



THE CYCLE OF SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract:

Fear of writing can be caused by many reasons. Some reasons come from the learners, some from the teachers and some from the surrounding environment. A learner with negative feelings towards writing may present this fear into having writing anxiety when it comes to classrooms activities. This fear can become a never-ending cycle of fear towards writing. This pilot study is done on 108 respondents to find out the influence of perceived difficulties, reasons for writing and writing anxiety on ESL academic writing. The instrument used is a 56-items survey with 5 likert scales. Findings of the study displayed an interesting self-prophecy towards writing. The results of the study revealed that many learners' perception of writing difficulty started in semester one of their study. This fear can be aggravated by a non-supporting learning environment by the writing teachers. Next, cognitive anxiety such as low self-esteem added on to the negative feeling on writing. This negative feeling can be rooted from the learners past experience (somatic anxiety) on the learning of writing. Finally, learners may end up showing avoidance behaviour such towards learning writing. They would only write essays in English if they were not given any choice.

Keywords: writing, fear, self-fulfilling prophecy, perceived difficulties, reasons

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

An employee with good communication skills is highly sought by potential employers. According to Changpueng (2017), good communication skills is a requirement for all professionals. Workplace communication is made up of verbal, non-verbal, spoken and especially written forms. Writing is not a skill easily acquired by many. Some have problems with their language skills, while some may have problems with writing skills. It is also said that some while may fear writing due to past experiences. Fear of writing can become a vicious cycle.

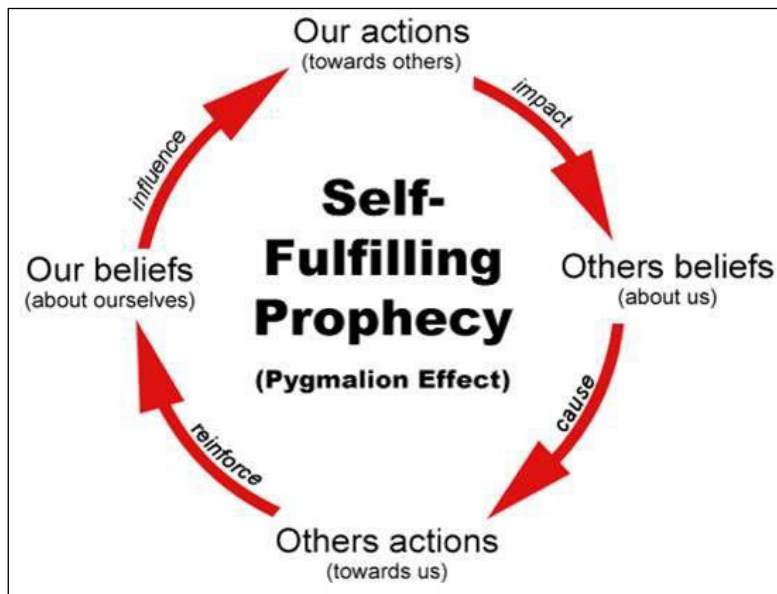


Figure 1: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (Ackerman, 2008)

In the teaching and learning psychology, self-fulfilling prophecy (Ackerman, 2008) is a prediction that what a person sees/ feels as true will directly or indirectly become true eventually. Based on Figure 1, the person's beliefs about himself/herself will influence his/her actions towards others. This action then impacts the beliefs of others about that person. This belief then causes the action of others towards the person. Without realizing it, the action of others would reinforce the person's beliefs and the influence back his/her actions. The whole fear now becomes a cycle.

2. Statement of Problem

Karakaya & Olper (2011) reported that there was a negative correlation between writing practice and writing activities. Their study showed that as students' writing practice and teachers' writing activities increased, writing anxiety levels of students decreased. Writing activities can be a demotivating factor towards language learning. Learners first perceived the skill to be difficult and this perception led to their anxiety.

The study by Badrasawi, Zubairi & Idrus (2016) reported that writing apprehension has a negative influence on students' writing performance. They found

that the sources of contributing factors could be students, instructors, and teaching learning setting; and writing apprehension could be reduced through suggested strategies. Learners fear of writing are actually caused by various reasons.

The study by Liu and Huang (2010) reported interesting relationship between writing, and variables. The study found that affective variables, anxiety and motivation are highly correlated to learning in second/foreign language. When learners fear learning the language skills, they will in turn be less motivated towards the learning process. This affects their acquisition of the language learning. Interestingly, the fear of writing can be categorised into many types and the types are rooted from different causes.

The objective of this study is to explore the influence of perceived difficulties on writing. It also explores the causes of writing anxiety, as well as the categories of writing anxiety across students of different semesters. This study is done to answer the following questions;

- 1) How does perceived ESL writing difficulties differ across semesters?
- 2) How does reasons for ESL writing apprehension differ across semesters?
- 3) How does categories of ESL writing apprehension differ across semesters?

2. Literature Review

2.1 ESL Academic Writing

As the name applies, “academic writing” is a skill all learners need-from primary school and way up to institutions of higher learning. Especially so in institutions of higher learning, majority of assignments are in the written form. According to Rahmat (2018), writing is one of the most difficult for ESL learners to acquire. Many may have begun by having problems in academic writing in their first language, so writing in the second language will be an added burden to them and this can cause anxieties.

2.2 Perceived Writing Difficulties

The study by Rahmat, Mohd Yunus, Syed Abdul Rahman, and Aripin (2017) reported the relationship between perception of learners towards writing and their learning surrounding. The learner begins by perceiving writing as difficult.. This perception then influences the way they (the learners) respond to the environment (classroom teaching). This response is influenced by and will affect the cognitive view of the writer. This cognitive view will in turn add more to the writers’ perception of writing difficulty. The whole process becomes a cycle until the writer decides to leave the cycle (no longer far writing).

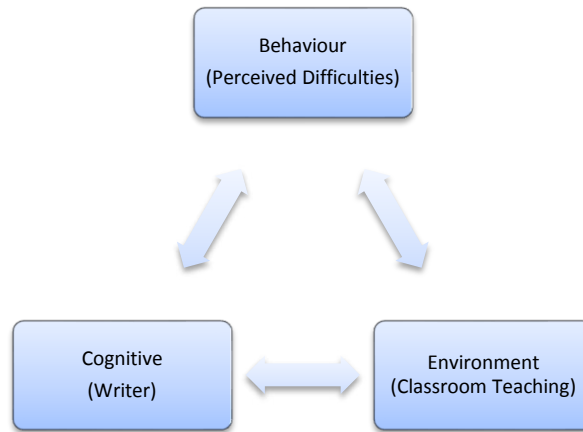


Figure 2: Perceived Writing Difficulty (Rahmat et al., 2017)

2.3 Reasons for Writing Apprehension

The study of Rahmat, et al. (2017) presented some causes of writing apprehension among learners. Writers' apprehension is rooted from two main causes and they are the writers' personal reasons and also what they (the writers) think of the writing teacher. Personally, some writers felt they were not proficient enough when asked to use English (as a second language) in class. Next, they also felt that they were given very few opportunities to practice English (as a second language) in class. Some were also worried that their written assignments had to be done in English; while others felt they had weak foundation in writing. In addition to that, the study also reported that learners blamed their teachers in class. They felt that some teachers had low proficiency. Some also complained that their teachers' methods of teaching English was not good. Many were not happy when the teacher used only English as medium of instruction. However, some were concerned that some teachers showed lack of interest in teaching or the teacher did not give enough writing practice in and outside class.

2.4 Writing Anxiety

Fear of writing, writing anxiety, writing apprehension are among some of the terms used by writers to explain the unpleasant emotion associated to writing. Jacfsky, Santos, Khemlani-Patel & Neziroglu (2019) conducted a study on the acquisition and maintenance of fear in language learning. Their study is based on Mowrer's two-factor theory combined the learning principles of classical and operant conditioning. They reported that the avoidance of (or escape from) anxiety-provoking stimuli led to the removal of unpleasant emotions. Thus, avoidance becomes a reward and reinforces (increases) the behaviour of avoidance. Liu and Huang (2011) claimed that anxiety among the other affective variables was the strongest predictor of student L2 performance. So, sadly, anxiety is related to language acquisition.

Cheng (2004) presented a three-dimensional conceptualization of anxiety including Somatic anxiety, Cognitive anxiety, and Avoidance behaviour which specify the physiological, cognitive, and effects of writing anxiety on writing processes and behaviours based on the SLWAI. She argues that the negative relationship between test anxiety and L2 writing performance is primarily due to the cognitive components

rather than somatic components or avoidance behaviour. This classification is used to identify the types of writing anxiety among EFL students in the present study.

2.5 Theoretical Framework of the Study

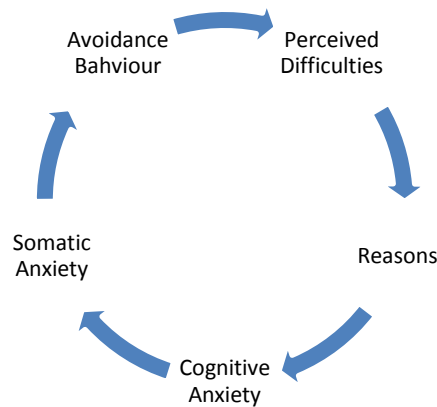


Figure 3: Theoretical Framework of the Study

Figure 3 shows the theoretical framework of this study. Writers began by having a perception that writing is difficulty. This difficulty will be backed up by the writers with their reasons. This results in cognitive anxiety towards writing. Their mind influences how they react and this leads to the prevalence of somatic anxiety. Finally, the writer displays avoidance behavior towards writing. This avoidance is further enhanced by their perception of how difficult writing is. The whole process becomes a cycle.

2.6 Past Studies

Various studies have been done to show the influence of writing anxiety on learners. Tanyer and Susoy (2013) conducted a study to find out the foreign language (L2) writing anxiety of Turkish pre-service teaches of EFL and the relationship between their writing anxiety and writing performance. The study looked into the participants' underlying perceptions, attitudes towards writing anxiety in L2 and possible anxiety sources. 48 freshman students taking the 'Academic Writing and Report Writing' course at Anadolu University participated in this study. The main instruments of this study are;

- a) Second Language Writing Apprehension Inventory (SLWAI) (Cheng, 2004), and
- b) open-ended questionnaire.

Participants' first midterm exam scores were also used as an index of their writing performance for correlational analysis. Findings revealed that for SLWAI, 19% of the participants were found to be high anxious (HA) while 21% were labelled to be low anxious (LA), and the rest (60%) were categorized as moderate anxious (MA). In addition to that, the correlational analysis result suggested a statistically significant negative relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance. A one-way ANOVA compared the writing scores of students distributed to three different anxiety

levels. Conclusive analysis of the findings revealed that the open-ended questionnaire uncovered the sources, associated feelings, people and situations and the perceived difficulties related to writing in L2.

Next, Rezaei and Jafari (2014) conducted a study to examine the levels, types and causes of writing anxiety among Iranian EFL students. The participants were 120 EFL students in two institutes of higher education in Shiraz, Iran. The researchers used the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) (Cheng, 2004), and Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI).. The findings of this mixed method design study indicated a high level of writing anxiety. Rezaie and Jafarai (2014) also found that cognitive anxiety was the main type showed. The study suggested that educational system teachers should move toward a more non-judgemental and less-threatening approach they should also focus on EFL students' writing needs and expectations than setting far-achieved goals and putting pressure for perfect work. This study offers some implications for practitioners in this field which contribute to the betterment of writing skill among Iranian EFL students. Similar suggestions was also concluded in the study by Al-Shboul and Huwari (2015) who explored the causes of writing apprehension among Jordanian Phd students at UUM. This qualitative study was conducted on 21 Jordanian Phd students. Four main themes were found apparent and they were (a) lack of knowledge in English structure, (b)negative attitude toward writing, (c)negative writing experience in the past, and (d)inadequate knowledge in academic writing.

Jabreil, Azizifar, Gowhary and Jamalinesari (2015) conducted a study to investigate the level of writing anxiety of the Iranian EFL students with different proficiency levels. 45 students (elementary, intermediate, and advanced learners) studying in Azad University of Ilam, Iran were selected based on random sampling. Second, Language Writing Anxiety Inventory SLWAI (Cheng, 2004) was used to measure anxiety. The study used both descriptive and inferential statistics for analysis. A one-way ANOVA was run to analyse the data. Statistical analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Findings indicated that the selected Iranian EFL students majoring in English language teaching experienced a high level of anxiety. In addition to that, students with elementary level were found to suffer higher level of English writing anxiety than the students with intermediate and advanced levels. Cognitive anxiety was the most common type of anxiety, followed by somatic anxiety, and avoidance behaviour. The results also revealed that foreign and second language teachers should be cautious of the dangers of anxiety.

The study by aims Whayuni and Umam (2017) at analyzing the writing anxiety of English students of an Islamic State College in East Java, Indonesia. This study described the levels, dominant type, and main factors of writing anxiety of the English students. Fifty English students at the fourth semester participated in this study. Two closed-ended questionnaires, Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) proposed by Cheng, and Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) proposed by Rezaei and Jafari (2014) were employed to collect the data. The findings revealed that 54% of the students experienced high level of writing anxiety, 44% experienced moderate level of writing anxiety, and 2% experienced low level of writing anxiety. The

dominant type of writing anxiety was cognitive writing anxiety, which is based on the highest mean among two other types of writing anxiety. Then there are four main factors that cause writing anxiety. They are linguistic difficulties, fear of teachers' negative comments, insufficient writing practice, and time pressure.

3. Material and Methods

108 participants participated in this pilot study. Participants were chosen purposely sampled from a population of ESL learners in a public university. Samples came from participants who have completed an academic writing course offered by the university. The instrument used for this study is a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 56 items and is designed adapting (a) Perceived Writing Difficulty and Learners' Reasons (Rahmat, et al., 2017) and (b) Writing Anxiety (Cheng, 2004). Cronbach alpha was conducted on the instrument and results showed a high internal consistency of 0.961 (Table 1). Data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to report descriptive and inferential findings.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.961	56

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This section discusses the findings based on the three research questions presented. Descriptive statistics was used to present the frequency of responses for each category. Perceived Difficulties

RQ 1: How does perceived ESL writing difficulties differ across semesters?

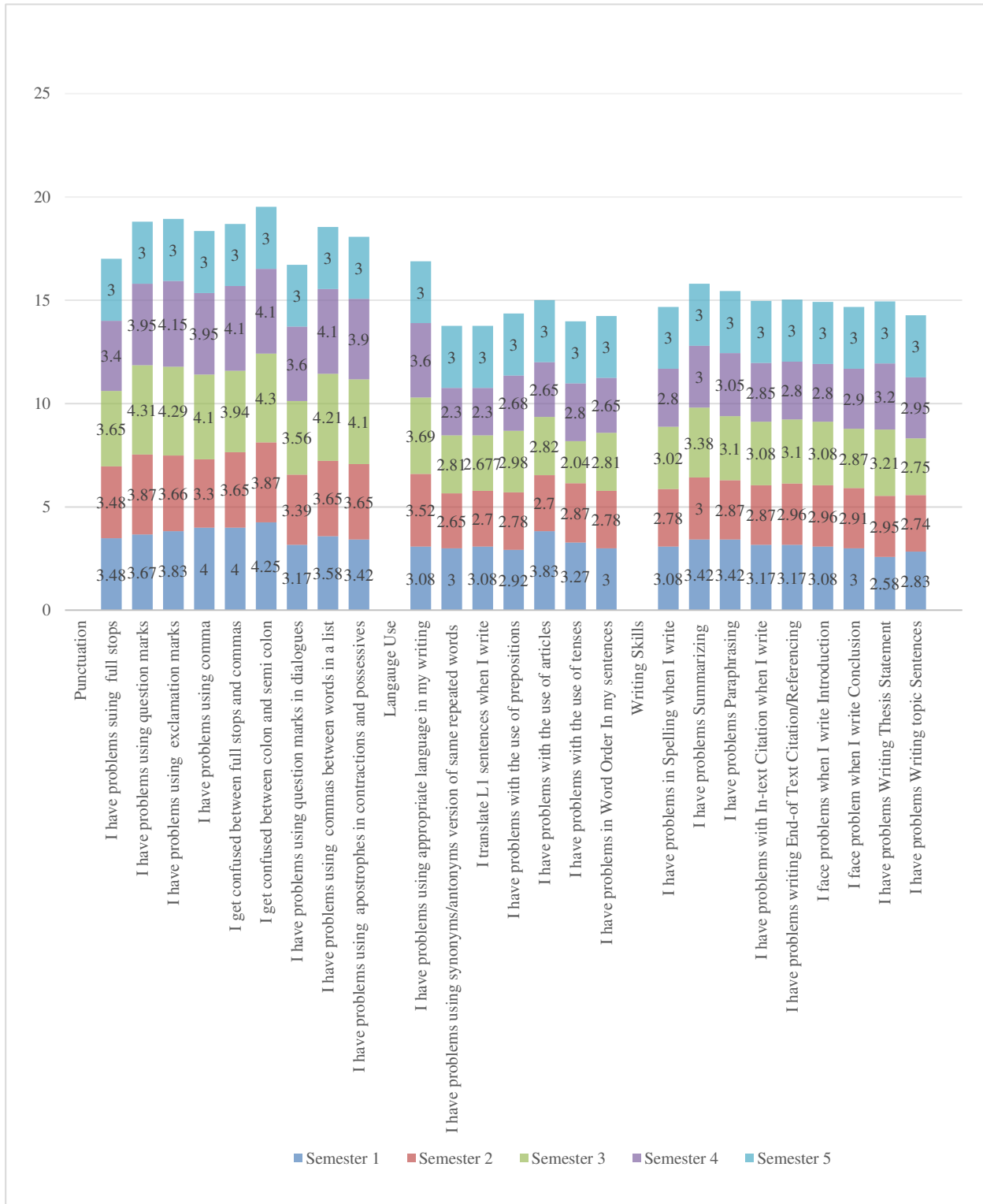


Figure 1: Percieved Difficulties

Figure 1 presents the mean score for perceived difficulties for five semesters. A general overview does indicate writers reporting higher mean in semester 1. This could be learners in semester 1 may not have been exposed academic writing and learning them for the first time may be overwhelming. This finding is in accordance with the

study by Tanyer and Susoy (2013) who reported that freshmen do face writing anxieties because they perceived academic writing as difficult.

4.2 Reasons for Writing Apprehension

RQ 2: How do reasons for ESL writing apprehension differ across semesters?

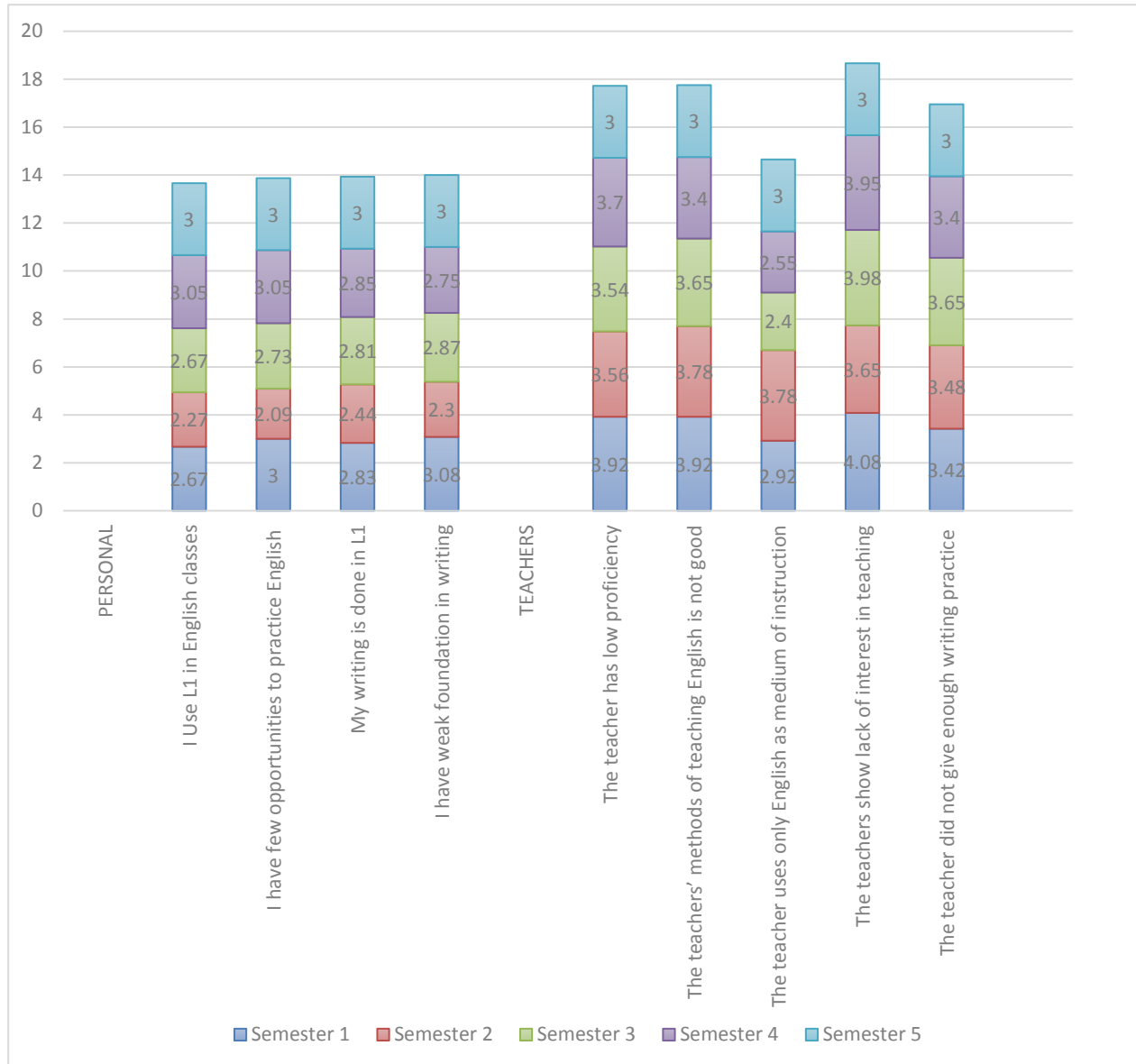


Figure 2: Learners' Reasons

Figure 2 above is a representation of the mean scores for learners' reasons. Higher mean scores were found in semester 1 and students blamed some teachers to have lack of interest in teaching. According to Rezaei and Jafari (2014), often teachers' teaching motivation can be a cause for learners fear of writing. Some learners found that they did not like the way some teachers gave negative comments to their writing. The learners also didn't appreciate the writing teachers gave insufficient writing practice.

RQ 3: How does categories of ESL writing apprehension differ across semesters?



Figure 3: Somatic Anxiety

Figure 3 reports mean scores for somatic anxiety across 5 semesters. Generally, higher mean scores were seen in semester 1 and semester 5. This is understandable because learners may fear the unknown in semester 1 and in semester 5 may find writing final year project a difficult process. Semester 1 students may fear writing due to their past writing experience. This is also agreed by Al-Shboul and Huwari (2015) who found that fear of writing could stem from learners past fear on learning writing.

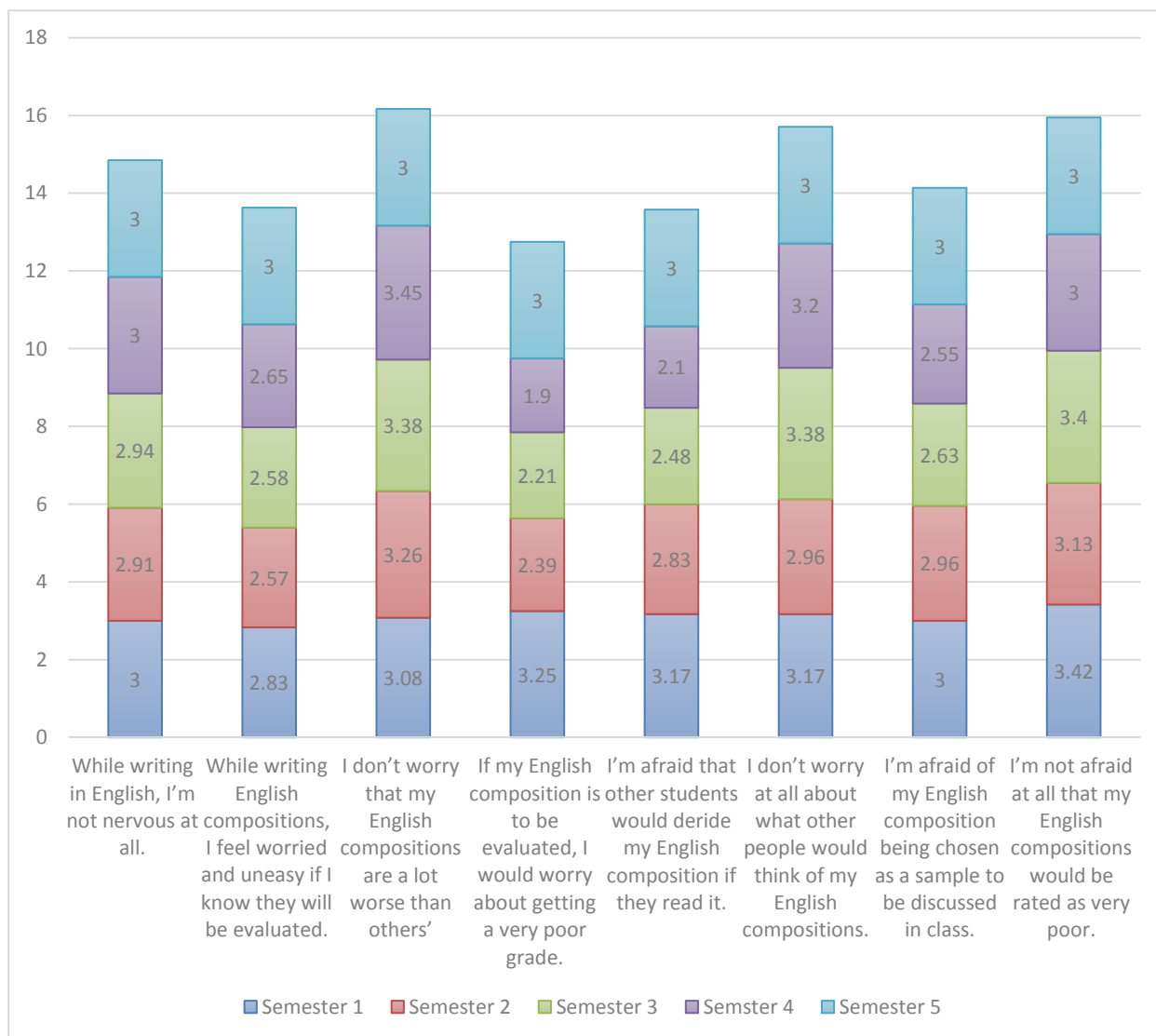


Figure 4: Cognitive Anxiety

Figure 4 shows the mean scores for cognitive anxiety. It is interesting to see the highest mean for learners “did was not afraid that their English compositions would be rated as very poor”. The mean score is higher throughout the 5 semesters. Ackerman (2008) describes self-fulfilling prophecy is when learners have low self-esteem on the learning behavior. That low self-esteem is then projected in their attitude towards new learning. This becomes a negative cycle.

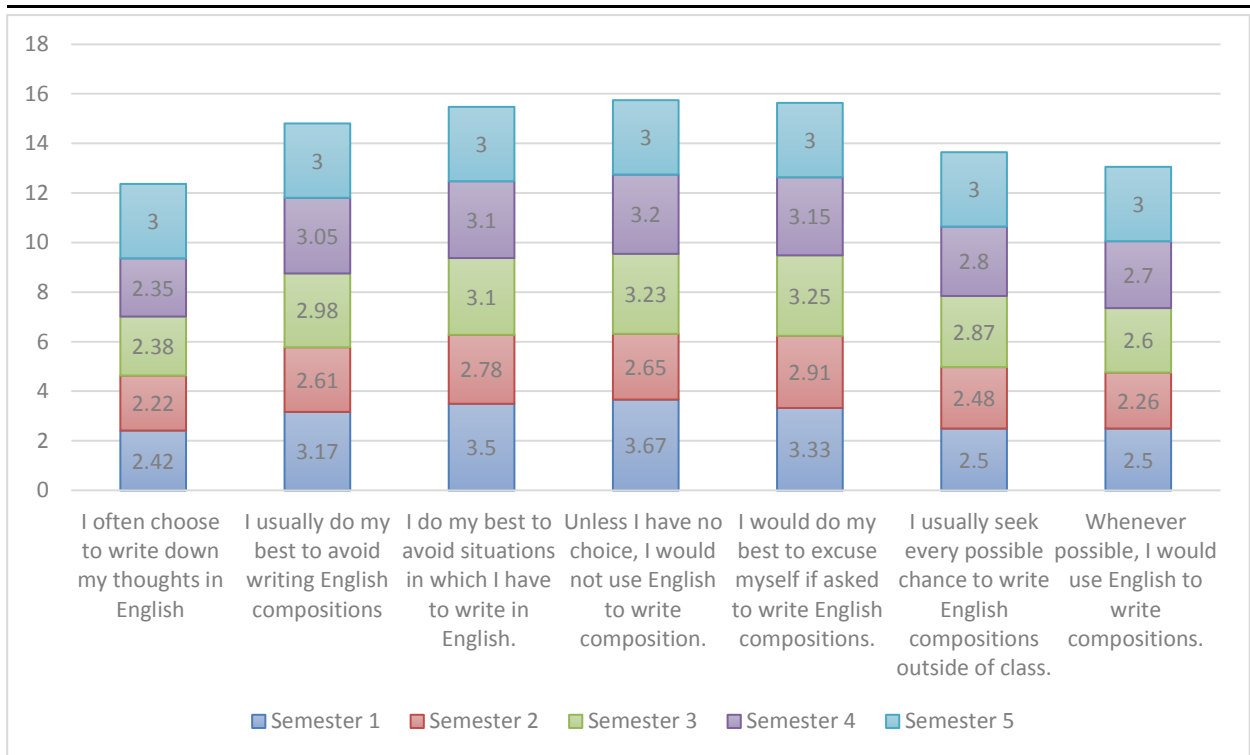


Figure 5: Avoidance Behaviour Anxiety

Figure 5 shows the mean scores for avoidance behavior anxiety. Higher mean scores were reported on “unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write composition” across 5 semesters. This again is a result of self-fulfilling prophecy from having negative perceptions on academic writing (Ackerman, 2008).

5. Discussion of Findings

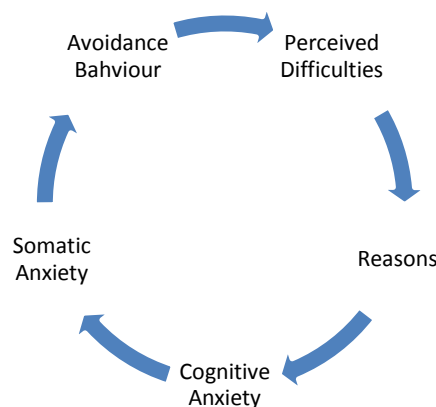


Figure 3: Theoretical Framework of the Study

Findings of the study displayed an interesting self-prophecy towards writing. The results of the study revealed that many learners’ perception of writing difficulty started in semester 1 of their study. This fear can be aggravated by a non-supporting learning environment by the writing teachers. Next, cognitive anxiety such as low self-esteem added on to the negative feeling on writing. This negative feeling can be rooted

from the learners past experience (somatic anxiety) on the learning of writing. Finally, learners may end up showing avoidance behaviour such towards learning writing. They would only write essays in English if they were not given any choice.

6. Recommendations

This study has shown how snowballing effect can do to learners' perceived fear of writing. From perceived fear, learners developed valid reasons to be negative towards the learning of writing. This negativity can add on to their cognitive, somatic anxiety and finally show avoidance behavior when it comes to writing.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Pedagogical Implications

The teaching of writing has undergone many changes over the years. Writing teachers should be exposed to newer and more interesting, yet less stressful activities to make learners not only fear academic writing, but also love to write. According to Rahmat, Syed Abdul Rahman, and Hassan (2018), the current generation of learners are easily bored and preferred real and authentic materials when it comes to learning. Writing teachers should consider these criteria when designing writing activities. Future studies could be done on writing behavior of gen Zers and younger to see what they fear, like, or even excel when it comes to writing.

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About the Author(s)

Noor Hanim Rahmat has taught in UiTM for the past 25 years. She has a Phd in Education; specializing in TESL (Academic Writing). She has taught and supervised post graduate students. She actively presents papers, writes articles for journals, as well as book for TESL methodology.

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