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An Investigation into the Factors Contributing to English Writing Anxiety among Undergraduate ESL Students of KUST: A Mixed Method Approach

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Abstract: This research endeavoured to realize the objective of identifying possible factors which cause writing anxiety among undergraduate (BS) students of Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), situated in Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa (KPK), majoring in English. For this interpretive study, students' perceptions were obtained by adopting a mixed-methods approach; a questionnaire was accomplished by 101 sample students, whereas 12 participants were engaged in semi-structured interviews. Through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data, the following main sources of WA were explored: linguistic difficulties, fear of teachers' negative comments, insufficient writing techniques, insufficient writing practice, time pressure, and lack of background knowledge about the concerned topics. In addition, analysis of qualitative data specified some additional causes: fear of peers' negative comments, competition, the nature of the audience, and over-dependency on information technology. The contribution of this study is significant either through theoretical and pedagogical implications or with respect to valuable recommendations for future researchers.

Introduction

The importance of English as a second language in Pakistan can never be overemphasized. Apart from being a queen language of the world and enjoying the status of lingua franca, it is assumed as a ladder to success in this region. As an official language, it is used for multiple purposes in Pakistan (Mehboob, 2002; Rahman, 2003; Mansoor, 2005). Particularly, as it is used as the medium of instruction together with Urdu, students need to acquire a requisite level of expertise in all the skills in this very language, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, writing has its own specific significance; in Pakistan, most of the official communication and educational activities, like

assignments, examinations, applications, etc., are written in English. Though it is imperative for students in Pakistan to attain sufficient command of English writing (Hamid, 2007), the situation is not as favourable as desired. Different researchers have averred that, be it postgraduate or undergraduate level, Pakistani students do not possess aptly strong ESL writing skills (e.g., Mashori and Iqbal, 2007; Khan, 2009).

Second language writing anxiety is a situation-specific phenomenon which depends upon various factors, including context; a negative relationship between the degree of its existence and students' writing performance is

an established reality. According to Hassan (2001), "SLWA is a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing." There are manifold behaviours which may be taken as indicators of SLWA among students: nerviness, obsession and delaying tactics are commonly observed symptoms in this context. Literature has abundant studies to offer which bring out that writing performance in a second language is subject to substantial effects of writing anxiety (for example, Hassan, 2001; Horwitz, 2001; Cheng, 2004; Zhang, 2011).

Problem Statement

As mentioned earlier, it has been inferred by several studies that ESL writing performance is intensely influenced by apprehension. An interesting development was documented by Barwick (1995); he studied behaviours of students suffering from writing anxiety and grouped them into three interesting categories, including "nonstarters, non-completers, and non-exhibitors". In the same line, Cheng (2002) registered a further argument that apart from swaying performance, writing anxiety possesses the force to induce a negative impact even on the attitude of students towards taking up writing assignments. Thus, it is not surprising that even ESL students not only feel apprehensive about writing but also avoid writing (Shang, 2013). This phenomenon is highly alarming for language educators because it is an agreed-upon fact that the ability to write well is normally perceived as the predictor of academic success (Daly and Miller, 1975; Shang, 2013). Nonetheless, without an exploration of factors which cause writing anxiety, remedial measures cannot be devised.

While a lot of research works can be found on SLWA in other countries, this area comparatively caught less attention from Pakistani scholars; only a few recognized studies on the subject are available. In the Pakistani context, the

quantitative study by Younus et al. (2014) to explore the factors responsible for SLWA was followed by Fareed, Khan and Akhtar (2021) and Sloangi, Memon and Lohar (2021), which were purely qualitative and quantitative in nature respectively. Their findings suggested further studies for a deeper understanding of the topic through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Thus, this study opted for a mixed methods approach to explore the factors responsible for writing anxiety among the students of a public sector university based in Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa province.

Research Question

What are the principal factors perceived by ESL students of KUST responsible for writing anxiety?

Literature Review

Foreign or Second Language Learning Anxiety is dealt under a particular type of anxiety that causes non-productive responses in individuals. Marcos-Llinas and Garau (2009, p.94-95) maintain that the language learning process hatches a particular type of anxiety that is distinct from others. MacIntyre and Gardner uphold that this type of anxiety is a complicated phenomenon which dominates all the stages; the initiating mode, the learning mode, and the production mode. They move further by accounting for the debilitating impact of anxiety in language learning, which hinders the acquisition, retention, and production of new language and, thus, generates a variety of problems for language learners (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994, p.85-86).

According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), anxiety casts sufficient effects on both competence and performance in foreign languages. Their model roots itself on three nooks of a triangle, which are: "1. Communication apprehension, 2. Test anxiety, and 3. Fear of negative evaluation" (p.30-31).

The term “writing anxiety” was first introduced by Daly and Miller in 1975. Later, J. A. Daly (1978) defined it in the following words, “A person’s inclination to avoid writing, especially when it is graded.” Likewise, SLWA, according to Hassan (2001), stands for avoiding any general and public situation which invites writing or producing a piece of writing in a second language (p. 3-4). In a study conducted in 1994, Mosca elucidates the phenomenon even more than those who fear less and show mild anxiety is more explicit in expressing themselves in any of the languages in writing (p.13-14).

As put up by Cheng (2002), to track the tentative sources of FLWA, there may be a variety of indicators: social, cognitive, cultural, and context-based. In the range of ESL-related anxieties, he also highlights that there could also be individual sources: belief, motivation, confidence, and self-perception. In continuation, he suggests that numerous language learning-related reasons are also worth noting, i.e. competence in a second language, the requirement of the institution, expectations of parents, processes of formative analysis, patterns of learning, and relatedness of gender (ibid, p. 652-653). According to many other known researchers, FLWA’s sources with respect to language could be weak grammatical knowledge, insufficient writing techniques, and strange peer models (Pajares and Jonson, 1994; Latif, 2007). Moreover, Hyland (2003) identifies insufficient grammar and vocabulary competencies as prominent factors which push learners into apprehension while trying to express something in L2 (p. 33-34). He further underlines the lack of sufficient and reasonable knowledge of the topic to be a considerable source of uneasiness associated with writing.

Zhang (2011) adds up two other sources, which are phobias of examination and negative feedback by the evaluator; he also notes that time restriction creates a certain pressure that directly or indirectly influences even the performance of the high achievers (p.12-13). It is, thus, invariably

calculated that anxiety related to writing could be due to a wide spectrum of factors, as the majority of these factors are context-driven.

In the Pakistani context, Younas et al. (2014) focused on BS (English) students of the University of Gujrat, Mandi Bahauddin Campus, to underline the major causes of writing anxiety. This quantitative study manifested that the major reasons could be perfectionism in work, difficulties in grammatical structure, issues with the choice of topic, and time factors. Fareed, Khan and Akhtar (2021) employed focus-group interviews with ESL students of undergraduate level and teachers in Karachi for their qualitative study. They hinted at a range of novel reasons for SLWA: 1. System of education, 2. Nature of evaluation/critique, 3. The attitude of teachers, 4. Weak culture of reading/writing, and 5. The traditional style of teaching. Sloangi, Memon and Lohar (2021) adopted the questionnaire devised by Rezaei and Jafari (2014), focusing on 200 undergraduate students of ESL based at Mehran University of Engineering & Technology, Jamshoro. The study found out fear of writing tests, lack of topic knowledge, pressure for perfection in written work, and fear of teachers’ negative comments and evaluations as the major causes of writing anxiety.

Research Gap for Present Study

The present study on the concept of WA is like a ground-breaking in the context of Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa. So far as the causes of SLWA are concerned, many researchers are convinced that for a deeper understanding of the issue, more studies should be carried out in this respect by using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Rezaei and Jafari, 2014; Fareed, Khan and Akhtar (2021). Thus, the mixed method design of the present study makes up its rationale by filling the aforementioned gap.

Research Methodology

Keeping in view the objective of this research, the

cross-sectional study design with a mixed methods approach was adopted.

Population and Sampling

This study was designed to be conducted within the scope of Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), so its population encompassed English majors in the BS Programme at the Department of English. Nonetheless, commonalities among socio-cultural and educational contexts may allow the findings of this study to be valid and generalizable for all the universities of Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa at least. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to mention here that various notable research studies on writing anxiety, both in Pakistan and abroad, have already taken this option of hiring participants from a single university (Zhang, [2011](#); Latif, [2015](#); Younas et al., 2014; Sloangi, Memon and Lohar, 2021).

For the questionnaire, the researcher initially planned to pick 100 English majors, including both genders, belonging to an age group of 18 to 22 years. However, to be on the safer side, 110 students were sampled during the quantitative phase; nonetheless, after sorting out anomalies in attempted questionnaires, 101 were finalized for further proceedings. Random sampling technique was preferred to ensure the availability of valid and rich data, which is the foremost condition of research validity and its generalization. In the qualitative phase, for semi-structured interviews, 12 students were selected randomly out of those who had accomplished the questionnaire and were willing and available for the said job.

Methods of Data Collection (Research Instruments)

In the quantitative phase of data collection, the questionnaire known as the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAII) was adopted by this study to identify the factors responsible for SLWA among sample students. This questionnaire was

devised by two Iranian researchers, Maliheh Rezaei and Mohammad Jafari (Rezaei and Jafari, 2014). It was developed on the bases of various factors of L2 writing anxiety proposed by some renowned researchers in earlier research works (e.g. Claypool, 1980; Bloom, 1981; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Cheng, 2002; Horwitz et al., [1986](#); Hyland, 2003 as cited in Rezaei and Jafari, 2014). So far as the reliability of CWAII is concerned, with a Cronbach's Alpha (α) value of 0.80, it is considered highly reliable and has been used in various studies (e.g. Rabadi and Rabadi, [2020](#); Wahyuni et al., 2019). In the Pakistani context, Sloangi, Memon and Lohar ([2021](#)) also utilized this inventory in their study as a data collection tool.

The collection of qualitative data was carried out through comprehensive semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted in Urdu and then transcribed into English. It was consistently endeavoured to curtail all possible hazards to avoid the influence of personal opinions and any kind of subjectivity.

Data Analysis Procedures

In the next phase, both quantitative and qualitative procedures were operated to analyze the obtained data. The findings and results inferred from both types of data were then integrated to obtain a thorough understanding of the topic being studied. In order to find out frequencies and required per cent values, SPSS (2.0-version) was used; data obtained via a questionnaire were treated through this software. On the basis of the aforementioned descriptive statistics, causes of SLWA were identified. To exemplify, frequencies with respect to students' responses to each item of the questionnaire provided the base to confirm the existence of certain reasons behind WA (Rezaei and Jafari, [2014](#); Samad, [2014](#); Sloangi, Memon and Lohar, [2021](#)).

Miles & Huberman ([1994](#)) have recommended the following sequence of procedures for analysis

of interviews: “data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing.” After repeated and fastidious listening to the recorded interviews, the contents were transliterated and meticulously converted from Urdu to English. For the purpose of ensuring credibility through stamped precision and validity, the transcripts were got rechecked by three subject specialists who already possessed research experience. Consequently, a clear understanding was established through thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

To answer the research question, data were obtained from participant students through the questionnaire named Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) and semi-structured interviews. The table given below presents participants’ responses to the questionnaire.

Table

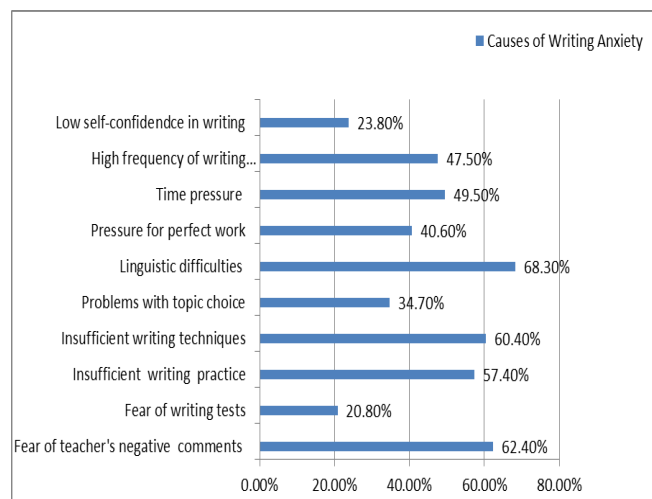
Students’ Views about Sources of Writing Anxiety

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-Certain	Disagree	Strongly Agree
1	When I write English essays: I worry about the negative comments and evaluation of the teacher.	17.8%	44.6%	10.9%	19.8%	6.9%
2	I’m afraid of writing tests.	2.0%	18.8%	14.9%	40.6%	23.8%
3	I lack sufficient English writing practice, which makes me feel anxious.	16.8%	40.6%	14.9%	23.8%	4.0%
4	I don’t have a good command of English writing techniques which makes me feel anxious.	12.9%	47.5%	11.9%	21.8%	5.9%
5	I don’t know what to write on the topic given by the teacher, so I feel upset.	8.9%	25.8%	18.8%	30.7%	15.8%
6	I often encounter some linguistic problems, such as inadequate mastery of vocabulary, sentence structures, grammatical errors, etc.	17.8%	50.5%	16.8%	13.9%	1.0%
7	I’m under pressure to offer perfect work, which makes me upset.	10.9%	29.7%	22.8%	30.7%	5.9%
8	I feel anxious due to the high frequency of writing assignments.	9.9%	37.6%	12.9%	27.7%	11.9%
9	I feel worried when I have to write under time constraints.	9.9%	39.6%	23.8%	22.8%	4.0%
10	I have low confidence in English writing.	5.9%	17.8%	13.9%	43.6%	18.8%

The figure given below depicts the responses, as shown in the table, in graphic form.

Figure

Descriptive Statistics of the CWAI



Fear of Negative Evaluation

The study reveals that most of the students feel apprehension and remain under stress because of their possible vulnerability to negative judgment. However, during interviews, it was revealed that this fear factor provoked by evaluation is not merely confined to teachers' negative comments; rather, it further expands to some other undesirable things like mocking remarks of peers and negative criticism by others.

Fear of Teachers' Negative Comments: As the figure depicts, 62.4% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the Statement-1 of the questionnaire, "I worry about the negative comments and evaluation of the teacher." This finding of the questionnaire was amply supported by qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews. Nayyar, one of the participants, looked gloomy while talking on this theme; he expressed his opinion in the following words:

When you write something, and you are snubbed, you feel dejected. A teacher is like a facilitator; if he starts

discouraging instead of correcting your mistakes, it puts you in a shell.

Fear of Peers' Negative Comments: As mentioned above, it was inferred during interviews that besides teachers' comments, critical or deriding remarks by fellow students, friends or others also cause writing anxiety. While expressing his experiences with writing anxiety, Ashir indicated:

One of the common factors that make me uncomfortable is showing a piece of writing to someone else, like a teacher or friend. In fact, I am afraid that they may judge me on the basis of my writing mistakes.

Fear of Writing Tests

According to quantitative data, 20.8% of students agreed and strongly agreed with Statement-2, which says, "I'm afraid of writing tests." Although the majority of the students couldn't agree with this idea given in the questionnaire, it was supported by qualitative data gathered through interviews where some students declared that they felt anxious in the tests when they had to write English compositions. Ashir, one of the participants, looks at writing tasks during exams as one of the core reasons for anxiety:

Personally, I feel writing is more prone to anxiety, especially while writing an essay or attempting papers.

Insufficient English Writing Practice

While attempting the questionnaire, 57.4 % of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I lack sufficient English writing practice, which makes me feel anxious." It depicts that insufficient writing practice is one of the major causes behind ESL writing anxiety among sample students. While talking about the causes of ESL writing anxiety, Asim argumentatively said:

The foremost factor that is responsible for ESL writing anxiety is that students don't put in sufficient practice for it. Writing is a skill that is the sum total of all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The more you put the effort into your other skills, the better you get at writing. However, writing is a language skill for which students get very limited or no practice.

Insufficient Writing Techniques

Students' responses to the questionnaire depict that Statement-4, "I don't have a good command of English writing techniques which makes me feel anxious." was agreed or strongly agreed upon by 60.4% of participants. This finding shows that the majority of students perceive themselves as less adept in ESL writing techniques and that this demerit ultimately causes them anxiety. During the interview, in a complaining mode, Wasiq described:

There is a lack of teaching tactics to improve writing skills at the school and college levels. I remember when I was in 1st year at my college; our teacher taught us how to convert an essay on "My Best Friend" into some others like "My Best Teacher" or "My Best Personality". So, this was the level of our learning; as a result, our writing techniques couldn't develop up to the required standard. Consequently, I feel anxiety while producing anything in written form.

Problems with Unfamiliar Topics

This study reveals that some students get depressed when they feel a dearth of background knowledge about a given topic. Item-5 of the questionnaire, "I don't know what to write on the topic given by the teacher, so I feel upset." was endorsed by 34.7% of participants who ticked the columns of 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. Although the responses to this item of the questionnaire don't make a huge figure, yet views of some participants in the interviews provide supporting evidence to it. In this context, Aslam expressed his concern:

If I don't have sufficient background knowledge about a topic, I feel more confused.

Linguistic Difficulties

This study finds that among all other causes of ESL writing anxiety, limitation in linguistic competence is the one that is deemed as the most anxiety-provoking entity. As is obvious in the table above, the statement, "I often encounter some linguistic problems such as inadequate mastery of vocabulary, sentence structures, grammatical errors, etc." received the highest positive response of 68.3% of students in the form of agreement or strong agreement. Asfand described, more comprehensively, how linguistic elements arouse his anxiety:

There are many reasons for writing anxiety, such as a shortage of vocabulary and uncertainty about sentence structure. My writing speed gets slow, so I gradually become uneasy. Moreover, spelling mistakes are also a problem for me.

Pressure to Offer Perfect Work

A considerable number of students feel anxiety because they often find themselves under the pressure of accomplishing writing tasks in a perfect manner. Statement-7 was supported by 40.6% of sample students who endorsed their agreement or strong agreement to it. For more evidence, during the conversation, Wasiq spoke his heart like this:

When I come to know that someone is assessing my writing skills, I feel anxious. Secondly, I have a good reputation in terms of speaking in front of my teachers and classmates, and they expect that I am equally good at writing as well. So when I go for writing, I start thinking about others' expectations towards me; as a result, I keep feeling anxious about whether I will be able to meet these expectations or not.

Competition: Competition is an important subtheme that surfaced during interviews. For example, Nayyar highlighted this point by saying:

If you are in competition with someone, you have the fear that he will write better than you.

Nature of Audience: The nature of the audience is another factor which plays a role in raising the demand for perfect work. In this context, Saim expressed:

It depends upon two things, the context and your audience; if you are writing to the Dean, you will try to write more perfectly, which will create anxiety.

High Frequency of Writing Assignments

The excessive workload in the form of frequent assignments has also been recognized as a source of anxiety for the students. As the table exhibits, item-8 attracted 47.5% of participants to respond in the agreement or strong agreement. This quantitative finding also got some validation through qualitative data collected through interviews. While describing the factors that cause writing anxiety, Asfand was of the view:

There are many reasons for writing anxiety, such as shortage of vocabulary...I get embarrassed and confused when I have an excessive workload, like too many assignments. I feel anxious due to the high frequency of writing assignments.

Time Pressure

A large number of students feel anxious while writing in time-bound situations. As we can see, statement-9 in the questionnaire, as demonstrated in the table, "I feel worried when I have to write under time constraints." was welcomed by 49.5% of students through agreement or strong agreement. In this context, Anees opined:

When you are short of time to write something in a specific time span, it creates pressure.

Lack of Confidence

23.8% of participants responded either in agreement or strong agreement to Statement-10, "I have low confidence in English writing."

Although the number of students is not huge who directly admitted to facing a lack of confidence through the questionnaire during interviews, the urge shown by many to gain confidence is an indicator that they are concerned about it. Somehow, consciously or unconsciously, they realize that any source of writing anxiety may ultimately lead to a lack of confidence. Mukarram, a participant interviewee, explicitly articulated:

Shyness (lack of confidence) is another source of anxiety; we have to avoid it because we are unable to write anything worthwhile under its influence.

Excessive Dependency on ICT in Writing

During interviews, an interesting finding appeared that seems to be a common issue in the current era of science and technology. Mostly, in writing tasks, students put themselves in a comfort zone by seeking support from the latest available gadgets and services like computers, mobile phones and internet, etc. This dependency may ultimately push their cognitive abilities into passive mode, and their writing skills fall vulnerable to decline; so, when asked to write independently, they feel highly uncomfortable. Putting forward this innovative idea, Wasiq stated:

I use my cell phones excessively, and I think technology is also causing hindrance in building my writing skills. Most of the time, while typing anything, I get support from autosuggestions. Moreover, there are many soft-wares which help me in writing; as a result, I commit spelling and grammatical mistakes while writing on paper during exams or in day-to-day life. This addiction causes me embarrassment and uneasiness.

To sum up, in order to explore the sources of ESL writing anxiety among ESL undergraduate students of KUST, mixed methods were applied. For the purpose of achieving triangulated results, a questionnaire was administered, followed by semi-structured interviews. All the themes

present in the questionnaire were also supported by responses from interviewees. Among all the found causes of WA, the following were those which emerged as major ones: linguistic difficulties, fear of negative evaluation, insufficient writing skills, insufficient writing practice, time pressure and high frequency of writing assignments. In addition, analysis of qualitative data obtained through interviews indicated some more sources of WA: fear of peers' negative comments, competition, nature of the audience, and over-dependency on information technology.

Research Implications

Theoretical Implications

As writing anxiety is a situation-specific phenomenon and depends upon many factors, including contextual dynamics (Cheng, 2002), this study has offered a valuable contribution by undertaking the first-ever research work on this subject in the context of KPK. Generally, it is an accepted fact that computer and information technology are supportive of language learning processes; however, this study finds that if a student consistently relies upon modern gadgets and services, he/she becomes so much habitual that feels uneasy and has trouble if asked to write on paper.

Pedagogical Implications

This study depicts that the teacher's role is crucial that can either ignite or abate writing anxiety among students. A teacher can play a constructive role through positive comments and feedback. Error correction is a crucial phase of teaching which calls for a rational approach and a sane choice of strategies. To help the purpose, "modelling" may be recommended as a highly productive option; this technique simply focuses on the reiteration of the right versions by the teacher without specifying the students (Young, 1991, as cited in Samad, 2014). Thus, this study raises an important question for teachers about what kind of behaviour they should adopt for

better outcomes. So, it is the only way that a teacher should be the epitome of a positive mindset. Here, this is a blinking reality that if an anxious student gets discouraged, his/her anxiety may get supplemented.

Through this study, students have pronounced that insufficient linguistic competence and lack of writing techniques cause them writing anxiety a great deal. Here, a clear assumption may be developed; if students are generally devoid of prerequisites for ESL writing, it questions the efficacy of teaching methodologies being adopted by English teachers. Instead of continuing with traditional and product-oriented methods, innovative approaches may be adopted to support concept-building and encourage creative minds. Nonetheless, it is much looked-for for those teachers to accept the phenomenon of writing anxiety and its implications. Once they are convinced to step into the realm of realistic approaches, they can apply this study and other research like this to make a huge difference.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, many researchers have proved that writing anxiety has a debilitating effect on the writing performance of learners, so it is mandatory to sort out the sources which give existence to this phenomenon. Various causes of SLWA underlined by findings of this study, as perceived by sample students, may noticeably be teachers-related, students' self-related, socio-cultural setting related, and even system-related. This study has also marked some incongruence in results with previous research along with consistencies. For example, if we consider another research in the Pakistani context carried out by Solangi, Memon and Lohar (2021), which also used the same questionnaire (CWAI) for the purpose, sources chalked out by both studies may be alike, but their gravity is different. For instance, the source termed as 'fear of writing tests' received the highest positive response from the participants of the abovementioned research,

whereas, in the present study, though it has been acknowledged as a potential cause, not as one of the most prominent challenges like 'linguistic difficulties' and 'lack of writing techniques'. Moreover, the present study exhibits some diverse themes, such as 'excessive reliance on modern technology in the writing process', which ultimately may lead to writing anxiety.

Given that research work on ESL writing anxiety is very limited in Pakistan overall, and particularly in Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa, more studies on this subject are needed in different local contexts for a comprehensive clarity of related theoretical assumptions. Further research in a wider perspective may be opted involving multiple universities of KPK. The current study was conducted on the basis of students' perceptions only. It is suggested that another study may be planned involving both students and teachers simultaneously. Moreover, a comparative study may be a very interesting venture to understand various aspects of English writing anxiety among undergraduate English majors and non-majors of KUST or other universities.

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