EXPLORING THE MANIFESTATIONS OF SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING ANXIETY IN MASTER’S LEVEL DISSERTATION WRITING: A MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Past studies have reported negative correlation between second language writing anxiety (henceforth, as SLWA) and writing performance but little information is available on the underlying mechanism. Therefore, the study aimed to improve understanding on how and why SLWA could influence writing performance as the connection appears stronger in L2 settings. Thus, this paper describes how SLWA may manifest in master’s level dissertation writing.

Methodology: In this multiple-case study, four Malaysian postgraduate students were selected as participants using purposeful sampling and the data was obtained through a combination of in-depth interviews, personal document analysis, audio journals, and supporting instruments (i.e., academic reading survey and Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale).

Findings: The thematic data analysis revealed the following themes: 1) students’ perceived sources of SLWA are their present reasonings; 2) L2 dissertation writing has contextual significance on SLWA when students are reviewing existing literature, conceptualizing research, and writing; and 3) performance appraisal, self-perception, and cognitive dissonance link SLWA to writing performance.
Contributions: Hence, this paper promotes greater understanding of SLWA as a way to inform efforts to improve students’ performance and motivation in dissertation writing. The paper also highlights important pedagogical, practical, and methodological implications.

Keywords: Second language writing anxiety, master’s level dissertation writing, ESL context, dissertation writing issues, multiple-case study.


1.0 INTRODUCTION

At the postgraduate level, dissertation writing is a prevalent issue among L2 students (Bitchener, 2018; Jeyaraj, 2020), as they often grapple with constructing grammatically sound sentences, maintain coherence, critically analyzing text, synthesizing information, choosing pertinent references, and cultivating their authorial voice (Akhtar et al., 2019; Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020). For this reason, most higher education institutions mandate that their students undertake English language, academic writing, and research methodology courses to equip them with the essential knowledge and skills required for dissertation writing. Despite these efforts, the trend of delayed completion among Malaysian postgraduate students continues to persist, even in light of increasing enrollment rates (Sidhu et al., 2021). According to the 2013 and 2014 statistics published by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education in 2016, the average rate of postgraduate students graduating on time fell below 50%.

Moreover, dissertation writing can be anxiety-provoking for L2 students as their academic success depends on their writing skills and language proficiency (Bitchener, 2018; Jeyaraj, 2020). In fact, dissertation writing has been associated with the highest level (71.8%) of SLWA (Huwari & Abd Aziz, 2011). Although it is logical to view SLWA as the students’ own recognition that they are neither linguistically proficient nor skilled at writing (Jafari, 2019; Rohmah & Muslim, 2021), students who are competent writers and proficient users of the language have also been reported to struggle with SLWA which had influenced their writing performance (Genç & Yaylı, 2019; Kelly et al., 2015). Since students tend to anticipate negative outcomes when lacking self-beliefs which could cause SLWA and influence effort expenditure (Autman & Kelly, 2017; Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2020), how they perceive their
competence seems to be more important than their actual competence. Hence, postgraduate students may struggle with SLWA in L2 dissertation writing which could influence their writing performance.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Second Language Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance

SLWA, as a relatively stable trait (or tendency to experience SLWA), may recur when students write (Woodrow, 2011). It relates to the negative and anxious feelings that could disrupt parts of the writing process (McLeod, 1987). Cheng (2004) introduces three dimensions of trait SLWA: cognitive anxiety (such as fear of negative evaluation, negative perceptions and expectations); somatic anxiety (or physiological reactions such as pounding heart and excessive sweating); and avoidance behaviours (such as procrastinating and avoiding writing situation).

Accordingly, past studies have reported negative correlation between SLWA and writing performance (Jin & Guo, 2021; Sabti et al., 2019) and students with high levels of trait SLWA tend to have lower scores than students with low levels (Jafari, 2019; Rohmah & Muslim, 2021). Their written outputs have been described as containing disorganized and underdeveloped ideas (Badrasawi et al., 2016) and lacking quality (Sabti et al., 2019) and coherence (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015). In brief, since SLWA can be a consequence and a cause for poor writing performance, it is imperative to improve current understanding on how and why SLWA could influence writing performance as the connection appears stronger in L2 settings (Teimouri et al., 2019).

However, little information is available on the underlying mechanism that connects SLWA to writing performance (Teimouri et al., 2019). Existing studies have identified a variety of individual- and contextual-specific factors that could cause or influence SLWA such as low language proficiency (Rohmah & Muslim, 2021), underdeveloped writing skills (Badrasawi et al., 2016), low self-confidence (Rohmah & Muslim, 2021), insufficient topical knowledge (Solangi et al., 2021), insufficient writing experience (Sabti et al., 2019), fear of negative evaluation (Jafari, 2019), academic writing conventions (Abd Rahim et al., 2016), task requirements (Genç & Yaylı, 2019), time constraints (Sabti et al., 2019) and instructors’ negative feedback (Sabti et al., 2019). But such information appears inadequate to explain the varying effects of SLWA on ESL students and their writing performance.

According to Bono and Judge (2003), core evaluations exert a subconscious influence on individuals' self-appraisals, while more profound and central self-appraisals shape situation-specific evaluations. Considering the individual- and contextual-specific nature of SLWA and
its correlation with self-efficacy (Aytaç-Demircivi, 2020) and self-esteem (Huwari & Abd Aziz, 2011), writing anxiety may arise from overlapping situation-specific appraisal and self-appraisal. Notably, students with elevated SLWA levels have consistently demonstrated diminished self-esteem and reduced self-confidence in their ability to improve writing skills, particularly when faced with negative feedback from supervisors and peers (Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Abd Rahim et al., 2016). Essentially, given the high degree of interrelation among self-esteem, self-efficacy, emotional stability, and locus of control (Bono & Judge, 2003), SLWA can trigger a cascade of debilitating effects. This underscores the pressing need for a comprehensive theoretical framework that can effectively describe the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions of SLWA and elucidate their intricate interplay (Teimouri et al., 2019). Therefore, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

i. What do the postgraduate students identify as perceived sources of their second language writing anxiety in dissertation writing?

ii. How do contextual factors in dissertation writing influence the postgraduate students’ second language writing anxiety?

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

Multiple-case study is viewed as the appropriate research design for several reasons. State SLWA (or actual experience of SLWA) may fluctuate with varying intensity (Jawas, 2019; Jin & Guo, 2021) due to academic, cognitive and social causes throughout the writing process. Therefore, low or moderate levels of trait SLWA could still influence students’ writing performance (Wahyuni et al., 2019). Thus, it is important to address both trait- and state-like qualities of SLWA. Moreover, SLWA can be attributed to a variety of contributing factors (Jafari, 2019; Rohmah & Muslim, 2021) and it may also manifest differently among students (Jawas, 2019). Some may have higher levels of cognitive anxiety (Jin & Guo, 2021) or avoidance behaviours (Solangi et al., 2021). Given these points, the selection of the multiple-case study approach is deemed appropriate due to the individual- and context-specific nature of SLWA. This approach allows for exploration 'within its real-life context,' where 'the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 2003, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 40).
3.1 Participant Selection and Ethical Considerations

A two-stage purposeful sampling procedure was conducted to select the participants, utilizing both an online survey and interviews. Initially, 44 respondents participated in the survey. From this group, nine individuals were identified for preliminary interviews, and four were ultimately selected as the research participants. The selection was based predominantly on the following traits, i.e., SLWA levels, perceived SLWA experience, language proficiency, academic writing experience, and dissertation writing progress. SLWA has been linked with high trait levels, low language proficiency, limited writing experience and poor writing progress. In order to ensure a diverse representation of cases, following Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) approach, a comprehensive selection was carried out by recruiting participants at various stages of dissertation writing, encompassing a wide range of trait SLWA levels and English language proficiency (see Table 1). Additionally, some participants also had varying levels of academic writing experience.

Table 1: Brief summary of participants’ profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Trait SLWA Level</th>
<th>English Language Proficiency</th>
<th>Dissertation Writing Progress</th>
<th>Publication Achievements</th>
<th>Frequency of Writer’s Block</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nayla</td>
<td>73 (High)</td>
<td>Band 4 (MUET)</td>
<td>Working on proposal (in her 10th semester)</td>
<td>2 conference proceedings</td>
<td>“Every time I work on my dissertation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>37 (Low)</td>
<td>Did not take MUET/ IELTS/ TOEFL but is a certified translator</td>
<td>Working on proposal (in his 3rd semester)</td>
<td>2 research articles</td>
<td>“Several times in 1 semester”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>33 (Low)</td>
<td>7.5 (IELTS)</td>
<td>Completed 3 chapters (in her 4th semester)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>“Several times in 1 semester”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Arwaa</td>
<td>32 (Low)</td>
<td>Band 3 (MUET)</td>
<td>Working on proposal (in her 1st semester)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>“No experience”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, the study received its research ethic clearance from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee, Malaysia (UMREC). As such, pseudonyms are used to address
the participants (i.e., Nayla, Adam, Sophia, and Arwaa) in order to protect their privacy, confidentiality, and safety. At the beginning of the study, the participants were briefed on the objectives and the nature of the research as well as their rights as participants, before consenting. Hence, ethical considerations were prioritized for the benefits and protection of the participants as the data provider.

3.2 Instruments
The online survey comprises two sections. The first section gathers demographic data, including students’ dissertation writing progress, publication achievements, experiences of writer’s block, and perceived writing challenges. The second section features Cheng’s (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (hereafter referred to as SLWAI), which assesses participants’ tendency to experience writing anxiety across three categories: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behaviors. With Cronbach’s coefficient achieving a reliability estimate of .91, the SLWAI has been utilized in previous studies (e.g., Jin & Guo, 2021; Lau & Rahmat, 2014).

Similarly, the survey on academic reading experience in dissertation writing incorporates the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (Saito et al., 1999). This supplementary tool was employed to delve deeper into emerging themes identified during the initial data analysis, as participants were noted to experience reading anxiety while reviewing literature. With a reliability level of .86 for the internal consistency coefficient (Saito et al., 1999), this scale has been utilized in previous studies to gauge participants' levels of reading anxiety (e.g., in Mohd Zin & Rafik-Galea, 2010).

3.3 Data Collection
The data collection process spanned 24 weeks and was conducted concurrently with initial data analysis. Within this timeframe, participants underwent seven interview sessions, structured according to an interview protocol designed to elicit reflections on their Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA) and dissertation writing experiences. The interview protocol included items covering various aspects such as participants' perceptions of SLWA triggers, coping mechanisms, and challenges encountered during the writing process. Though participants were permitted to use their mother tongue (Bahasa Melayu), they predominantly spoke in English, with occasional colloquial expressions used to convey their feelings. The interview sessions were informed by a set of carefully crafted questions sourced from previous research on SLWA and qualitative research methodologies (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2019; Aytaç-
Demirçivi, 2020; Genç & Yaylı, 2019; Tahmouresi & Papi, 2021). Recordings of these sessions, including audio journals, were later translated and transcribed by the researcher. This verbal data allowed the researcher to gain insight into participants' perceptions and interactions with their environments, as their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and past experiences are not directly observable (Merriam, 2009).

Moreover, participants documented their present Second Language Writing Anxiety (SLWA) experience in audio journals, as well as their writing experiences when they did not experience SLWA, recognizing that state SLWA may fluctuate throughout their writing journey (Jin & Guo, 2021). They were encouraged to express themselves freely while adhering to guidelines provided, which included prompts to note the time, date, thoughts, emotions, physical reactions, and current context (e.g., location, current activity, and writing progress). Participants recorded their audio journals on their smartphones and submitted them to the researcher via Telegram or WhatsApp, following guidelines for submission outlined by the research team. The length of the audio journals varied, with none exceeding 14 minutes, as per the established guidelines.

Additionally, considering the possibility that participants may behave differently from what they claim or believe to be true, their personal documents were also collected for analysis. These documents include research proposals, literature review matrices, drafts, completed chapters, and dissertations. The inclusion of textual data strengthens the validity of the study, as it is free from the researcher’s influence. In summary, the findings were generated through the use of in-depth interviews, audio journal recordings, and analysis of personal documents.

### 3.4 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

From the operational perspective, the first round of data collection and analysis established the initial propositions to develop the next and more focused round of data collection to explore and refine the propositions (Mackey & Gass, 2016). This cyclical data analysis allows deep exploration of the research topic (Mackey & Gass, 2016). The propositions were formed in a three-stage data analysis process using open, axial and selective coding to identify the emerging categories and relationships (Corbin et al., 2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Then, the collected data underwent three re-coding cycles to check for consistency (Mackey & Gass, 2016), considering the amount of data that had to be analyzed by the researcher. Next, the descriptions of the cases were constructed and patterns in within- and across-case analysis were identified and juxtaposed for abstraction (Stake, 1995) to construct a comprehensive view of SLWA in L2 dissertation writing.
From the conceptual perspective, the conceptual framework based on Hayes’ (1996) Social-Cognitive Model of Writing highlights the interrelationship between the internal environment of the student-writer and the external environment of dissertation writing, reflecting the individual- and the contextual-specific nature of SLWA. It also underlines the connection between the students’ motivation and affect and the cognitive process in writing, reflecting the effects of SLWA on students and their writing performance and vice versa. Therefore, the study explored the participants’ psychological individuality, perceived sources of SLWA and anxiety-salient conditions, as well as examined their written outputs. Thus, the composition and the metadiscoursal profiles of the participants’ written outputs were also constructed based on language use, text organization, authorial voice, referencing and citation, coherence and cohesion, usages of academic and discipline-specific vocabulary, as well as interactive and interactional resources. But in this paper, only the compositional aspect is presented and discussed.

As has been noted, the findings were generated using triangulated data sources and were based on the conceptual framework. Other strategies were also implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings such as ensuring adequate engagement in data collection, providing rich and thick descriptions, conducting member checks and prioritizing maximum variation in participant selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The underlying mechanisms linking SLWA to writing performance are thematically categorised for each case. Each case theme is described and discussed using excerpts from the interviews, audio journals, and analysed documents, as well as data from supporting instruments.

4.1 Perceived Sources of SLWA as Present Reasonings

The participants perceived different sources of SLWA. Nayla and Sophia believed that insufficient academic writing experience caused their writing anxiety (Nayla-I4: 29-31; Sophia-I2: 64). At the same time, Sophia also perceived lacking supervisor’s feedback as a factor, stating that “It makes me feel uneasy – I don’t know what to do.” (Sophia-I4: 251-252). In contrast, Arwaa believed that SLWA emerges when the mind is distracted by personal and work commitments, explaining that for writing, “you need to be in a quiet – a place where you can focus” (Arwaa-I4: 111-113).
Nevertheless, only Nayla and Adam identified time constraints as a factor, even though all of them appear to experience a degree of time anxiety in dissertation writing. Nayla expressed that “the primary constraint that I have is the time itself” (Nayla-I7: 253) and Adam insisted that “It is not having enough time to sit down, read, synthesize and produce an output – that is my anxiety.” (Adam-I7: 154-155). However, both of them did not perceive social interaction as a factor, even though they tend to be overly concerned with others’ impressions of them when they perceive personal evaluation, whether in real or imagined social situations (Coyle & Malecki, 2018). They stated in an interview:

> When people ask me, how’s your progress now? When people raise the topic of let’s write something about this or bring up certain topics, then comes the anxiety – I don’t want to talk to you about that.

(Nayla-I4: 99-101)

> Somebody might say, if I can do it, why can’t you? You know? No one has said that to me but I feel.

(Adam-I1: 340)

In this view, the participants do not appear to be entirely aware of the nuances of their SLWA experience to effectively identify all of the contributing factors.

Moreover, there were instances where Nayla and Adam appear to misinterpret the consequences for actively dealing with their guilt for not making progress in dissertation writing as causing their SLWA. Nayla revealed that she often felt “guilty to do other things. You don’t feel like you deserve to do it because you have not completed your Master’s study yet” (Nayla-I7: 34-35). Similarly, Adam confessed feeling the “guilt, maybe? Not being able to sit down and write. 6 months? 1 year?” (Adam-I4: 71-72). According to Breggin (2014), guilt is an example of negative and self-defeating emotion (besides anxiety and shame) and individuals tend to suppress their guilt feelings by taking on duties, obligations, and burdens. For this reason, they often feel rushed to get things done, never seem to have enough personal time and view their obligations and duties as deserving their undivided attention (Breggin, 2014). Nayla had stated that “I don’t have a lot of time for myself” (Nayla-I7: 31-32) because her other commitments (work and family) “demand like the same amount of attention from me” (Nayla-I1: 98). Likewise, when Adam had the time to work on his dissertation, he ended up driving his family around town: “I feel like I owed them the drive. These are some of the things that cause me anxiety” (Adam-I1: 258-261). When he had to delegate tasks among his
subordinates at work, he “gave them less than what I do. But these things give me work anxiety, more than ever.” (Adam-I2: 354-357). It appears that the participants may misinterpret the consequences for actively dealing with guilt as causing SLWA. Hence, their perceived sources can be viewed as their present reasonings to explain their writing situations; they do not represent a true or objective read of what had caused their SLWA but rather, a reflection of how they should think and act (Proffitt & Baer, 2020).

4.2 The Significance of L2 Dissertation Writing Context on SLWA

To further emphasize, the participants did not relate their SLWA to dissertation writing, even though their engagement with the text written so far, the genre and the writing task seem to influence their SLWA. Notably, they seem to experience a degree of reading anxiety when they review existing literature. Perceiving the necessary amount of reading they have to do to complete their dissertations appears to aggravate their SLWA. As mentioned by Arwaa:

> It comes back to I need to read more. I need to read more...I’m worried that I don’t know anything in my viva so now I need to read more.

(Arwaa-I2: 544)

Insufficient reading and lacking topical knowledge have been identified as factors of SLWA (Solangi et al., 2021) and the writing activity as the post L2 reading task is the main cause of reading anxiety (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015). Although the participants’ levels of trait reading anxiety were low (see Table 2), such results are common when reading anxiety is assessed without taking into account the writing context (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015). Important to realize is that the amount of time they reported they need to finish reading an article, does not reflect the amount of reading they should have been able to accomplish, considering the semesters they had completed (especially for Nayla, Adam and Sophia). Notably, they appear to rely more on secondary sources as there are discrepancies between the evidentials they included in their texts and their reference lists. Given these points, even if they did not experience reading anxiety, their insufficient reading, reading procrastination, or lack of topical knowledge could create subsequent writing issues which could influence their SLWA and thus, their writing performance.
Table 2: Participants’ reading anxiety scores and reading activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Nayla</th>
<th>Adam</th>
<th>Sophia</th>
<th>Arwaa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Trait reading anxiety score (range of</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>theoretical mark from 20 to 100)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Number of completed semesters</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reading time (for 1 article with less than</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>10-30</td>
<td>10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 pages)</td>
<td>hours</td>
<td>min</td>
<td>min</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Number of references</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Number of evidentials</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, the demand on creative thinking and novel research contribution could exacerbate SLWA since individuals tend to be more anxious about being creative (Daker et al., 2019): “I always have this in my mind that if it is a research gap, it has to be novel, right? ...That’s why I said it is a small gap. This is not enough for me.” (Sophia-I1: 83-86). The relationship between anxiety and creative performance is particularly negative for verbal and complex tasks (Byron & Khazanchi, 2011). For this reason, incomplete research conceptualization could contribute to the participants’ SLWA as it may disrupt their writing progress as Arwaa had expressed:

*I have no clear view on how we are going to do it. What kind of questions are we going to use? I don’t have any ideas and I haven’t touched on this yet.*  

(Arwaa-I4: 193-195)

Evidently, the participants’ written output appears to exhibit poor thesis development. As highlighted in Excerpt 1, although Adam aimed to demonstrate how tabletop role-playing games can be used as a teaching approach to build local students’ confidence to speak in English, the research focus was later changed to cover other language skills that was never discussed as part of the research background. Similarly, although Sophia intended to explore the effectiveness of teaching formulaic sequence in report writing, her reasonings were based on its effects on oral and not writing skills (see Excerpt 2). These writing decisions seem to reflect either issues or incomplete research conceptualization as they only deviate the focus of their research. Thus, the process of conceptualizing research could influence SLWA due to the emphasis on creative thinking and novel research contribution in dissertation writing.
Ex. Besides language improvement, we should also be able to study how students’ other skills besides speaking skills improve upon playing RPGs.

(Taken from Adam’s Text)

Ex. This may indicate that the number of presentations of formulaic sequences on teaching and learning have strong effects for oral ability to attract students’ attention to such formulaic sequences.

(Taken from Sophia’s Text)

Furthermore, the unresolved reading and writing issues seem to form a difficulty network (Phakiti & Li, 2011) that the participants struggled to finish their dissertations: “to start and to keep on writing on the topic, and to make it relevant, so to an extent, it is hard, for me” (Sophia-I6: 178-179). In fact, they experienced writer’s block when they engaged with the text written so far as reported by Adam:

*I want to write this here and I know exactly what I want to write, it’s going to be at least 4 to 5 pages. Then, suddenly, after I wrote 2 paragraphs, I had a block.*

(Adam-I6: 209)

Since fluency is a function of how individuals perceive their own thoughts, the participants could mistake the lack of ease in writing as a reflection of their writing ability (Proffitt & Baer, 2020) which could influence their SLWA. In other words, the act of engaging with the genre, the writing task and the text written so far could trigger intense SLWA experience (Genç & Yaylı, 2019) which could explain why state SLWA fluctuates with varying intensity (Fajri & Hikmah, 2018) and why apprehensive students are also among the competent writers and the proficient users of English (Genç & Yaylı, 2019; Rohmah & Muslim, 2021).

To demonstrate, Sophia’s and Arwaa’s written outputs lack conciseness as they include repetitive clauses (Excerpt 3) in what seem like an attempt to increase the number of words in their dissertations. Although the details of their research methods were discussed in different subsections of the research methodology chapter, Sophia and Arwaa still included the same information in the chapter introduction. Comparatively, Nayla’s and Adam’s written outputs lack organization as they reported the findings from other sources and organized them into subsequent paragraphs to form the content of their literature review chapter (see Excerpt 4). Although they put the sources into their own words, it is still not the synthesis of the original and when combined, do not form a synthesized review. Their short paragraphs are not
annotated bibliographies either since they seldom include concise descriptions and evaluations of the sources.

Ex. Subsection 3.0: Paragraph 2
3 Applicants who do not meet the English proficiency requirements of their chosen programme at that university, can improve their English by attending university intensive English programme prepared by the university and must pass certain level of English proficiency before starting their degree programmes in the university.

Subsection 4.0: Paragraph 1
Applicants who do not meet the English proficiency requirements of their chosen programme can improve their English via intensive English course and must pass certain level of English proficiency before starting their degree programmes in the university.

(Taken from Arwaa’s Text)

Ex. Subsection 1.4: Paragraph 3
4 Second, Wu (2011) in his study on the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Taiwan highlighted that the university students…

Subsection 1.4: Paragraph 4
Meanwhile, in China, Hu (2002) explained that the dominant teaching method was based on audiolingual and grammar-translation approaches in English classes there…

(Taken from Nayla’s Text)

As can be seen, the participants’ engagement with their texts could aggravate their SLWA because the unresolved reading and writing issues may make it more challenging for them to continue writing. The perceived struggles and lack of writing progress could influence their perceptions towards own writing abilities to complete their dissertations successfully. In a word, their engagement with the text written so far, the genre and the writing task could influence their SLWA when they review existing literature, conceptualize research and write.

Furthermore, since dissertation writing is a social affair as much as it is cognitive, collaborating with supervisor could influence the participants’ SLWA. Despite receiving academic and emotional support from their supervisors, predicting potential conflicts within the relationship seems to exacerbate Nayla’s, Adam’s and Arwaa’s SLWA. For example, Nayla expressed feeling guilty and anxious for not consulting her supervisor for a long time that she was worried “if she (her supervisor) might give up on me” (Nayla-AJ2: 15-16), whereas Adam felt guilty for not fully utilizing the materials his supervisor had sent him:
She gives me links and everything. I can't attend to the links for a long time and again, that makes me feel like, urgh, I am maybe disappointing her...

(Adam-I3: 349-351)

He became fearful of the possibility that his supervisor might think that he is wasting her time (Adam-I4: 189-190). In this case, the participants tend to view their supervisors as self-guides (a standard for self or a specific image of how one ought to be) and feel pressured to meet their expectations so when Adam’s supervisor pointed out that “this part is not good enough,” he felt that he “should be better than this” (Adam-I4: 45-46). Similarly, Nayla felt “uncertain” and would question her writing decisions and worry “whether I will able to meet my supervisor’s expectations” (Nayla-I4: 23). Based on the self-discrepancy theory, we are motivated to reach a state where our self-concept matches our self-guides and the discrepancy between the two can be most destructive (Higgins, 1987). This may explain why interaction with supervisor could provoke self-reflection and their negative comments could cause intense SLWA (Jafari, 2019; Solangi et al., 2021). Their feedback carries a strong force because the participants tend to personalize or extend the meaning of their comments to themselves. For this reason, collaborating with supervisor could influence their SLWA.

In contrast, not receiving the expected academic support from her supervisor aggravates Sophia’s SLWA (Sophia-I4: 219-221), especially when she learned that her peers have received a lot of instructions from their supervisors:

I will get more anxious when I found out that my friends’ supervisors are very attentive. When my friends reported that they need to do this and that? There were always corrections to be made…whereas I don’t have that.

(Sophia-I4: 303-306)

In effect, she became suspicious of her supervisor that she even deleted some paragraphs in her draft before submitting “to check whether or not, she read it” (Sophia-I4: 206-209). To explain, Sophia wanted her supervisor’s feedback to learn how to improve her writing: “When I gave her my work, I would want to see feedback – is there any way that I can better my proposal?” (Sophia-I2: 125-127). In this view, since she perceived herself as having insufficient academic writing experience, she may view her supervisor as a potential threat to her writing goals and this may have caused her SLWA since she believed that she did not receive the academic support she needed from her supervisor.
To summarize, L2 dissertation writing can be anxiety-provoking for postgraduate students. First, the writing task demands a high degree of linguistic and academic writing skills as well as critical and creative thinking skills. Under such situations, the students may feel pressured to perform and develop preoccupation on performance which could contribute to their SLWA (Fajri & Hikmah, 2018; Rohmah & Muslim, 2021), especially when they struggle to make progress. Second, engagement with the text written so far, the genre and the writing task may present anxiety-salient conditions due to unresolved reading and writing issues so the students may experience intense SLWA when they review existing literature, conceptualize research, write and collaborate with supervisor. In other words, L2 dissertation writing has contextual significance since the constructed meanings behind the students’ writing experiences appear to determine their SLWA.

4.3 Performance Appraisal, Self-Perception and Cognitive Dissonance Link SLWA to Writing Performance

Important to realize, the participants’ perceived sources of SLWA are their present reasonings to explain their writing situations and L2 dissertation writing has contextual significance because the constructed meanings behind their writing experiences appear to determine their SLWA. This is because the participants’ performance appraisal, self-perception and cognitive dissonance appear to form the underlying mechanisms that link their SLWA to their writing performance. To explain, the participants appraised their writing performance constantly by monitoring and reflecting on their progress. But Nayla, Adam and Sophia also predicted the outcomes and evaluated themselves in the process.

*If I were to just do it, despite knowing that I don’t know, it won’t produce good writing. Even when I do know, I have so many problems!*  
(Sophia-I1: 286-287)

*I still feel lacking on my part because I feel I need to read a lot on the topic – to equip myself first before I get to give my own opinion about something.*  
(Nayla-I1: 28)

Since self-appraisal has influence over situation-specific appraisal (Bono & Judge, 2003), how they perceive their writing competence could be more important than their actual competence. Low writing self-efficacy and impaired self-beliefs have been reported to influence SLWA and effort expenditure (Autman & Kelly, 2017; Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2020).
In this case, the participants perceived themselves negatively and while Nayla and Adam fixated on their image of ought L2 self (ideas on who they think they should become), Sophia and Arwaa focused on both their image of ought L2 self and ideal L2 self (the attributes that they or others believe they possess). Since they tend to evaluate themselves in performance appraisals, they may perceive a gap between their actual self and who they think they should be or want to be. For instance, Nayla believed that she should have a Master’s degree because she works at a university so she “cannot end up with just a bachelor’s degree” (Nayla-I2: 350-352), whereas Adam insisted that he “should be able to do this (dissertation writing)! If it’s not 100%, at least 90% level – not at 40% level or 30% level!” (Adam-I1: 242-243). Therefore, they may experience intense state SLWA because the desire to reduce the gap between one’s actual and ought L2 self triggers agitation-related emotions such as anxiety (Papi et al., 2019; Saito et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the desire to reduce the gap between one’s actual and ideal L2 self leads to elation-related emotions (Papi et al., 2019; Saito et al., 2018). In fact, students who are motivated by their ideal L2 self tend to feel less anxious, more motivated and receive better grades than the students who are motivated by their ought L2 self (Tahmouresi & Papi, 2021). Notably, Sophia expressed her determination to complete her writing: “Because I really wanted to finish it. I had fear and I was feeling some dread but not too much.” (Sophia-AJ2: 13). She believed she had “more room” for personal development to “not just stay stagnant” and “stop as a language instructor” (Sophia-I1: 295; I2: 9-12), emphasizing that she had “always wanted to have a Master’s degree” and planned to pursue her doctoral study in the near future (Sophia-I1: 240). This could explain why Sophia and Arwaa had lower levels of trait SLWA and experienced less writer’s block when compared to Nayla. SLWA is a prevalent factor of writer’s block (Dela-Rosa et al., 2018). In essence, the participants’ self-perceptions could influence their SLWA as they tend to evaluate themselves in performance appraisals.

Moreover, if the participants perceived a discrepancy between what they believe they can accomplish and the actual outcome, they may experience cognitive dissonance. This psychological discomfort resulting from conflicting thoughts and feelings (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019) may motivate them to alter their beliefs to resolve the mental conflicts. For example, Adam initially acknowledged his procrastination, demonstrating awareness of his avoidance behaviours: “I know I should write this but I’m not going to write this now because if I do, I will have to write it again and that’s what stops me.” (Adam-I1: 16-19). This statement reflects his writing progress as he had submitted only one audio journal during his stint as a participant. But he later stated that:
It’s very rare that I can just sit down and write. It might also have something to do with how I draw. Artists, before they actually do their work, they would have a warm-up sketch.

(Adam-I5: 72-73)

In like manner, Arwaa initially expressed her struggles to produce good enough text for her supervisors, exhibiting preoccupation on performance: “The challenge now is me, to say that it is enough for you to send to your supervisors because when I read it, I still find things to improve. I keep on improving, improving on it.” (Arwaa-I1: 231-232). But in another interview, she reduced the importance of writing a good dissertation:

Master study is just about completing the requirements. There’s a form that you have to do, publishing papers – it’s not so much about thesis than you have to complete the requirements.

(Arwaa-I2: 502-505)

According to Festinger’s (1957, as cited in Schacter, 2001) Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, there is an interplay between cognition, motivation and emotion and individuals are motivated to reduce the discrepancies between their thoughts and feelings. But altering beliefs may lead the participants to misattribute the cause of their SLWA and poor performance which could cause further anxiety as it fails to sufficiently explain the state of their cognitive dissonance (LeDoux, 2015).

In brief, SLWA is a complex affective phenomenon that is both individual- and contextual-specific. It is linked to writing performance because of the constructed meanings individuals form based on their performance appraisal, self-perception and cognitive dissonance. For this reason, the connection appears stronger in L2 settings because their performance appraisals tend to overlap with their self-appraisals which in turn, could create self-discrepancy and cognitive dissonance that could add further anxiety.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, performance appraisal, self-perception and cognitive dissonance are the three components which form the underlying mechanism that links students’ SLWA to writing performance. Since the constructed meanings behind their writing experiences determine their SLWA, dissertation writing has contextual significance. Engagement with the text written so far, the genre and the writing task could influence their SLWA due to unresolved writing issues when they review existing literature, conceptualize research and write. As such, their perceived
sources of SLWA can be viewed as their present reasonings to explain their SLWA experience and writing situations. In other words, students may not be omniscient to the causes of their SLWA and poor writing performance due to misattribution or misperception when they respond to cognitive dissonance.

The findings suggest several research implications. From the pedagogical standpoint, the academic writing course can be designed to include academic reading, research methodology, extensive writing, engagement with text and social engagement with readers. This is done to facilitate the students’ transfer of skills between interrelated areas and to enable them to anticipate and prepare for potential writing challenges. Additionally, dissertation writing is already designed to encourage optimal experience as it requires setting up goals, learning skills, providing control over research, and receiving feedback. Hence, instructors may help the students to break down the ultimate goal of dissertation writing into several obtainable goals that match the students’ current skills. Not only will they gain satisfaction from the goals they accomplished, they will be able to learn how to apply the knowledge necessary to complete their dissertation successfully.

Furthermore, it is important that the curriculum highlights the cognitive processes in dissertation writing that could influence the students’ motivation and affect and vice versa. Students need to be aware of the emotional and intellectual cues that inform them when they are ready to write, to stop, to continue or to do other things in between. Since misattribution and cognitive dissonance due to SLWA, could distort the students’ reasonings, instructors may redirect their focus to dissertation writing and encourage them to reappraise the sources of their SLWA to writing challenges that can be resolved. For this reason, it is critical that instructors and supervisors encourage students’ research ownership development by allowing freedom to explore ideas, practising positive criticism, promoting perception of mistakes as part of the learning process, and encouraging positive self-efficacy beliefs.

Although it is a widely accepted aphorism that dissertation writing tests the students’ perseverance above all else, the affective aspect of dissertation writing is often disregarded. In this view, the students may gain benefits if the higher education institutions would organize a self-improvement programme to engage struggling students in active metacognitions about dissertation writing that will enable them to talk about problems and strategies to effectively monitor their motivation and writing progress. In similar fashion, institutions may consider conducting a vision enhancement programme as L2 students’ motivation can be improved by boosting their vision through training their abilities to imagine and visualize future self-guides.
(Safdari, 2021). Such external interventions could help students maintain their motivation to complete their dissertations.

As for future research implications, data triangulation is a must because the participants may alter their beliefs when they respond to cognitive dissonance so it is important to corroborate their stories with different data sources. Nonetheless, this study has its limitations. Since only four participants were involved in the study, more readers can apply the findings to their contexts if more participants had been recruited (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Likewise, giving voices to the participants’ social agents (e.g., supervisors, and peers) might present more compelling cases as their voices could provide different perspectives on the participants’ SLWA and dissertation writing journey. As such, future researchers may consider addressing these limitations and exploring related topics such as postgraduate students’ emotion regulation strategies and self-regulatory skills as well as the affective processes in L2 dissertation writing.

REFERENCES


