Difficulty

EFL Learners’ writing development is influenced by multiple linguistic factors including the breadth of their vocabulary, their selection of words, their mastery of grammatical structures, their organization skills, and their familiarity with rhetorical structures (Derakhshan & Karimian Shirejini, 2020).

Participants faced challenges in selecting appropriate words to express their thoughts, ideas, or feelings accurately. They struggled to find the best words to express themselves, leading to either overly simple language or the incorrect use of more complex words. P8 echoed this, stating, “*I always feel that my vocabulary is not enough and I can’t use some complex sentences.*” Moreover, effective writing requires the ability to use complex grammatical techniques to emphasize key points and to establish a style appropriate to the intended purpose and audience (Derakhshan & Karimian Shirejini, 2020). This is remarked by P6 “*The English foundation is not good, so my vocabulary and grammar knowledge are not strong, whenever I want to write a composition, I will feel difficult to write.*” Nevertheless, a number of participants struggled to comprehend the essential rules and structures of English grammar, encompassing

components such as parts of speech, verb forms, sentence construction, punctuation, and other grammar-related aspects. This is noted by P15 *“I am often troubled by my vocabulary and grammar. I often fail to remember the part of speech and the form of some words, which affects my English writing,”* and P9 *“I know there will be grammatical errors because I don’t know what to use when writing about verb forms, prepositions.”* Those challenges increased participants’ writing anxiety. As a result, the existence of writing anxiety has been found to be caused mainly by linguistic difficulties (Song et al., 2023).

Themes of Reviewing

Theme 7 Negative Feedback from Others

Feedback is crucial for EFL learners to identify their weak points and receive direction on improving their writing abilities. However, in large classes, instructors or peers give negative feedback in public, even with the intention of helping learners improve their performance (Zhou et al., 2022). This is indicated by P16 that *“I was so worried about what other people thought. Writing is about confronting the fears and responding to others’ comments with consistent action.”* Furthermore, Negative feedback may also prevent learners from participating or seeking help from instructors or peers, as noted by P5 *“Once I can’t get help from anyone and have no clue what to write about. It’s like the worst feeling ever and I don’t want to ask anybody else anymore.”*

Discussion

The qualitative research on EFL writing anxiety during the writing process revealed several primary themes. Firstly, Chinese EFL learners often experience fear and worry when confronted with EFL writing tasks due to their lack of prior knowledge. This fear is typically caused by their unfamiliarity with the topic of the writing assignment. Additionally, it was found that the writing process itself can be a source of apprehension for EFL learners, particularly when they are uncertain how to arrange ideas, organize structure and integrate resources. Furthermore, these feelings of unease are even more potent if doubts arise about whether they are using the correct vocabulary and grammar. This is consistent with the research of Liu and Ni (2015). They identified several challenges from the interview, including learners’ desire to express themselves more proficiently but having poor linguistic proficiency and being unfamiliar with writing genres.

The findings of this study have certain implications for both instructors and EFL learners.

- 1) EFL learners need to seek reliable sources to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the topic and enhance their existing knowledge prior to commencing their writing

This is crucial because, in China, EFL learners tend to rely more on memorizing specific knowledge and materials (Teng et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). EFL writing instructors could introduce learners to high-quality materials to enrich their vocabulary, help them grasp various sentence structures in English, and explore their individual writing styles (Wern & Rahmat, 2021). Moreover, EFL instructors should recognize that learners’ beliefs on their writing

competence play an important role in their experience of writing anxiety, the beliefs include whether they have enough prior knowledge, whether they are skillful to convey their thoughts with correct language (Cheng, 2002). Further research confirms that the lack of confidence in a language has resulted in writing anxiety among Chinese learners, leading to decreased interest in EFL writing (Wern & Rahmat, 2021).

- 2) Various forms of graphic organizers should be incorporated into teaching practices to facilitate EFL learners in arranging information

This is necessary because Chinese EFL learners often struggle with their limited vocabulary, unclear ideas, and incoherent organization of content, as reported in this research. Zhang (2018) also supports this finding. Learners benefit from graphic organizers as they offer multiple ways to view ideas and simplify the process of language production compared to summarizing in writing. By prompting learners to visualize and categorize concepts on diverse topics, graphic organizers stimulate the organization and arrangement of ideas (Kılıçkaya, 2020). It removes writing block in EFL learners by furnishing a starting point for their writing and offers learners a visually appealing and structured format for arranging information, enhancing comprehension of the resources they are working on (Boykin et al., 2019; Hafidz, 2021; Trisusana & Susanti, 2020).

- 3) Furthermore, instructors are encouraged to make it a priority to provide learners with regular and positive feedback (Jin & Guo, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022)

This is because positive feedback may empower learners' self-efficacy beliefs and reduce their writing anxiety (Ruan, 2014). To alleviate writing anxiety, Wern & Rahmat (2021) further suggested to collaborate with learners in establishing a learning corner where they can collectively review common writing mistakes and provide remedial guidelines. Various feedback methods, such as individual meetings, class discussions or peer reviews, can be employed by instructors to create a supportive and encouraging learning environment that fosters the growth and development of learners (Yu & Zhou, 2022). Moreover, instructors can incorporate peer feedback strategies or peer interaction into the teaching activities, which have proven to be effective learning tools for enhancing EFL learners' writing skills in higher education (Song et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The current research intended to explore Chinese EFL writing learners' perceptions of writing anxiety in their writing process, as well as how these perceptions can inform EFL writing teaching and learning. To address the research questions, the research applied a qualitative method to collect data from EFL learners in China and made a thematic analysis to identify themes that emerged. The themes then were analyzed in relation to their potential implications for EFL writing teaching and learning.

The findings indicate that Chinese EFL learners faced anxiety at the very beginning in writing process, primarily due to their lack of prior knowledge. They felt anxiety when they were uncertain about how to organize their ideas and structure their writing. In addition, EFL learners were apprehensive about making mistakes because of the deficiency of linguistic proficiency.

The study investigates Chinese EFL learners' writing anxiety and its teaching implications using a qualitative examination of learners' views and experiences to suggest topics for instructional insights. The implications of these findings are significant for EFL writing instruction in China. For instructors, it is recommended that provide Chinese EFL learners with strategies to manage writing anxiety. These strategies include providing them with appropriate resources and graphic organizers and offering various feedback. Concurrently, it's crucial for Chinese EFL learners to develop their self-confidence, minimize writing anxiety, and take the initiative to seek help, feedback, and guidance from their instructors and peers.

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