

The differential impacts of domain-specific anxiety on L2 writing performance across different levels of topic familiarity

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ABSTRACT: Learner individual differences can influence performance across various task types and complexity levels. This study explores how domain-specific anxiety affects second language (L2) learners' performance on familiar and less familiar writing tasks. A total of 106 lower-intermediate L2 learners in China completed either a more familiar writing task or a less familiar writing task. The study assessed L2 writing anxiety using the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), which measures somatic anxiety (adverse feelings such as tension), cognitive anxiety (negative anticipations and fixation on performance), and avoidance behavior (reluctance to engage in writing activities). Writing performance was evaluated through complexity, accuracy, and fluency. For the more familiar task, avoidance behavior negatively correlated with accuracy measures. In contrast, for the less familiar task, somatic anxiety negatively correlated with one measure of complexity and cognitive anxiety negatively correlated with two measures of complexity. These findings highlight the differential impact of anxiety dimensions on L2 writing performance contingent upon topic familiarity, suggesting that writing instruction should be tailored to reduce avoidance behaviors in more familiar tasks and address somatic and cognitive anxieties when learners engage with less familiar tasks.

Keywords: Domain-specific anxiety, L2 writing performance, CAF, topic familiarity.

Los impactos diferenciales de la ansiedad específica de dominio en el desempeño de escritura en L2 según los niveles de familiaridad con el tema

RESUMEN: Las diferencias individuales entre los aprendices pueden influir en el desempeño en diversas tareas y niveles de complejidad. Este estudio examina cómo la ansiedad específica de dominio afecta el desempeño en la escritura en segunda lengua (L2) de estudiantes ante tareas con temas más familiares y menos familiares. Un total de 106 aprendices de L2 de nivel intermedio bajo en China completaron una tarea de escritura más familiar o una menos familiar. La ansiedad relacionada con la escritura en L2 se evaluó mediante el Inventario de Ansiedad en la Escritura en Segunda Lengua (SLWAI), que mide la ansiedad somática (sensaciones adversas como tensión), la ansiedad cognitiva (anticipaciones negativas y fijación en el rendimiento) y el comportamiento de evitación (renuencia a involucrarse en actividades de escritura). El desempeño en la escritura se valoró a través de la complejidad, la precisión y la fluidez. En la tarea más familiar, el comportamiento de evitación se correlacionó negativamente con las medidas de precisión. En contraste, en la tarea menos familiar, la ansiedad

somática mostró una correlación negativa con una medida de complejidad, mientras que la ansiedad cognitiva se correlacionó negativamente con dos medidas de complejidad. Estos hallazgos evidencian el impacto diferencial de las dimensiones de la ansiedad en el desempeño en la escritura en L2 según la familiaridad con el tema, sugiriendo que la enseñanza de la escritura debe adaptarse para reducir los comportamientos de evitación en tareas más familiares y abordar las ansiedades somática y cognitiva cuando los aprendices se enfrentan a tareas menos familiares.

Palabras clave: Ansiedad específica del dominio, rendimiento en la escritura en la L2, CAF, familiaridad con el tema.

1. INTRODUCTION

Individual differences, such as anxiety, play an indispensable role in the learning process. In the language learning domain, productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing) often induce a relatively high level of anxiety on the part of learners (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Gkonou, 2011). Among the four language-related skills, speaking has been viewed as the most anxiety-provoking skill in second language (L2) instructional settings (Phillips, 1992), with numerous studies examining the influence of speaking anxiety on performance (Azizifar, Faryadian, & Gowhary, 2014; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Khodadady & Khajavy, 2013). As another type of productive skill, writing may induce a similar amount of anxiety to speaking (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999). Learning to write could be an overwhelming task for many learners, and they were likely to feel anxious and frustrated during the tedious and difficult process of completing the task (Richards, 1990). Probably that is why writing anxiety is regarded as a major obstacle for learners' successful writing (Finn, 2018). Due to the potential role of writing anxiety in learners' writing, it seemed that exploring the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance is of great significance.

In the first language (L1) writing domain, after Daly and Miller's (1975a) preliminary study on the development and validation of L1 Writing Apprehension Test, an array of studies (Daly, 1978; Daly & Miller, 1975b; Faigley, Daly & Witte, 1981; Lee & Krashen, 1997; Richmond & Dickson-Markman, 1985) have reported empirical findings that writing apprehension could exert negative impact on learners' writing quality, suggesting that learners with higher level of anxiety composed writings with lower quality. For example, Daly and Miller (1975b) contended that learners with high apprehension had less successful writing experience in the past and demonstrated unwillingness to tack high-level writing courses. Furthermore, Daly (1978) found that low apprehensive learners scored significantly better than their high apprehensive counterparts on writing skill tests, which were operationalized in terms of grammar, mechanics, and other broader aspects. Through examining the effect of high and low apprehension levels on syntactic complexity and different genres of learner writing, Faigley, Daly & Witte (1981) showed that high apprehensive learners produced significantly less words in T-units and clauses in narrative essays; however, different apprehension levels did not play a role in argumentative essays. Although it seems that researchers have reached a consensus regarding the substantial impact of writing anxiety on L1 writing quality, to the best of our knowledge, only a handful of studies (Cheng, 2002; Goodman & Cirka, 2009; Zabihi, 2018) have been conducted to investigate how writing anxiety affects L2 learners' learning performance.

In addition to the studies examining the relationship between writing anxiety and writing outcomes, there were studies that sought to explore the impact of writing anxiety on some other variables, particularly the variable related to learner factors. And these studies also investigated how such factors mediated the relationship between writing anxiety and writing outcomes. Specifically, researchers found that learners with high level of anxiety achieved low level of motivation (Alico, 2016; Tsao, Tseng & Wang, 2017), writing self-efficacy (e.g., Abdel Latif, 2015; Woodrow, 2006), and writing attitude (Sarkhoush, 2013). Li (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of the correlations between writing anxiety and various related factors, revealing that learners' language proficiency and age significantly mediated the relationship between writing anxiety and writing outcomes. The study indicated that low proficiency learners were less likely to achieve satisfactory writing outcomes as their writing anxiety may not have been sufficiently triggered to elicit effective coping strategies. In addition, it was found that children and adolescents exhibited a more negative correlation between writing anxiety and writing outcomes compared to adults. Similarly, Zabihi (2018) examined how writing self-efficacy indirectly influenced the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance operationalized as complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). The results indicated that highly anxious learners tended to have low writing self-efficacy, which resulted in low scores in writing performance. In addition to the variable of learners' factors, the variable pertaining to writing topics seems to be a promising research area worthy of more attention due to its evident influence on the overall writing process. For example, Aslim Yetis (2017) noted that student writers experienced high levels of anxiety when required to write on topics under time pressure. In terms of topic genres, Faigley, Daly & Witte (1981) proposed that writing anxiety became evident in task performance when students were asked to write narrative and descriptive topics that necessitated the expression of personal emotions, experiences, and viewpoints. Thus, it can be hypothesized that various types of writing topics elicit different levels of writing anxiety on the part of students, which in turn affects their writing performance.

Topic familiarity is typically defined as an individual's prior knowledge of, and, consequently, familiarity with a particular subject matter (Bui, 2014; Qiu, 2020). It is viewed as a subcategory of task-internal readiness in Bui's (2014) framework and as a variable of task complexity in Robinson's (2011) framework. Based on the two frameworks, one strand of studies examined the mediating role of anxiety in the relationship between topic familiarity and L2 speaking performance. It was found that increasing topic familiarity enhanced fluency (Bui, 2014) and lexical (Bui, 2019) performance by fostering positive task preparedness and mitigating learners' anxiety. Furthermore, another strand of studies directly explored the relationship between topic familiarity and L2 speaking anxiety, finding that learners experienced relatively high anxiety when they were asked to speak on less familiar topics, resulting in poor speaking performance (Hanifa, 2018; Kasbi & Shirvan, 2017; Qiu & Lo, 2017; Tuan & Mai, 2015). In such case, it can be hypothesized that student writers will exhibit reduced writing anxiety when addressing topics with which they are more familiar, as opposed to those that are less familiar. Although the studies about L2 speaking seem to consistently reveal negative correlation between topic familiarity and speaking anxiety, little research has been conducted to investigate whether such correlation still exists in the L2

writing domain. To date, no empirical studies have yet examined the relationship between topic familiarity and writing anxiety. One study that has touched upon the relationship between topic familiarity and emotional elements in student writing was Abdi Tabari, Bui & Wang's (2021) study. The results of that study demonstrated that the amount of negative emotion expressed in students' written texts was lower in their writings of more familiar topics, revealing the potential relationship between topic familiarity and negative emotions (e.g., anxiety). However, Abdi Tabari et al.'s study did not specifically and empirically explore the relationship between topic familiarity and writing anxiety, nor did it address the nuanced dimensions of writing anxiety. Therefore, the aim of this study is to bridge this research gap by investigating the relationship between topic familiarity and the different dimensions of writing anxiety, namely somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behavior (Cheng, 2004). Three research questions are addressed in this study:

1. What role does writing anxiety play in the CAF of lower-intermediate L2 learners' writings on more familiar topics?
2. What role does writing anxiety play in the CAF of lower-intermediate L2 learners' writings on less familiar topics?
3. Which type of topic—more familiar or less familiar—has a greater impact on the CAF of lower-intermediate L2 learners' essays?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Setting and participants

A total of 106 EFL students (63 males, 59.3%; 43 females, 40.7%) from a university located at southwest China voluntarily participated in this study. Enrolled in the College English course, which is a compulsory course for all students in the university, the students from two intact classes met for two 90-minute sessions per week. One teacher holding a master's degree in English applied linguistics taught the two classes based on the syllabus approved by the university. The students were majored in clinic medicine, medical examination, and medical imaging technology. They learned English throughout their primary and secondary education, amounting to approximately 9 years in total. None of them had any experience of studying or living in English-speaking countries. The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 21, with a mean age of 19 ($SD = 2.1$).

To ensure the students' English proficiency level was relatively homogeneous in this study, their scores in College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) were collected and calculated through an independent samples *t*-test. The results of the test were reported in the Result section. CET-4 is a national standardized English proficiency test for all university students in China to assess their proficiency level, and the validity and reliability of using the scores of CET-4 to gauge EFL students' English proficiency has been well documented in literature (Gao & Min, 2021; Huang & Renandya, 2018). After discussing with their teacher and checking their scores of the final English test of the previous semester and scores of the CET-4, we agreed that their English proficiency was lower-intermediate.

2.2. Instrumentation

2.2.1. *Second language writing anxiety inventory*

Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was adapted to measure the students' writing anxiety level in this study. The reasons for selecting the SLWAI were two-fold. First, both the students in Cheng's study and the students in the current study were Chinese EFL learners. Second, the SLWAI consists of three sub-scales, namely, (a) somatic anxiety, evidenced by adverse feelings such as tension; (b) cognitive anxiety, demonstrated through negative anticipations and fixation on performance; and (c) avoidance behavior, indicated by reluctance to engage in writing activities. Sample items for each of the sub-scales are: My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraint; I'm afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class; I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English. The students answered the SLWAI using five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The SLWAI comprises 22 items in total. Consequently, the total score ranged from 22 to 110, with higher scores indicating greater levels of anxiety. The scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability, evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88, with each of its three subscales maintaining a Cronbach's alpha above 0.70. The SLWAI has been extensively utilized in research on L2 writing anxiety (Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020; Rahimi & Zhang, 2018; Sun & Fan, 2022).

2.2.2. *Writing tasks*

The present study utilized a background questionnaire to select a more familiar topic and a less familiar one for the students to write. The questionnaire was composed of 20 writing topics extracted from previous CET-4, and the topics were argumentative for the purpose of controlling genre. Given that topic familiarity is not a binary attribute, participants were asked to rate their familiarity with each topic on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = not familiar at all, 10 = extremely familiar), assuming these topics were presented in a test setting. From these ratings, the topics with the highest ($M = 6.87$, $SD = 1.98$) and lowest ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 2.33$) mean familiarity scores were selected. The difference in familiarity between these two topics was statistically significant ($t(86) = -5.93$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.64$, large effect). The highest-rated topic involved an argument about whether developing a healthy life-style is important among college students, whereas the lowest-rated topic involved an argument about whether more public money should be spent on roads and motorways than on public transport systems (see Appendix 1). While operationalizing topic familiarity dichotomously can yield valid interpretations, it may obscure individual-level variations. Consequently, we utilized the students' respective Likert-scale ratings for the two topics in our analyses.

2.3. Procedure

The study was conducted during the fourth week of a 12-week semester. The writing anxiety questionnaire and writing tasks were administered to students in class. Wenjuanxing (<https://www.wjx.cn>), a widely utilized platform among Chinese students for questionnaire responses, was employed for data collection. After homogenizing the students' English profi-

ciency, they were instructed to complete their writing tasks on paper during an in-class session, supervised by the teacher, within a 30-minute timeframe. The classroom teacher supervised the administration of the questionnaire, informing the students that the items had no right or wrong answers, and encouraging them to seek clarification if needed. Feedback indicated that students completed the questionnaire within an average of 13 minutes. Subsequently, the 106 students were divided into two groups. Group 1 (52 students) was assigned a more familiar topic and group 2 (54 students) was assigned a less familiar one as their writing tasks. Handwritten texts from the students were later transcribed into Word documents by a research assistant for syntactic complexity analyses. The first author reviewed all transcribed documents to correct any typing errors.

2.4. Measures

This study used CAF to measure the students' writing performance. CAF measures are essential for assessing students' performance on specific tasks (Norris & Ortega, 2009; Skehan, 1998), and researchers in L2 writing domain have been utilizing this triad to evaluate the quality of students' written work. Lu's (2010) L2 Syntactic Complexity Analyzer (L2SCA) was used to analyze the complexity measure. Following Norris and Ortega (2009), this study utilized four indices from the L2SCA: (1) Mean Length of T-units (MLT): This index measures general syntactic complexity by calculating the average length of T-units, which are minimal grammatical units that contain at least one main clause. A higher MLT indicates a more complex structure and the ability to manage longer, more sophisticated syntactic constructions. (2) Dependent Clauses per T-unit (DC/T): This measure reflects subordinate syntactic complexity, assessing how often writers use dependent clauses in relation to the main clauses. The frequency of dependent clauses indicates a writer's ability to create more complex, embedded sentence structures, which typically reflect higher language proficiency. (3) Coordinate Phrases per Clause (CP/C): This index evaluates coordinate complexity, capturing how frequently writers use coordinate phrases, which involve joining multiple elements within a sentence. A higher CP/C ratio indicates an ability to handle coordination in sentence structures, contributing to sentence variety and sophistication. (4) Complex Nominals per Clause (CN/C): This measure assesses phrasal complexity by counting the occurrence of complex nominal phrases, which are noun phrases with modifiers or embedded elements. Writers who use more complex nominals demonstrate advanced language use, often contributing to more nuanced and precise expressions in writing. These indices were chosen based on prior research (e.g., Housen Kuiken & Vedder, 2012; Johnson, 2017), which identified key dimensions of syntactic complexity and suggested the incorporation of measures that address general, subordinate, coordinate, and phrasal complexity. In this study, general complexity was operationalized through MLT, subordinate complexity through DC/T, coordinate complexity through CP/C, and phrasal complexity through CN/C.

For accuracy, this study employed the measure of error-free clause ratios (EFC/C), calculated as the percentage of error-free clauses per clause. This metric was selected because of its robust correlation with various error measures (Polio & Shea, 2014) and its effectiveness in evaluating accuracy among lower-intermediate EFL student writers, compared to alterna-

tive metrics such as error-free T-units (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki & Kim, 1998). The higher an EFC/C is, the more accurate a written text is. Following Vasylets and Marin (2021), this study considered grammatical and vocabulary errors based on Standard English. The errors of capitalization, spelling, and punctuation were excluded (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). To ensure inter-rater reliability in error coding, both the first and second authors independently coded 10% of the dataset. Any differences were discussed until consensus was reached. Upon achieving a reliability coefficient exceeding .85, the first author proceeded to code the remaining data. Finally, fluency was measured by the total number of words produced by the students within a 30-minute time frame.

3. RESULTS

Prior to the start of the study, an independent samples *t*-test was run to ensure the comparability of the student participants' English proficiency level. The results showed that there was no significant difference between the more familiar topic group (M = 429.370, SD = 43.342) and the less familiar topic group (M = 442.519, SD = 61.000) in English proficiency ($t(104) = -1.269, p > .05$). For the primary statistical analyses, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated to explore the relationship between writing anxiety components and the CAF of the more familiar writing task. As shown in Table 1, a significant negative correlation was found between avoidance behavior and accuracy measure in this study (EFC/C $r = -.28, p < .05$). This suggests that higher levels of avoidance behavior were associated with lower accuracy in the writing task. However, no significant correlations were observed between writing anxiety subcomponents and the measures of syntactic complexity and fluency (i.e., $p > .05$), indicating that the impact of anxiety on complexity and fluency was not as pronounced for the more familiar task.

Table 1. Correlations between writing anxiety subcomponents and the CAF of familiar task

Familiar Task (N = 54)	Somatic Anxiety	Cognitive Anxiety	Avoidance Behavior
Syntactic complexity			
MLT	.50	-.040	.114
DC/T	.025	.067	.071
CP/C	-.009	-.028	-.109
CN/C	.031	-.090	-.063
Accuracy			
EFC/C	-.105	-.256	-.281*
Fluency			
TNW	-.150	.023	-.025

Note: * $p < .05$. MLT = mean length of T-units; DC/T = dependent clause per T-unit; CP/C = coordinate phrases per clause; CN/C = complex nominal per clause; EFC/C = error-free clause ratios; TNW = total number of words

The relationship between writing anxiety components and the CAF of the less familiar writing task was investigated by computing a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. As can be seen in Table 2, significant negative correlations were found between somatic anxiety and one measure of complexity (MLT $r = -.357, p < .01$) and between cognitive anxiety and two measures of complexity of the less familiar writing task (MLT $r = -.291, p < .05$; DC/T $r = -.292, p < .05$). These results suggest that higher anxiety levels, both somatic and cognitive, negatively impacted the syntactic complexity of writing for the less familiar task. However, no significant correlations were found between writing anxiety subcomponents and the measures of accuracy and fluency (i.e., $p > .05$), indicating that the effect of anxiety on fluency and accuracy was less evident for the less familiar task.

Table 2. Correlations between writing anxiety subcomponents and the CAF of unfamiliar task

Unfamiliar Task (N = 52)	Somatic Anxiety	Cognitive Anxiety	Avoidance Behavior
Syntactic complexity			
MLT	-.357**	-.291*	-.231
DC/T	-.187	-.292*	.036
CP/C	.016	-.008	.133
CN/C	.100	.032	.071
Accuracy			
EFC/C	-.087	-.031	-.079
Fluency			
TNW	-.065	.109	-.079

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored the differential role of writing anxiety in EFL learners’ writing performance on more and less familiar tasks.

4.1. More familiar task, writing anxiety, and writing performance

In terms of learners’ writing performance on a more familiar task, a negative relationship was found between avoidance behavior and accuracy measure, suggesting that those who showcased more avoidance behavior (i.e., the behavior of evading writing task) tended to produce writings with lower accuracy.

This finding can be understood from both objective and subjective perspectives. Objectively, students’ writing proficiency plays a crucial role. As Shukri (2014) noted, EFL students with lower-intermediate proficiency might allocate more attentional resources to generate ideas in their first language (L1) when writing about more familiar topics. Excessive

reliance on L1 during pre-task planning can lead to negative transfer, which may contribute to avoidance behavior and consequently lower writing accuracy.

Additionally, researchers have pointed out that EFL students often attempt to use advanced vocabulary (Hu, 2022) and complex sentence structure (Kessler, Ma & Solheim, 2022) beyond their proficiency level when addressing familiar topics. This can result in avoidance behavior if they struggle to articulate their ideas accurately. From a subjective perspective, Wern and Rahmat (2021) argued that EFL students may experience stress when writing about familiar topics due to perceived pressure to produce writings with high quality, which can manifest as avoidance behavior. Moreover, according to Qiu and Lo (2017), a false sense of confidence stemming from familiarity with the topic may lead to increased mental effort and avoidance behavior if the cognitive demands become overwhelming, further impacting writing accuracy.

However, no significant relationship was observed between writing anxiety subcomponents and the complexity and fluency measures of the more familiar writing task. According to Jalili and Shahrokhi (2017), L2 writing entails complex cognitive processing, which can induce anxiety due to cognitive constraints. This implies that different levels of task familiarity might impact anxiety differently. Research suggests that more familiar writing tasks can reduce writing anxiety by lowering cognitive load and providing a more secure writing experience (Abdi Tabari et al., 2021), leading to positive emotional states (Qiu & Lo, 2017). Therefore, even students with high anxiety might perform well on more familiar tasks due to the inherent characteristics of these tasks in alleviating anxiety compared to less familiar tasks. Specifically, the more familiar task in this study asked the students to discuss the importance of developing a healthy life-style among college students, which was more closely related to their daily lives than the less familiar task that asked them to share their opinions on public transport systems. As Bui and Huang (2018) claimed, a more familiar task of this type can help students save attentional resources through minimizing the need to retrieve ideas, allowing them to direct these resources towards producing writings with greater syntactic complexity and fluency. This finding is also in line with Skehan's (2013) Limited Attentional Hypothesis, which asserts that cognitive resources for information processing are limited. When a task requires less cognitive effort, the saved resources can be directed to enhance performance in other cognitive processes.

4.2. Less familiar task, writing anxiety, and writing performance

As regards the effect of writing anxiety on the less familiar task, negative relationships were found between somatic anxiety and one measure of complexity and between cognitive anxiety and two measures of complexity. The results suggested that the students with higher levels of somatic (i.e., students experiencing negative feelings such as tension) and cognitive anxiety (i.e., students characterized by negative performance expectations and a predominant focus on task completion strategies when writing) were likely to produce writings with lower syntactic complexity. This finding partially aligned with the research by Liu and Ni (2015), Phung (2017), and Yu and Zhou (2022), which indicated that exposure to less familiar topics elicited negative affective responses, manifested as both somatic and cognitive anxiety in students. Moreover, the finding of the present study was consistent with the finding of

Rahimi and Zhang's (2018) study in that both studies found that, when students did less familiar writing tasks, those who had higher level of anxiety produced writings with lower syntactic complexity.

One explanation was that when confronted with unfamiliar writing topics, students may engage in extensive online planning due to difficulties in generating relevant ideas and activating linguistic resources (Qiu & Lo, 2017). This heightened level of online planning could potentially lead to increased somatic and cognitive anxiety, as the cognitive load associated with excessive planning may overwhelm students, inciting the emergence of anxiety (Pekrun, 2006).

According to Attentional Control Theory (ACT) (Eysenck et al., 2007), anxiety disrupts the ability to suppress irrelevant information and direct attention towards pertinent information, thereby reducing working memory (WM) capacity. This impairment can detrimentally affect performance across cognitive activities, such as writing tasks, highlighting the potential role of anxiety in impairing WM and subsequently impact writing performance. Syntactic operations in writing demand WM resources for the generation of morphosyntax, requiring the temporary retention of information until it is transcribed (Kellogg, 1996; McNamara, Crossley & McCarthy, 2010; Serafini & Sanz, 2016). Consequently, writers at least need to preserve their planned ideas in WM until they are actualized through transcription. In this case, insufficient WM capacity caused by anxiety in doing less familiar task can place students in a disadvantageous position where they find it hard to allocate more attentional resources for morphosyntactic processing, resulting in reduced syntactic complexity in writings.

4.3. Pedagogical implications

Although this paper provides only speculative insights into the relationship between domain-specific anxiety and learners' written performance on two distinct task types, it may nonetheless incite considerable interest among language teachers, teacher trainers, assessment professionals, and textbook developers regarding the strategic use of varied writing tasks. To enhance writing performance, it is recommended that language teachers select tasks that align with the writing objectives and target areas prone to anxiety. Specifically, if accuracy is the primary focus, teachers should consider using more familiar tasks, as writing anxiety negatively affects accuracy more in familiar tasks. On the other hand, for tasks assessing writing complexity, less familiar topics may be prioritized, as anxiety impacts complexity more in these tasks. Assessment professionals are encouraged to design writing tests with more familiar topics to reduce cognitive load and improve performance, particularly in high-stakes assessments. Additionally, English textbook developers should sequence writing tasks in a way that mitigates the anxiety induced by varying levels of topic familiarity.

4.4. Limitations and future research

Four limitations of the present study should be noted. First, this study focused solely on the genre of argumentative writing tasks, leaving other genres (e.g., narratives) unexplored. Future studies should expand to examine the role of anxiety in writing performance of the genres other than argumentative writings. Second, the study assessed writing accuracy from a

general perspective, without differentiating between specific error types (e.g., morphological versus syntactic errors). It might be possible that writing anxiety may influence different types of errors in distinct ways. Third, this study relied solely on quantitative data to explore the relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance in different familiarity levels of writing tasks. Future studies can incorporate qualitative methods to provide a more nuanced view of how writing anxiety affects writing performance across different task familiarity levels. Fourth, this study was conducted within the context of EFL instruction at a Chinese university. As such, generalizing these findings to other instructional contexts should be approached with caution. Future research could replicate the present study to further enrich the literature on the relationship between writing anxiety and writing tasks with differing levels of familiarity.

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6. APPENDIX 1. WRITING TASKS

1. Public transport systems

Directions: Some people think more public money should be spent on roads and motorways than on public transport systems. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

You are allowed 30 minutes to write an essay with at least 130 words but no more than 160 words.

2. The importance of developing a healthy life style among college students

Directions: You are allowed 30 minutes to write an essay on this topic. You should write at least 130 words but no more than 160 words.