

# Writing Apprehension in Chinese as a First Language

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## Abstract

First year high school students in Taiwan filled out a questionnaire probing their writing anxiety and leisure reading and writing habits in Chinese. A strong relationship was found between reported writing apprehension and frequency of leisure writing, confirming results reported by Daly and associates with North American English-speaking subjects. In addition, there was evidence of a relationship between writing apprehension and frequency of reading, suggesting that those who read more have lower writing apprehension.

## Introduction

In a series of studies, Daly and associates have confirmed that writers in English vary in writing apprehension. University students with more anxiety about writing are less likely to enroll in advanced writing courses (DALY and MILLER, 1975), select majors and professions that require less writing (DALY, 1985), receive lower grades in composition courses (FOWLER and KROLL, 1980), score lower on standardized tests of writing (DALY, 1985), and write essays that receive lower evaluations (DALY, 1985).

To our knowledge, all research on writing apprehension has been done using English. In this study, we attempt to determine whether writing apprehension and writing frequency and competence

are related for native speakers of Chinese. In addition, we attempt to extend the research by examining the relationship between reading and writing apprehension.

Good writers have two kinds of competence. First, they know the code, the language of writing. There is strong evidence that this code is acquired from reading. It has been shown that those who read more are better writers. In addition, it has been argued that the conventions of educated writing are too complex to be consciously learned and taught: they must, therefore, be absorbed through reading (KRASHEN, 1984, 1993). The relationship between reading and writing ability is probably not linear, however. It is not simply the case that the more you read the better you write. Rather, there is probably a threshold effect: Good writers have all read enough to acquire the code.

In addition to knowledge of the code, good writers understand the "composing process"; they understand that as they move from draft to draft, they come up with new ideas. They understand that writing helps thinking, that in writing, "meaning is not what you start out with, but what you end up with" (ELBOW, 1973, p.15).

Writers may thus be apprehensive for two reasons: (1) Insufficient acquisition of the code, and (2) misunderstanding of the composing process, the false belief that good writers get it right on the first draft.

In addition to investigating whether writing apprehension exists in Chinese, specifically, whether those with more apprehension write less and do not write as well as those with less apprehension, we examine here the role of reading in lowering writing apprehension. Our prediction is that a significant, but modest relationship will be found between the amount of free voluntary reading done and writing apprehension. We expect the relationship to be modest, because of the non-linearity of the relationship between reading and writing ability, and our hypothesis that there is more than one cause of writing apprehension.

## **Method**

Subjects were 318 first year senior high school students in Taiwan, ages 14 to 16. Subjects filled out a questionnaire probing free reading habits, writing frequency, and writing apprehension.. The questionnaire was administered during class time and took only about 20 minutes to fill out. Subjects answered seven questions dealing with free reading (see table 1). A test of internal consistency for these items revealed an alpha value of .64. Writing frequency was probed in the questionnaire with four questions (see table 2), with an internal consistency of alpha = .61.

Writing apprehension has been measured in English with the Writing Apprehension Scale (WAS), a 26 item questionnaire that has been used with college students, high school students, grade schoolers and adults in the United States (DALY, 1985). Internal consistency of the WAS is high (.94) as is test-retest reliability (.92). For this study, the WAS was translated into Chinese. In order to insure that the Chinese version of the WAS tested the same construct as the original English version did, the technique of back translation by two bilinguals was employed. Appendices A and B present the original English version and the translated Chinese version of the WAS.

Writing: Subjects provided scores from the composition section of the Senior High School Entrance Examination (SHSEE). The SHSEE is one of the most important examinations given in Taiwan, and covers English, Mathematics, Social Science, Natural Science and Chinese. The composition accounts of 25% of the Chinese language grade. Topics assigned students were typically expository, but contemporary (e.g. problems with the environment, "If I were still a first-year high school student."). While reliability estimates have not been reported for the composition, essays are holistically scored by two raters, and a third rater is involved when the two raters show clear disagreement.

## Results

Responses to questionnaire items related to free reading are presented in table 1 and responses to items dealing with leisure writing are presented in table 2.

Table 1. Free reading in Chinese as a first language

|  | mean | sd   |
|--|------|------|
| 1. I read for pleasure (1) less than once a week; (2) once a week; (3) about three days a week; (4) everyday.  | 2.73 | .95  |
| 2. I visit the library or check out books (for outside reading) (1) almost never; (2) a couple of times a year; (3) at least once a month; (4) once or more a week.                                  | 2.50 | 1.01 |
| 3. I visit bookstores (1) almost never; (2) once or twice a year; (3) once or twice a month; (4) once or more a week.  | 3.06 | .75  |
| 4. Do you have library card(s) outside of school? (1) no; (2) yes.   | 1.51 | .51  |
| 5. I read magazines (1) less than one hour a week; (2) 1 to 3 hours a week; (3) 4 to 7 hours a week; (4) more than 7 hours a week.   | 1.92 | .87  |
| 6. I read newspapers (1) I do not care to read a daily newspaper even if I have the time; (2) I do not have time to read a daily newspaper; (3) occasionally; (4) everyday; (5) more than one daily. | 3.72 | .77  |
| 7. Not including textbooks, how many books do you read a year? (1) none; (2) one or two; (3) 3 - 10; (4) 11 - 30; (5) more than 30.  | 3.77 | 1.00 |

Table 2. Report of Pleasure Writing

|  | mean | sd   |
|--|------|------|
| 1. I enjoy writing for pleasure (1) never; (2) occasionally; (3) at least once a week; (4) more than once a week; (5) everyday.                  | 1.51 | .58  |
| 2. How often do you write letters? (1) almost never; (2) occasionally; (3) often.  | 1.90 | .66  |
| 3. Do you keep a diary? (1) never; (2) occasionally; (3) often; (4) everyday.  | 1.59 | .70  |
| 4. I only practice writing for exams, instead of self-expression or enjoyment (1) very much so; (2) moderately so; (3) somewhat; (4) not at all. | 2.56 | 1.00 |



The mean score on the WAS was 84.40 ( $sd = 14.52$ ), somewhat higher than scores reported for undergraduates in the United States (table 3). Reliability for the Chinese version of the WAS was high ( $\alpha = .93$ ), consistent with studies done in English. The mean for the composition was 25.56 ( $s.d. = 7.61$ ).

Table 3. Studies of Writing Apprehension: Undergraduates in the US and high school students in Taiwan

| Study                         | mean WAS score |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Daly and Miller, 1975a        | 79.28          |
| Daly and Miller, 1975b        | 74.66          |
| Daly, 1978                    | 75.59          |
| Faigley, Daly and White, 1981 | 70.01          |
| Lee and Krashen               | 84.40          |

Table 4 presents intercorrelations among the variables investigated here. Composite scores were used for free reading and leisure writing.

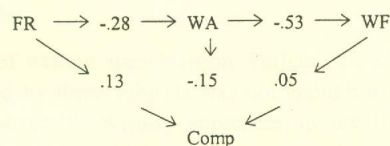
Table 4. Intercorrelations

|                           | FR   | WF   | Comp |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|
| Writing Apprehension (WA) | -.28 | -.53 | -.21 |
| Free reading (FR)         |      | .28  | .19  |
| Writing Frequency (WF)    |      |      | .16  |

All correlations significant,  $p < .001$

To better probe the relationship among the variables, a simple path analysis was performed using hierarchical regression (figure 1).

Figure 1. Results of Path Analysis



| significance level of paths |      |       |      |
|-----------------------------|------|-------|------|
| path                        | beta | t     | p    |
| FR > WA                     | -.28 | 5.01  | .000 |
| WA > WF                     | -.53 | 10.78 | .000 |
| FR > Comp                   | +.13 | 2.28  | .02  |
| WA > Comp                   | -.15 | 2.25  | .02  |
| WF > Comp                   | .05  | .68   | .50  |

Because of the large sample size, all correlations were significant, but only one was very strong: Those with more writing apprehension did less writing. In addition, the path analysis revealed a moderate relationship between the amount of free reading done and writing apprehension and between writing apprehension and scores on the composition. Writing frequency and the composition score were positively correlated, but this relationship was severely weakened in the path analysis, consistent with claims that it is reading (input) that affects writing ability, not writing (output) (KRASHEN, 1993).

## Discussion

Our study provides evidence that writing apprehension is a reality among high school students in Taiwan writing in Chinese: In agreement with studies done in English, greater writing apprehension was associated with less writing as well as with lower scores on a composition test. The latter relationship was modest, however. Possible reasons include:

- 1) The level of writing apprehension. Perhaps the writing apprehension showed by these subjects was not enough to affect their performance severely. Writing apprehension levels shown by our subjects, however, are higher than those found in other populations, and the SHSEE composition is anxiety-provoking.
- 2) Scores on the composition test are based on a number of factors, and not all of these factors may be influenced by writing apprehension.

The results of this analysis also confirm that free reading is related to writing proficiency, which is also consistent with previous research.

Of great interest to us is that the correlation between free reading and writing apprehension was significant, confirming our hypothesis. A plausible interpretation of these results is that one cause of writing apprehension is lack of knowledge of the written language. Because reading is the way we acquire the written language, those who read more will have less writing apprehension because they have a better knowledge of the special language used in writing.

Our results are suggestive. Additional studies could be done to see the combined effect of both reading and knowledge of the composing process on writing apprehension. Positive results would help us determine how apprehension can be lowered in individual cases: Some apprehensive writers may need additional knowledge of the code, while others may need to have a better understanding of the composing process.

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Appendix A

The English Version of the WAS

Directions: Below are a series of statements about writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by circling whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are uncertain, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree with the statement. While some of the statements may seem repetitious, take your time and try to be as honest as possible.

|  | SA | A | U | D | SD |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1. I avoid writing.  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 2. I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.                                       | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 3. I look forward to writing down my ideas.  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 4. I am afraid of writing essays when I<br>know they will be evaluated.                | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 5. Taking a composition course is a very<br>frightening experience.                    | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 6. Handing in a composition makes me feel good.  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 7. My mind seems to go blank when I<br>start to work on a composition.                 | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 8. Expressing ideas through writing seems<br>to be a waste of time.                    | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 9. I would enjoy submitting my writing<br>to magazines for evaluation and publication. | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 10. I like writing my ideas down.  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 11. I feel confident in my ability to<br>clearly express my ideas in writing.          | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 12. I like to have my friends read what<br>I have written.                             | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 13. I'm nervous about writing.   | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |



|   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
|---|----|---|---|---|----|
| 14. People seem to enjoy what I write.  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 15. I enjoy writing.  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 16. I never seem to be able to clearly write down<br>my ideas.                | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 17. Writing is a lot of fun.  | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 18. I expect to do poorly in composition<br>classes even before I enter them. | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 19. I like seeing my thoughts on paper.                                       | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 20. Discussing my writing with others<br>is an enjoyable experience.          | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 21. I have a terrible time organizing<br>my ideas in a composition course.    | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 22. When I hand in a composition<br>I know I'm going to do poorly.            | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 23. It's easy for me to write good compositions.                              | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 24. I don't think I write as well as other people.                            | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 25. I don't like my compositions to be evaluated.                             | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |
| 26. I'm no good at writing.   | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  |

## Appendix B

## The Chinese Version of the WAS

|                            | 非<br>常<br>意 | 同<br>意 | 不<br>確<br>定 | 不<br>同<br>意 | 非<br>同<br>常<br>意 |
|----------------------------|-------------|--------|-------------|-------------|------------------|
| 1. 我盡量避免寫作。                | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 2. 我不怕我寫的東西被評分。            | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 3. 我期盼寫下我的想法。              | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 4. 我怕寫文章，當我知道有人要打分數的時候。    | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 5. 上作文課是一個非常可怕的經驗。         | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 6. 每次交作文時我覺得很愉快。           | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 7. 當我開始寫一篇作文時，我的腦袋就變得一片空白。 | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 8. 經由寫作來表達意見是浪費時間的。        | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 9. 我很樂意將我的作品送到雜誌去評選或發表。    | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 10. 我喜歡將我的構思寫下。            | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 11. 我有信心能清楚地再寫作中表達我的想法。    | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 12. 我喜歡讓我的朋友讀我寫的東西。        | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 13. 我對寫作感到緊張。              | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 14. 別人似乎蠻喜歡我的文章。           | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 15. 我喜歡寫作。                 | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 16. 我似乎從未能在寫作裡清楚地寫下我的想法。   | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 17. 寫作有很多的樂趣。              | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 18. 上作文課之前，我就預期我會表現不好。     | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |

|                               | 非<br>常<br>意 | 同<br>意 | 不<br>確<br>定 | 不<br>同<br>意 | 非<br>不<br>同<br>意 |
|-------------------------------|-------------|--------|-------------|-------------|------------------|
| 19. 我喜歡將我的想法寫在紙上。             | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 20. 和別人討論我的作品是很愉快的經驗。         | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 21. 上作文課時，我總是無法組織得當。          | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 22. 每當我交上一篇作文時，我知道成績一定<br>不好。 | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 23. 對我來說，寫好的文章是一件簡單的事。        | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 24. 我不認為我寫得和別人一樣好。            | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 25. 我不喜歡作文被評分。                | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |
| 26. 我在寫作方面並不好。                | 1           | 2      | 3           | 4           | 5                |