

Strategies for Coping with Writing Anxiety: An Experimental Study

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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry (Scovels, 1978). According to Field (2004), general anxiety is one of several affective factors which can influence attention and hence lead to deterioration in language performance. Studies have proved that students experience considerable amount of anxiety when it comes to activities that require productive skills. Writing anxiety always affects writing performance. The investigator evolved a few strategies like Motivation, Diary Writing, Feedback, Reading, Vocabulary Enhancement, Email writing and Blogging to study their impact on students' writing anxiety levels. It was planned to administer a questionnaire to a set of students before and after a particular period of time to check and compare their levels of anxiety at both phases.

The investigator embarked upon the project with the following objectives:

- Implement strategies to students belonging to the investigator's workplace to overcome writing anxiety.
- Study the impact of instruction on students.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

The study group belonged to students of B. A. English. Twenty students comprised the control group and twenty, the experimental group. All the 40 students were given a pre-test. The test was intended to find out the level of writing anxiety of the students. The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) (Cheng, 2004) was adapted to assess the level of ESL writing at the initial phase of the experiment.

The students chosen for the study were briefed on the purpose of the research and the methodology. The investigator met all the students every day in the usual classes. The syllabus prescribed by the university was dealt with in the classes. The students in the control group did not receive any special instruction for writing skills except for what was normally provided in their classroom. The investigator met the students of the experimental group during the lunch

break and in the evening after classes at least twice a week. The strategies as mentioned before were implemented in those sessions.

Considering the students average level of writing skills, it was necessary to take them back to sentence level and begin with introduction of how to write sentences with simple structures. The implementation of the selected strategies is discussed below.

Motivation

From the outset, the investigator made the students conscious that the kind of treatment they were to undergo was, though an experiment for research would be highly beneficial to them in the long run. A rapport was established to promote a positive kind of involvement. First, the students were motivated to improve their writing skills. None of the students had come from English medium schools. So there was an inherent anxiety in them whether they could cope up with the English classes. The investigator made them understand quoting from personal experience how persistent effort can help even struggling language learners to write well. Whenever some interest or improvement was shown on their part, they were encouraged to perform better. Simple words of appreciation like ‘Well-written’, ‘Good effort’, ‘Remarkable imagination’, etc., served as incentives for the students. A reassuring environment was created wherein they were able to cooperate with the investigator’s ideas. Furthermore, they were made to feel that writing was not a chore but an interesting activity. The unconditional positive regard shown helped them develop a positive attitude towards writing. They evinced an overt sense of liking and interest in the activities given.

Diary writing

Students were also asked to maintain a notebook wherein they could record whatever they wanted to. They could write what happened at home, on their way to college, in the classes, any interesting incident and so on. They were encouraged to begin with simple sentences such as ‘I woke up at 6 a.m.’, ‘I brushed my teeth’ and the like. After two months of writing about their daily activities, students were encouraged to write on any other topic that interested them. They began with simple topics like ‘My pet’, ‘My first day experience in college’, ‘A memorable day’, etc. Towards the end of the period of study, they were encouraged to write on topics like ‘Education in India’, ‘Role of youth in today’s world’. They were assured that they did not have to worry about committing errors. What they had to concentrate on was first flow of ideas. Writing prompts given by the investigator were tremendously useful, great triggers for a writing task.

Here are some examples of writing prompts given to students:

- Who is your favourite actor and why?
- What are the three items you'd take to a deserted island and why?
- Write about one of your favorite movies and why you liked it so much.
- What is the best gift you have ever got?

Students showed great enthusiasm while writing on these topics.

Feedback

How teachers intervene in writing instruction, and how L2 writers react to the feedback reduces writing anxiety and influences the composing process. The investigator read the students' diary entries every week. She focused on idea development, clarity, and coherence before identification of errors and grammar correction. Certain errors in writing had to be pointed out in the beginning itself so that they do not become ingrained or fossilized in their writings. Only those errors which impeded meaning were pointed out first. The students were given the correct usage and better presentation of ideas. The students were also asked to read one another's notebooks, so that they could become familiar with different styles of writing and also avoid mistakes. The purpose of the feedback was to make sure that students learnt from their own mistakes. The investigator did not fail to appreciate the students with words of encouragement like 'You have done a good job!', 'I appreciate the efforts you have taken', 'Good effort! You can do better', and so on. Monitoring student progress is important for two reasons: it allows teachers to measure students' writing on an on-going basis to determine how and what to teach, and it allows administrators to measure the effectiveness of a holistic natural approach to teaching writing. This idea, adapted from (Hamayan p.8), that on-going assessment is a crucial element of good teaching, regardless of the approach taken, prompted the investigator to read the students' entries in their diaries and give comments regularly.

Reading

Students were encouraged to develop the habit of reading. The investigator circulated her personal copies of simple story books. Students of the experimental group were asked to read the stories and write the summary of the stories they had read. Reading stories made them become familiar with different sentence structures and new words. Most of the story books circulated were writings by Indian authors. Reading a variety of literature provided models that illustrate the characteristics of good writing. This included how authors use words to evoke specific images and

feelings, manipulate sentences to speed or slow down the flow of text, organize ideas, set and change the mood of text, or use illustrations to reinforce and sharpen a reader's understanding.

Vocabulary enhancement

No explicit instruction was given for enhancement of vocabulary. Students were asked to make note of the new words they came across while reading, find the meanings and learn their usage. They were asked to frame sentences using the words they had learnt and use them while writing. Furthermore, they were asked to find out derivatives of the words they came across. This process, it was hoped, would help them enhance their vocabulary.

Email writing and Blogging

The investigator encouraged the experimental group to create email ids and share ideas through email. A Writer's Blog was also created and they were motivated to post their views on the blog. Feedback on the same was given in private to them individually in order to avoid uneasiness on the part of the students with regard to the errors they had committed. Students who showed reluctance were asked to post their corrected diary entries first. Gradually they got over their inhibitions and started posting their views.

Towards the end of the study, the students in the experimental condition showed perceptible signs of improvement not only in their performances but also in their attitude towards writing in English. Their anxiety levels had reduced considerably. Not much of instruction was given. The learning experience was fortuitous. It was a combination of strategies namely Motivation, Diary Writing, Feedback, Reading, Vocabulary Enhancement, Emailing and Blogging, which indirectly persuaded students in the experimental condition into autonomy in learning. The duration of the study was for eight months.

At the end of the study the SLWAI was administered once again to all the students. The levels of writing anxiety were tabulated and analyzed. The results of the experimental study showed significant improvement in the performance of the students of the experimental group than those of the control group. The tabulated material has been analyzed in detail in the following section wherein possible reasons for the results have been discussed.

The following table shows the number of students under the various anxiety levels before implementation of the strategies.

Level of anxiety	Experimental Group	Control Group
High	10	10
Moderate	8	7
Low	2	3
Total	20	20

The following table shows the number of students under the various anxiety levels after the implementation of the strategies.

Level of Anxiety	Experimental Group	Control Group
High	4	7
Moderate	9	9
Low	7	4
Total	20	20

Prior to the experiment, students in the experimental study committed many errors in their writing. Run-on and fragmented sentences were common. Resistance was expected from the students when they had to be taken back to the basics. Care was taken to rectify their errors without demoralizing them or making them feel their skills were poor. They were made to understand that once a good foundation had been laid, they could move on to basic paragraph writing and then, on to essays.

IMPACT OF THE STRATEGIES

Diary writing influenced students' sentence writing length and the participants, who wrote a few lines at the beginning, wrote one or more pages later and when students wrote about topics meaningful to them, they exercised more effort and time to write longer texts. Diary writing proved to be a great way to get students to write on a regular basis, plus keep track of their progress as far as writing skills were concerned. Discussions about their works were revealing as they gave the investigator a fuller understanding of what the students were trying to achieve in

their writing or of the sources of errors. It is also clear that discrete grammar instruction does not reliably enhance student writing as in the case of the students in the experimental study for whom grammatical structures were reinforced unconsciously.

Reading helped them get acquainted with different styles of writing. It helped them with the expression of the flow of thought. It also enabled them to acquire a wealth of vocabulary. This raised their level of confidence and they did not have to struggle for words while writing. It has been proved that learning to read can help students learn to write and vice versa. Emailing and Blogging did enhance their writing skills and reduced writing anxiety.

Students were offered opportunities to build from basic writing tasks to more sophisticated challenges that required them to synthesize and critique information gleaned from divergent sources. The investigator, faced with the challenge of preparing diverse students to meet the demands of private, academic, and civic life, fostered interest in activities that encouraged writing as a tool for exploration and learning. The most important factor in writing exercises is that students need to be personally involved in order to make the learning experience of lasting value. The investigator focused on encouraging student participation in the activities which she felt would help refine and enhance their writing skills thereby reducing writing anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Achieving even a minimum level of proficiency requires more time than our formal classroom environment can provide. Hence it follows that the teacher should build a bridge between formal and informal activities. The changes that occurred in the experimental students' attitudes can be deemed as the result of the free and informal activity the students did. What they learnt in a formal way was applied in an informal way. It was observed that the students in the experimental condition had become facile enough to construct sentences with minimum grammatical infelicity, if not perfect ones. In as much as the treatment received by the experimental group has proved instrumental in their progress, it is implied that the strategies did work well for them as they evinced interest in writing in addition to having reduced writing anxiety levels.

Harris in his study "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors", discusses how writing centres provide students with tutorial interaction, something that is not possible in other institutional settings. By working one on one with students, tutors enable writers to feel more comfortable both with the writing process and asking questions they might not otherwise ask. Tutors also help students better interpret assignments and teacher comments. Furthermore,

they are a great resource for getting students to think more about personal writing issues (35). The investigator suggests that the teacher take up the role of a tutor, further still, a mentor and help writers reduce stress, overcome hurdles, and alleviate writing anxiety levels.

Works Cited

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