Writing Apprehension Among English as a Foreign Language Postgraduate Students

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Abstract
Although many studies have investigated writing apprehension among students of different education levels during the last decades, several of its aspects have remained uninvestigated in different contexts. One of these contexts is North Cyprus. For this reason, this study aimed to measure the level of writing apprehension experienced by English as a foreign language (EFL) postgraduate students at this particular context when writing in English. The study also tried to explain whether variables such as age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status were correlated with writing apprehension. To achieve these aims, the researchers adopted Daly and Miller’s questionnaire called Writing Apprehension Test. A total of 37 EFL postgraduate students belonging to different ages, genders, academic levels, and socioeconomic statuses took part in the study. The collected data were analyzed using the SPSS program to reveal whether there was a significant correlation between the aforementioned variables. Mean scores, standard deviations, Pearson correlation, frequencies, and percentages were employed to reveal the results. The study demonstrated that, though almost nearly half of the students were highly apprehensive, the majority of them experienced a moderate level of apprehension when writing in English and the relationship between writing apprehension levels and the variables was not statistically significant, that is, the results showed that age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status did not have any influence on writing apprehension.

Keywords
writing apprehension, postgraduate students, age, gender, academic level, socioeconomic status, English as a foreign language

Introduction
Writing is a productive skill that is necessary for academic success and career development for both native and foreign speakers of a language (Aljafen, 2013; Ismail et al., 2010; Kostić-Bobanović, 2016). Learners’ strength in writing skills leads to success in academic life. Conversely, absence of good writing skills leads to failure (Hosking, 2014).

To write effectively in a second/foreign language (L2), students need to have knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. They should have information about the topic, the skill of organizing ideas and much more. Linguistic deficiency or lack of any one of the aforementioned factors can cause learners to perform writing tasks poorly and write inefficiently. Yet, another set of factors that can limit efficiency in students’ writing include the affective factors. Relatedly, Salem (2007) believes that the problems faced by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners when encountering writing and not being able to write effectively are due to the limited number of vocabulary, cultural knowledge, idioms, and writing apprehension. On his part, Zhang (2001) has found that students experience a substantial amount of apprehension when they carry out activities that require productive skills such as writing and speaking. Research has also found that there is a significant relationship between apprehension and low-quality writing scripts. Daly (1978) has demonstrated that apprehensive writers tend to have short and low-quality papers containing less developed language and sentence structure. According to Reeves (1997), learners who are apprehensive have more difficulties with producing new ideas in writing and score lower in terms of syntactic development. Apart from apprehension, other affective factors such as students’ beliefs about their writing skills, general self-confidence (Pajares & Johnson, 1994), and lack of achievement motivation and self-efficacy (Sabati et al., 2019) can affect writing performance. Thus, it is

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apparent that writing apprehension is a serious problem that needs to be diagnosed. Its determining factors need to be explained and strategies of reducing it need to be devised accordingly.

Writing apprehension, which is the concern of this study, in its often-cited definition, is conceptualized by Daly (1978) as “a situation and subject-specific individual difference” concerned with “a person’s general tendencies to approach or avoid situations perceived to demand writing accompanied by some amount of evaluation” (p. 10), or simply it is “the tendency of people to approach or avoid writing” (Faigley et al., 1981, p. 16). To put it another way, writing apprehension is someone’s experience of feelings of anxiety, discomfort, and nervousness during writing and these feelings lead to writing being disrupted (McLeod, 1987). Similarly, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) used apprehension basically to refer to someone’s negative and anxious feelings that distort some part of the writing process, that is, to describe those writers who know how to perform tasks, but who face problems with these tasks due to apprehension.

A high number of studies have investigated writing apprehension among undergraduate students in various contexts reporting that the majority of their participants experienced a moderate or a high level of writing apprehension (Huwari & Abd Aziz, 2011; Kim, 2006; Kostić-Bobanović, 2016; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). This assumes that most of the difficulties encountered by students in writing seem to be associated with the affective states of writers such as stress, apprehension, and lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, among others. This assumption is based on the idea that most students are taught the cognitive skills. However, as Krashen (1982) puts forth, what they are taught is filtered through the affective domains and then causes writers to be deficient of the necessary skills. Therefore, tackling writing apprehension, particularly among postgraduate students, who might possess the necessary writing skills but not perform well, is very well justified. More importantly, writing apprehension needs to be investigated because a high level of apprehension in writing might have detrimental effects on attitudes toward writing (Ismail et al., 2010), writing competence, performance, and outcome (Abbas, 2016; Daly, 1978; Tola & Sree, 2016). The severity of writing apprehension can prevent students from becoming competent writers. As such, it is recommended by many prior studies (Cocuk et al., 2016) that writing anxiety be examined in different contexts because further understanding of the aspects of writing apprehension in various contexts and with various education levels can open more gates for devising strategies of reducing apprehension and treating it successfully by foreign teachers of English. Writing apprehension has not been investigated in the Turkish Cypriot context, and despite the many studies that have been carried out in this field (Alluhaybi, 2014; Alnuafaie & Grenfell, 2013; Daly, 1978; Friesen, 1990; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Tola & Sree, 2016), few of them (Huwari & Abd Aziz, 2011; Onwueguzie & Collins, 2001; Pimsarn, 2013) have examined it among postgraduate students. Above all, most studies have called for more research in this field in the L2 context (Alluhaybi, 2014; Alnuafaie & Grenfell, 2013; Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015; Huwari & Abd Aziz, 2011; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Tackling writing apprehension in the context of this study and with postgraduate students seems to be essential as writing is essential in postgraduate education and these students write their theses after the completion of their core courses that is a requirement of postgraduate education completion. Therefore, one of the ambitious aims of the study is identifying the apprehension of postgraduate students at a private university in North Cyprus. This study will be the initiative for carrying out more studies of dealing with the strategies of reducing writing apprehension among them.

Another concern of this study is the effect of learner characteristics or demographic variables on the experience of apprehension in writing. By learner characteristics, the researchers dwell upon the impact of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and academic level on learners’ apprehension. Research on learner differences in apprehension has produced scattered and inconclusive results and few studies have delved into the field. As regards to age, its impact on writing apprehension is assumed to be essential with the participants of this study because, unlike undergraduate students who are often more homogeneous in age, postgraduate students’ ages vary, belonging to various age groups. Previous research has mostly dealt with undergraduate students and failed to explore the impact of age on writing apprehension due to the little variation that exists in their age. Therefore, this study is undertaken to deal with the issue in question. The second learner difference variable that is assumed to account for apprehension involves gender. Gender in this study concerns social, psychological, or cultural distinctions and are related to maleness or femaleness, and it should be distinguished from the more known and biological term “sex” that refers to physical or physiological distinctions between males and females (Diamond, as cited in Omar, 2020). Prior studies have produced conflicting results leaving the impact of gender differences on writing apprehension unanswered. Again, very few studies have taken the impact of socioeconomic status of students into account. Students’ socioeconomic status, according to McAllister (2014), refers to social standing or the class of an individual; however, it is measured solely on the basis of family income in this study whose variance includes disparities in the distribution of income and wealth. Finally, another learner difference variable includes students’ academic level that, in this study, is defined as students being either master or doctoral students. Again, the literature is not consistent as to whether students’ progress toward a higher academic level produces less or more apprehension.

To be able to reach the aforementioned aims, the following research questions are posed:
Research Question 1: To what extent do EFL postgraduate students experience apprehension when writing in English?

Research Question 2: Does students’ age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status account for writing apprehension?

Literature Review

Writing apprehension is referred to in the literature as composition anxiety, writing anxiety, and writing block (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Writing apprehension is not pervasive, that is, it is not present in every aspect of someone’s writing life (Kostić-Bobanović, 2016). For instance, someone might not be apprehensive while writing a report on the sociology of gender but delete and start over several times when writing a paper on a novel. This is supported in the literature by Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011) who showed that the writing situation plays an essential role in writing apprehension, with students experiencing more apprehension when writing a dissertation than writing an essay. In addition, writing apprehension is not something innate, that is, people become apprehensive through negative experiences with writing (Hassan, 2001) and they are not apprehensive when they are born. In other words, there are situational demands rather than features inherent in a student that cause writing anxiety, and that anxiety rises when students cannot develop realistic expectations for their writing (Larson, 1985). Writing apprehension is both a learned condition that results from repeated negative writing experiences and a particular response to a certain stimulus, for example, the writing assignment (Daly & Miller, 1975b). Thus, writer’s block, writing apprehension, and writing difficulties in general are internal conditions, but they might be externally imposed impediments at some point, such as prohibitions that are associated with race, sex, and class that become internalized (Leader, 1991).

Because writing is a product-based skill, it causes more anxiety than the other skills in an L2. It needs students to use their own thinking and ideas; therefore, it is more stressful for them (Tsui, 1996). It is seen that all English proficiency levels face difficulties when writing in an L2 and suffer from various kinds of problems such as writing apprehension. Based on Clark (1985), even the teacher of the writing course feels some sort of apprehension before entering a writing class, and both undergraduate and graduate students experience writing apprehension when they are asked to write their graduate research or their theses respectively (as cited in Friesen, 1990, p. 20).

Students who have a high level of anxiety do not like to enroll in writing courses and do not attend classes regularly (Cheng, 2002). Building on the work of Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2001), those graduate students who experience a high level of apprehension produce papers and proposals that are less developed than those who experience a low level of apprehension. Daly and Miller (1975b) explain that high writing apprehension levels can produce problems for students. When enrolled in compulsory freshman courses, these students often skip classes, turn in papers late or not at all, and they sit at the back of the class.

Writing apprehension is significantly and inversely associated with writing competence (Daly & Miller, 1975a; Friesen, 1990), writing performance (Sabati et al., 2019), and writing achievement (Kim, 2006). Based on the studies reviewed above, most report a high or a moderate level of apprehension among undergraduate and postgraduate students in different contexts and that apprehension has detrimental impacts on a number of writing variables. However, of particular interest and relevant to this study are the level of writing apprehension and the impact of the demographic variables such as age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status on students’ writing apprehension level. At the outset, the literature has revealed that writing apprehension is a common phenomenon not only among foreign writers of English (Altukruni, 2019; Cheng, 2004; Hassan, 2001; Kim, 2006; Latif, 2012; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014), rather among native writers, particularly undergraduate students (Britt, 2011; Daly & Miller, 1975b; McAllister, 2014) as well as postgraduate students who experienced a high level of writing apprehension in Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011) and Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999). Learners vary in their writing apprehension. Some experience a high level of apprehension, whereas others, a low level. High levels of writing apprehension result from a number of different factors, such as fear of teacher’s negative feedback, comments, and evaluation (Kim, 2006; Lin & Ho, 2009; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014), lack of self-confidence (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014), dearth of linguistic knowledge or English structure (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014), inadequate knowledge about academic writing (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015; Daly, 1978), negative attitudes toward writing, negative writing experience in the past (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015), time restriction, the writing task or the subject (Lin & Ho, 2009), and learners’ negative perceptions of themselves (Daly, 1978).

The studies reviewed report contradicting findings regarding the role of the demographic variables in writing apprehension. With respect to age, Marshall and Varnon (2009) noted no significant differences in writing apprehension scores among undergraduate seniors of accounting majors who were native writers of English in the accounting information system course. In the same way, Rosen and Maguire (1990) concluded in a meta-analysis of 81 research reports regarding computer phobia that computer anxiety was not significantly associated with age. This is supported in the literature by Simons et al. (1995). Inconsistently, Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011) revealed that age could account for writing apprehension of Jordanian postgraduate students, with younger students experiencing more apprehension in writing owing to the dearth of experience. Although, older people are not necessarily to have more experience and knowledge in
our opinion as this depends to a large extent on how much one devotes his time to reading and writing. McAllister (2014) noted the same result in his study regarding the role of age in apprehension with Black undergraduate native writers of English. He demonstrated that students who were between the ages of 18 and 21 years experienced a high amount of writing apprehension, whereas those who are aged 22 years and older experienced a low level, that is, younger students experienced more apprehension. When the role of age is considered in writing apprehension, no conclusions can be drawn as very few studies have taken age group differences into account. Therefore, although Britt (2011) stated that age proves a strong determinant in accounting for writing apprehension, he believed that more research is needed in this regard.

As for gender, a host of studies featured gender differences in the accounts of writing apprehension. Some studies showed that gender could predict writing apprehension, with female students having comparatively lower levels of apprehension than their male equivalents (Daly & Miller, 1975c; Elias, 1999; McAllister, 2014; Shang, 2013; Simons et al., 1995; Zorbaz, 2010) because they receive more positive teacher feedback to their writing than do males (Daly, 1985; Daly & Miller, 1975c; Zorbaz, 2010). Daly and Miller (1975c) further stated that this finding fitted with prior research that hinted males were generally less successful than females in elementary and secondary school writing endeavors and that there was a particular bias for females in those grades on the teachers’ part. Consequently, they manipulated the sex of the student being evaluated. The expectation was that tutors would respond based on this stereotype; they regard the low anxious female as the most positive, then the high anxious female and then low anxious male as the least positive. Hunzer (1994) confirmed that “gender stereotypes permeate and can subsequently affect the outcome of the tutorial situation” (p. 13). For example, Meier and Miller (1984) found that women were generally better writers than men, and Whites were better writers and had higher efficacy than Blacks. These gender or racial stereotypes might affect students’ self-efficacy and lower their level of writing apprehension. Daly and Miller (1975c) further suggested that positive reinforcement for writing is crucial to the level of writing apprehension. For this reason, it was considered reasonable that as males have generally been rated poorer than females in writing assignments over the years, that is, not positively reinforced, they would have higher levels of writing anxiety. Spielberger (1983) examined anxiety in different conditions and believed that the reason for why women were less apprehensive had to do with females being more emotionally stable than males in their reactions to highly stressful or relaxing circumstances. Jebreil et al. (2015) agreed with the above accounts by demonstrating that gender influenced writing apprehension among 45 Iranian EFL students, with males experiencing a relatively greater amount of anxiety. The level of cognitive anxiety was higher in males. However, the level of somatic anxiety and avoidance behavior did not vary according to gender.

Incongruously, a second line of research demonstrated that female writers were more apprehensive than male writers. In this connection, Cheng (2002) revealed significant effects for gender, with females suffering statistically significantly higher levels of English writing anxiety. This result is supported by Abdul-Fattah (1995), Cocuk et al. (2016), Larson (1985), Masny and Foxall (1992), Rodriguez et al. (2009), and Thompson (1981). This high level of anxiety experienced by female students was affected by factors such as fear of committing errors, female students’ hypersensitivity to negative evaluation and overcorrection, and their inability in maintaining a balance between their own expectations and their teachers’ expectations for their writing (Larson, 1985). Kim (2006) also displayed that Korean EFL female students were more apprehensive than their male counterparts, with female students self-evaluating their writing capability in English more negatively. They felt more apprehensive regarding the evaluation of their writing and they less enjoyed writing in English than males. Xu (1993) attributed the lower level of writing apprehension by men compared with women to the dominant role men traditionally play in the Chinese society, which constitutes their higher self-esteem than women. Based on the literature reviewed by Reeves (1997), female students underwent longer and more distressing writing blocks due to the loss of a substantial amount of self-confidence at the onset of puberty which might continue throughout females’ lives. Another reason for more apprehension experienced by females, based on Reeves (1997), includes the appropriation of voice, with female students taking a passive approach in writing, whereas the male students taking an active and authoritative approach in which the male was the center of all actions in writing. Reeves (1997) further stated that writing apprehension had strongly to do with growing up poor, rural, female, and the plantation of the seeds of apprehension from the start of elementary education by the teacher. Although Abu Shawish and Abdelraheem (2010) detected no significant correlations of gender to the overall writing apprehension level and causes of writing apprehension among Palestinian undergraduate students, they found that gender could predict some discrete causes and remedies of writing apprehension. They found that gender differences were shown in feedback as a cause of apprehension with females experiencing more apprehension because females in the Palestinian culture view their significance in others’ attitudes toward them and they are hypersensitive to receiving negative feedback. Opposed to this, males think that they have the capacity to do things on their own disregarding others’ attitudes toward them. As such, this makes female writers withdraw from writing classes or not prefer writing. Finally, Latif (2012) considered gender as a cause of writing apprehension. In other words, he reckoned that gender should be considered when discussing the causes of apprehension.
Yet inconsistently, other research observed no statistically significant differences between males and females in writing apprehension. A recent longitudinal study by Kostić-Bobanović (2016) showed that gender did not have any role in writing apprehension among Croatian EFL undergraduate students neither in their first year nor in their third year. He thought that the causes that make them feel anxious in writing seem to be the same. This is supported by Abu Shawish and Abdelraheem (2010), Al Asmari (2013), Faris et al. (1999), Popvich and Massé (2005), Reed et al. (1983), Schultz and Meyers (1981), and Zerey (2013).

Kostić-Bobanović (2016) and Latif (2012) believed that the results of prior research suggest no conclusive evidence of the connection between gender and writing apprehension. Thus, based on the above detailed review, it can be concluded that the results are inconsistent which imply that there is still little evidence to support the correlation between writing anxiety and gender in favor of one of the genders and this does not permit us to draw firm conclusions.

The three trends mentioned for the impact of gender on writing apprehension can also be true for the impact of students’ academic level on writing apprehension. Kostić-Bobanović (2016) demonstrated that there was a statistically significant difference in writing apprehension due to the students’ academic level. Third-year students had more willingness to write than first-year students; therefore, they experienced a lower level of writing apprehension than the first year. Although, they ascribed this to using strategies of reducing writing apprehension. Marshall and Varnon (2009) compared their senior accounting major sample with Daly’s (1978) sample of freshman and sophomore students and produced significant findings. They noted that senior accounting majors produced lower average writing apprehension scores than freshmen and sophomores. To illustrate, lower level students experienced more anxiety than senior students due to the experience they have had with writing and the amount of knowledge they possess (Ekmecki, 2018). Likewise, Cocuk et al. (2016) showed that writing apprehension differed according to the academic level, with fifth graders being more apprehensive than sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) found that participants who were at three different foreign language levels, that is, beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels, displayed a relatively consistent rise in apprehension as they advanced through the years of study, that is, freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

However, other studies reported that higher level students were more apprehensive. Al Asmari (2013) revealed significant differences between second and eighth graders and indicated that eighth graders were more apprehensive although the difference was not great. Abdul-Fattah (1995) also found that more advanced students experienced more anxiety and vice versa.

Totally contradictory to the above results, Cheng (2002) revealed no significant differences for freshmen, sophomore, and junior EFL Taiwanese students. Although a statistically significant difference was not found, first-year students had lower levels of writing apprehension. Built on the work of MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), language anxiety levels would be the highest at the early stages of language learning and then decrease as proficiency increases. Nevertheless, according to Cheng (2002), it is not unusual for students of high second language competence to have self-doubt of their capacity to meet the requirements of employing the L2, thereby undergoing great anxiety. In other words, proficiency might not be the sole factor in determining the rise or fall of foreign language writing anxiety according to Cheng (2002). She further claimed that a complex system of contextual, social, and learner variables should be integrated in a comprehensive sketch of language anxiety development. Yet other research that produced no significant differences in writing apprehension and in the causes and remedies of writing apprehension based on the academic level involves Abu Shawish and Abdelraheem (2010). Likewise, Shang (2013) detected no statistical significances between year of writing learning, that is, writing experience and anxiety. In the same way, Marshall and Varnon (2009), who compared their research sample with other studies’ sample to recognize the impact of the academic level on apprehension, observed no significant differences between the average writing apprehension scores of the senior accounting majors in their study and the sophomore accounting majors in the Simons et al.’s (1995) study.

This study also takes into account the impact of socio-economic status on students’ writing apprehension. Socio-economic status relies on “a combination of variables including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence” (McAllister, 2014, p. 8). In this study, socio-economic status includes students’ income only. Inspecting the literature makes it clear that very few studies have probed into it. Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011) showed that students’ socioeconomic status is inversely correlated with writing apprehension among Jordanian postgraduate students, that is, students with higher socioeconomic status were less apprehensive and vice versa. Socioeconomic status did not only influence writing anxiety, rather it influenced math anxiety among Nigerian primary students in favor of students with a higher socioeconomic status (Adimora et al., 2015). In addition, African American Black students in the United States had fear of writing due to low socioeconomic status that caused them to be underprepared (McAllister, 2014).

The above review revealed that the majority of EFL writers experienced a high level of apprehension when writing in English, and the causes of writing apprehension were of various kinds. Moreover, age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status were seen to have an effect on writing apprehension but the nature of the connection is not clear-cut. Therefore, this study is undertaken to extend previous research in this area by focusing on the writing apprehension experienced by postgraduate
English majors at a private university and by analyzing the connection between learner variables and students’ writing apprehension.

Method

Research Design and Procedures

To fulfill the research aims, an associational quantitative research design adopting a self-report test questionnaire was employed. This was deemed appropriate for the study as it sought to determine students’ writing apprehension and to reveal the differences between the groups objectively. According to Gall et al. (2007), such a design is beneficial for generalizing results from a sample to a specified population if the instrument for the data collection is well-designed. Furthermore, the selection of this design was also congruent with research on apprehension, to name a few (Aljafen, 2019; Cheng, 2004; Daly & Miller, 1975b; Hassan, 2001; Kim, 2006; Latif, 2012) in which it is easy to analyze data and less time-consuming, with results being reported in a few statements (Connolly, 2007). Based on Rea and Parker (2005), this design can help researchers achieve self-reported and verbal information from the participants to investigate attitudes and opinions that are not easily noticeable, and it allows researchers to obtain in-depth information about a certain phenomenon.

The test questionnaire was prepared on a word document and was distributed as hard copies to the participants. However, for absent students, the test questionnaire was prepared on Google forms and the link was shared via email.

The self-report test questionnaire was adopted due to several reasons. First, it costs less, it is quicker and easier to administrate, and is more general (Daly & Miller, 1975b). The calculation of the apprehension scores via this instrument to extract the findings using computer programs lasts only seconds. Second, the clear wording of the instrument and its simple and short statements have prevented it from different interpretations on the participants’ side and they can easily understand. Third, it has been reported to be highly reliable and even valid by many previous studies (more than 30 studies as reported by Aljafen, 2013) that will be discussed in the subsequent section. Fourth, this measure specifically tackles writing apprehension and is recognized as an effective tool for gauging writing apprehension levels. Fifth, the instrument can measure those feelings and experiences of participants that cannot be easily revealed. Sixth, it can display various levels of apprehension for participants to select from (Aljafen, 2013). Last but not least, the instrument can measure feelings of apprehension similar to those experienced by participants in the English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) settings (Aljafen, 2013); a statement like “My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on my composition” can clearly demonstrate this.

Participants and Sampling

The population of the study included all currently enrolled EFL postgraduate students at the English language teaching department of a private university in North Cyprus, that is, both master and doctoral students. In total 37 students enrolled to the English language teaching postgraduate program and all participated. Therefore, convenient sampling was employed as the participants were conveniently available. The participants belonged to different ages (ranging from 22 to 53 years; 20 students were from 22 to 32 years old, 14 students were from 32 to 42 years old, and only three students were from 42 to 53 years old), both genders (17 male students and 20 female students), different academic levels (28 MA students and nine PhD students), and different socioeconomic status backgrounds (nine low-income students, 28 moderate-income students, zero high-income students).

Data Collection

The data were collected through an empirically based standardized unidimensional test questionnaire drawing on measures of oral communication apprehension that was composed of two parts. The first part contained demographic information about the participants such as age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status. The second part, the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) devised by Daly and Miller (1975a), was adopted in the study. The test questionnaire originally contained 63 items and was later reduced through factor analysis to 26 items on a five-point Likert-type scale ([strongly agree = 1, agree = 2, uncertain = 3, disagree = 4, strongly disagree = 5]) that requested students to rate their experiences with anxiety in writing. Although the scale is said to be unidimensional, each item displays some form of apprehension regarding writing. Daly and Miller (1975) identified three subclasses of the test, namely stress apprehension, evaluation apprehension, and product apprehension (as cited in Akpinar, 2007). However, four different subcategories were later identified that included participants’ perceptions of their apprehension about the act of writing, liking for writing, responses to peer, teacher, and professional evaluations of their writing as well as participants’ self-evaluation of their writing (Daly, 1985). The test contained 13 positive items and 13 negative items. It was originally designed to measure native speakers’ writing apprehension level, especially English native speakers (Daly & Miller, 1975b).

Data Analysis

All the collected data from the hard copies and the Google forms were inserted into the SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences [SPSS], version 23.0). For the analysis, first, the score for each student was calculated
based on the formula suggested by Daly and Miller (1975b): \( \text{Writing Apprehension} = 78 + \text{Positive Statement Values} - \text{Negative Statement Values} \). Later, frequencies and percentages as well as mean scores and standard deviations were used to recognize the writing apprehension level among the participants. The total score on WAT ranges from 26 to 130 points. A score of 97 to 130 indicates a low level of writing apprehension, that is, a very confident writer, a score of 60 to 96 indicates a moderate level of writing apprehension level, whereas a score of 26 to 59 indicates a high level of writing apprehension level, that is, the higher the score, the lower the writing apprehension level. As concerns the mean, a mean score of 78 is considered to be moderate and to place a participant on the mean score, the closer the participant to the mean, the better the score is (Daly & Miller, 1975b). To understand the impact of age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status on writing apprehension, Pearson correlation, chi-square and independent samples \( t \) test were utilized.

**Ethical Consideration**

The participants were informed that participation in the study is completely voluntary and optional, their identity would be kept confidential, and their responses to the test questionnaire would only be used for research purposes. Moreover, both oral and written consent was received from the participants. Written permission from John Daly, one of the designers of the test, was obtained before carrying out the study. Most importantly, prior to the study, ethical permission was granted from the private university in question.

**Reliability and Validity**

Although WAT was originally designed to measure native language learners’ writing apprehension, especially English native speakers, many studies have applied the modified or even unmodified versions of the test to measure L2 language learners’ writing apprehension level. This instrument is regarded as a standard test and viewed to be the first systematic and the most widely used and accepted instrument among researchers to examine ESL/EFL writing apprehension levels, for instance, those who have employed it in the ESL/EFL contexts include Aljafen (2013), Alluhaybi (2014), Alnufaie and Grenfell (2013), Cheng et al. (1999), Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011), Ismail et al. (2010), Kostić-Bobanović (2016), Masny and Foxall (1992), Pimsarn (2013), and Tola and Sree (2016).

A significant feature of any instrument is its reliability that involves the extent to which participants respond consistently to the statements of that instrument. The instrument is highly reliable as the first group of studies conducted by Daly and Miller (1975b) revealed the internal consistency to be .94 and subsequent research using this instrument always produced reliability scores close to that figure (as cited in Daly, 1985; Stapa, 1998). According to Hanna (2009), Daly and Miller also achieved a rating reliability of .910 for the instrument by a split-half method in which they contrasted the top half of the scale with the top bottom. Later, they employed the test–retest technique and revealed a reliability of .923 over the period of a week, that is, the correlation coefficient between the test and retest was .92 (Daly & Miller, 1975a; Stapa, 1998). Yet subsequent studies that extended over more than 3 months observed test–retest coefficients higher than .80 (Daly, 1985). Overall, the scale has been found to be highly reliable with its internal consistency coefficient reliability being .92 (Aljafen, 2013). Other studies reported an internal consistency reliability of .90 in Lee (2005), .95 in Cheng (2002), and .94 in Cheng et al. (1999). Moreover, Cheng (2004) affirmed that this instrument possesses satisfactory internal consistency.

As for validity, since the mid-1970s, this scale has been widely utilized in a number of studies and frequently tested for validity. The results of all those studies have shown that the measure possesses good face validity (Hanna, 2009). Hanna (2009) reported the validity of the scale in terms of length, clarity, and internal validity and that the scale was appropriate and would elicit the information relevant to writing apprehension. Cheng (2004) also confirmed that the scale has concurrent and predictive validity. Although more recent instruments of writing apprehension do exist having great internal consistency, they lack validity checks present in Daly and Miller (1975b) according to Stapa (1998). Akpinar (2007) confirmed the validity of the scale based on its predictive validity through a one-way analysis of variance. Even Daly and Miller (1975a) themselves proved that the statements of the construct possess face validity because they represent the construct.

**Findings and Discussions**

**Writing Apprehension Among EFL Postgraduate Students**

To answer the first research question which sought to reveal to what extent EFL postgraduate students experience apprehension when writing in English, data from the collected questionnaires were computed through SPSS. The formula suggested by Daly and Miller (1975b), that is, \( \text{Writing Apprehension} = 78 + \text{Positive Statement Values} - \text{Negative Statement Values} \) as well as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used. Table 1 reports the results for the writing apprehension level among postgraduate students when writing in English.

According to Table 1, the findings of the study demonstrate that the mean and standard deviation for the writing apprehension level are \( M = 61.76 \) and \( SD = 13.831 \), respectively. Of 37 participants, eighteen of them (48.6%) experienced a high level of apprehension, 18 of them (48.6%) experienced a moderate level of apprehension, and only one
Table 1. English Writing Apprehension Levels.

| Writing apprehension levels | N  | %    | M     | SD   |
|-----------------------------|----|------|-------|------|
| High level                  | 18 | 48.6 | 61.76 | 13.83|
| Moderate level              | 18 | 48.6 |       |      |
| Low level                   | 1  | 2.7  |       |      |
| Total                       | 37 | 100  |       |      |

Note. \(N = \) frequency.

participant (2.7%) experienced a low level of writing apprehension. This indicates that the average writing apprehension level is moderate (\(M = 61.76\)) among postgraduate students when writing in English though close to the limits of high.

According to Daly and Miller (1975b), scores of the mean that range from 60 to 96 demonstrate a moderate writing apprehension level that is not an abnormal level of writing apprehension. Although this level is not harmful, students at this level might show certain indications of writing apprehension in doing some writing tasks, in writing essays for various purposes and for various authors, in writing theses and dissertations, in writing essays for placement tests, or in writing essays inside the class, for instance. This is due to the fact that the mean score, which is 61.76, is very close to the high level limit based on Daly and Miller (1975b)’s indication of writing apprehension levels. According to Clark (1985), even writing teachers and graduate as well as undergraduate students feel some sort of writing apprehension as aforementioned. Furthermore, writing apprehension will never entirely vanish (as cited in Friesen, 1990, p. 20).

Students’ responses to some statements in our study might put this in a picture. A high number of students responded positively to the statement, “My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on my essay” and “I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in writing” that are probably attributed to writing being taught to these students as a product rather than a process because prewriting activities are done to prevent from the writers’ block and producing writing goes through a number of steps to organize students’ writing in taking writing as a process. In addition, the majority of the students were uncertain of, “It is easy for me to write good papers” and “People seem to value what I write” that can be ascribed to their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Prior studies have shown a negative connection of writing apprehension to self-efficacy (Sabati et al., 2019) and self-esteem (Hassan, 2001; Xu, 1993).

The results of this study are supported by several other research studies in ESL/EFL contexts (Aljafen, 2013; Alluhaybi, 2014; Alnufaie & Grenfell, 2013; Friesen, 1990; Kostić-Bobanović, 2016; Pimsarn, 2013; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2017). They all found that the writing apprehension level was moderate among their participants. However, the results of this study are not congruent with Abbas (2016), Hanna (2009), Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011), Ismail et al. (2010), and Rezaei and Jafari (2014) who all found that the level of writing apprehension was high among their participants. The diverse results produced in the literature regarding the levels of English writing anxiety might relate to a number of factors. First, these studies have been carried out in different educational settings where different teaching methodologies are in use. For instance, our participants varied according to whether they were Turkish Cypriot or non-Turkish Cypriot, with the Turkish Cypriot students experiencing lower levels of writing apprehension compared with students who were Arabic or Kurdish. This, to our observation, might have to do with the student-centeredness approach that has been in use long ago while the opposite might be true for the Arabic or Kurdish student educational settings in which traditional approaches are still used and a number of classes are yet teacher-centered, and most importantly, emphasis is less likely to go to language skills in the latter setting. Second, the experience of the different writing apprehension levels by different participants of prior studies might also be associated with the way one is grown up, as Reeves (1997) explains, “despite advanced degrees and publications, I remain an apprehensive writer . . . I imagine it has something to do with growing up poor, rural, and female. It has to do with marginality, with being different” (p. 44). The third and most important factor is the variation in the other affective factors that we can call them “self” factors, such as self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy as explained above. Although the participants of this study showed a high level of confidence in English writing by responding positively to the statement, “I feel confident in my ability to express my ideas clearly in writing,” this might be different with the participants of prior studies and result in recording a high level of apprehension. The confidence of participants in our study presumably belongs to their postgraduate education level as they possess much writing-related knowledge.

The Effect of the Variables on Writing Apprehension

To identify the effect of each of the variables, namely age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status, on writing apprehension, the SPSS program version 23.0 was employed to deduce the results. Descriptive statistics were acquired from the responses of the students using Pearson correlation, percentages, frequencies, means, standard deviations, \(t\) tests, and \(p\) values. The results of the study revealed that neither of the demographic variables of the study, namely age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status, affected writing apprehension, that is, there was no statistically significant relationship between age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status and the level of writing apprehension. Table 2 illustrates the results for the effect of age on writing apprehension. The Pearson correlation revealed that the relationship is not significant because it is lower than .5.
Previous research on the effect of age on writing apprehension has not produced conclusive findings because of two reasons. One reason concerns, as explained earlier, the few number of studies that have considered age group differences in accounting for apprehension. The second reason is connected to the lack of justifications given by the studies showing significant differences between age and apprehension. For instance, Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011), McAllister (2014), and Tola and Sree (2016) showed that age affects writing apprehension in a way that older writers are less apprehensive than younger ones because they have more experience. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) proved the opposite, that is, the older the students, the more apprehensive they were and vice versa. However, our research did not detect any relevance of the effect of age on writing apprehension. This has been confirmed by Cheng (2002) that there is not only one factor that can be determining, writing apprehension is associated with a number of other factors such as learners’ beliefs and attitudes about writing as well as their self-doubt. Our finding is supported in the literature by Faris et al. (1999), Marshall and Varnon (2009), and Rosen and Maguire (1990) who observed no significant differences between age and apprehension.

Table 2. The Effect of Age on Writing Apprehension.

| Demographic variable | Sum all | M     | SD    |
|----------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Age                  |         |       |       |
| Pearson correlation  | .111    | 31.51 | 7.328 |
| Sig. (two-tailed)    | .511    | 61.76 | 13.831|
| N                    | 37      |       |       |

Note. Sig. = significance level.

The Effect of Age on Writing Apprehension.

Contradicting results concerning the effect of gender on writing apprehension have been displayed in the literature. Some studies, contrary to ours, displayed that gender could influence writing apprehension in favor of women, that is, male students recorded a higher level of writing apprehension (Daly, 1985; Daly & Miller, 1975c; Elias, 1999; Jebreil et al., 2015; McAllister, 2014; Meier et al., 1984; Shang, 2013; Simons et al., 1995; Zorbaz, 2010). In comparison with the aforementioned studies, it can be concluded that none of them were conducted among postgraduate students; rather, their participants included undergraduate or high school students. In other words, when students’ proficiency goes up, gender differences in writing apprehension might fade away. In addition, students in most of these studies recorded a high level of writing anxiety and this might increase the gap that exists between the genders in writing apprehension. This set of studies includes more or less the ones that have been conducted among native writers of English whose gender differences are more concerned with feedback and gender stereotypes as explained in the preceding section in the literature review. Another set of studies, though yet inconsistent to our study, showed significant gender differences in writing apprehension, but in favor of men, that is, women scored a higher level of writing apprehension (Abdul-Fattah, 1995; Aljafen, 2013; Cheng, 2002; Cocuk et al., 2016; Herrington et al., 2005; Kim, 2006; Larson, 1985; Masny & Foxall, 1992; Reeves, 1997; Rodriguez et al., 2009; Thompson, 1981; Xu, 1993). Again, most of these studies included undergraduate students as their participants. To accurately identify the variation of writing apprehension based on gender, the researchers of this study suggest conducting a study among postgraduate students with a greater sample size. Most of the studies that belong to the second set are among the ones that have been carried out among non-native writers of English whose high apprehension of their females in writing ascribes to the dominant role of men, females’ hypersensitivity to negative evaluation, appropriation of voice, and education in the context of those studies. Nevertheless, our finding is confirmed in the literature by a number of studies that detected no significant differences (Abu Shawish & Abdelraheem, 2010; Al Asmari, 2013; Kostić-Bobanović, 2016; Popvich & Masse, 2005; Zerey, 2013).

Regarding academic level, this study is in line with Abu Shawish and Abdelraheem (2010), Cheng (2002), and Shang (2013) who found that the academic level does not play any role in student’s writing apprehension. However, it contrasts with Kostić-Bobanović (2016)’ study who found that third-year students were less apprehensive than first-year students. This is clearly evident because first-year students have newly transitioned to university facing various kinds of problems.
and need to adapt to the university setting and they may possess less vocabulary and structure than third-year students. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) maintained that language anxiety decreases when the learners’ English level gets higher. Inconsistent with this was Genç (2017)’s study that showed his high academic level students experienced a high

| Table 3. Writing Apprehension Levels—Gender, Academic Level, and Socioeconomic Status. |
|------------------------------------------|
| Variable                                | 26–59, High | 60–96, Moderate | 97–130, Low | Chi-square | Total | p value |
| Gender                                  |             |                |             |            |       |
| Male                                    | 7           | 9              | 1           | 1.657      | 17    | .437 (NS) |
| %                                       | 18.9        | 24.3           | 2.7         |            | 45.9  |         |
| Female                                  | 11          | 9              | 0           |            | 20    |         |
| %                                       | 29.7        | 24.3           | 0.0         |            | 54.1  |         |
| Total                                   | 18          | 18             | 1           | 1.657      | 37    |         |
| %                                       | 48.6        | 48.6           | 2.7         |            | 100.0 |         |
| Academic level                          |             |                |             |            |       |
| MA                                      | 14          | 15             | 0           | 3.890      | 29    | .143 (NS) |
| %                                       | 37.8        | 40.5           | 0.0         |            | 78.4  |         |
| PhD                                     | 4           | 3              | 1           |            | 8     |         |
| %                                       | 10.8        | 8.1            | 2.7         |            | 21.6  |         |
| Total                                   | 18          | 18             | 1           | 3.890      | 37    |         |
| %                                       | 48.6        | 48.6           | 2.7         |            | 100.0 |         |
| Socioeconomic status                    |             |                |             |            |       |
| Low income                              | 6           | 3              | 0           | 1.688      | 9     | .430 (NS) |
| %                                       | 16.2        | 8.1            | 0.0         |            | 24.3  |         |
| Moderate income                         | 12          | 15             | 1           |            | 28    |         |
| %                                       | 32.4        | 40.5           | 2.7         |            | 75.7  |         |
| Total                                   | 18          | 18             | 1           | 1.688      | 37    |         |
| %                                       | 48.6        | 48.6           | 2.7         |            | 100.0 |         |

Note. NS = nonsignificant.

| Table 4. Gender, Academic Level, Socioeconomic Status. |
|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Demographic variable                                   | N  | M      | SD     | t test | df  | p value |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----|--------|--------|--------|-----|---------|
| Gender                                                 |    |        |        |        |     |         |
| Male                                                   | 17 | 61.94  | 17.718 | 0.074  | 35  | .942 (NS) |
| Female                                                 | 20 | 61.60  | 9.902  |        |     |         |
| Academic level                                         |    |        |        |        |     |         |
| MA                                                     | 29 | 60.24  | 12.780 | −1.280 | 35  | .209 (NS) |
| PhD                                                    | 8  | 67.25  | 16.926 |        |     |         |
| Socioeconomic status                                   |    |        |        |        |     |         |
| Low income                                             | 9  | 55.78  | 14.237 | −1.518 | 35  | .138 (NS) |
| Moderate income                                        | 28 | 63.68  | 13.389 |        |     |         |

Note. NS = nonsignificant.
level of apprehension though being preparatory students at university. This might be relevant to Cheng (2002)’s confirmation that it is more important how learners perceive their writing competence rather than their actual competence. Thus, having accurate judgments about themselves is as significant as their competence in writing.

One significant implication of prior studies is that when any academic level of students is compared with freshmen students, a statistically significant difference can be detected in favor of the higher academic level, as is the case in Kostić-Bobanović (2016) and Marshall and Varnon (2009). This might be related to the problems that freshmen students encounter during their first year that is a totally new environment for them. Ekmekçi (2018) believes that higher academic level students might experience less anxiety in writing than lower students as they possess more knowledge and experience with writing. This idea seems to be both logical and plausible for undergraduate students, although might not be true for all contexts, because students in our study did not show any differences in apprehension as both groups of students, that is, master and doctoral students, showed that they are self-confident in their writing abilities and they do not have self-doubt about their writing through the responses they gave.

Our study’s finding concerning socioeconomic status was again statistically not significant, although slight variations of apprehension were observed in favor of higher socioeconomic status students. In the same way, Huwari and Abd Aziz (2011) and McAllister (2014) found that socioeconomic status negatively correlates with writing apprehension, with higher socioeconomic status postgraduate students experiencing less apprehension in writing. In our study, the majority of the students had a moderate income, and this can be a significant factor for why their apprehension did not vary according to socioeconomic status.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study was conducted to investigate EFL postgraduate students’ writing apprehension level and whether students’ writing apprehension level varied according to their age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status. The results provided strong evidence supporting the existence of foreign language writing anxiety among postgraduate students, demonstrating a moderate level of apprehension when writing in English. Further results from our study showed that the variables age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status did not affect writing apprehension, that is, our participants’ writing apprehension level did not vary according to the demographic factors. Thus, our study confirmed and extended the results of past research that anyone regardless of their age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic status is prone to writing apprehension.

Postgraduate students often go unnoticed in terms of writing apprehension. Because they typically have a higher level of English language proficiency than undergraduate and high school students, and possess more knowledge of writing-related grammar, vocabulary, and other necessary writing-related skills, they might be supposed and viewed by many to record a lower level of or no apprehension when writing in English. Nevertheless, our study confirmed that even postgraduate students undergo apprehension. One important conjecture is that although our study confirmed previous research observing that even postgraduate students experienced apprehension, their experience of apprehension differs from the apprehension experienced by undergraduate students based on writing situations. Postgraduate students, based on our study, usually felt apprehensive when writing their thesis or a paper for a journal rather than writing an essay.

Because the majority of studies conducted in the area of writing apprehension, including ours, have revealed a high or moderate level of apprehension and demonstrated the detrimental effects of writing apprehension on writing performance and achievement, reducing it is highly recommended as our study only diagnosed postgraduate students’ writing apprehension; future studies can concentrate on relieving writing apprehension. In turn, it is recommended for ESL/EFL teachers in general and student supervisors of the current context in particular to be more aware of their students’ apprehension even at advanced levels and find ways to reduce it. Teachers obviously play a significant role in the students’ lives. If writing anxiety affects the student, then teacher reactions to it are crucial for a genuine understanding of the construct and relieving the apprehension they undergo.

It appears from our study and the accounts of writing apprehension in the literature that this phenomenon is context bound. In other words, different contexts require different interpretations for why students record a particular level of writing apprehension and for why they vary or not in their writing apprehension levels according to the demographic variables. In addition, the differences might relate to the different teaching methodologies used in teaching writing in that particular context more than any other factor. Most studies reported the indicated level of apprehension among their participants but did not explain for why their participants experienced that particular level. Furthermore, students in the same cultural context vary in their writing apprehension levels. To illustrate, Whites in America undergo a lower level of apprehension than Blacks as they are more prepared before they join the university and have higher economic statuses than Blacks, as explained in McAllister (2014). As such, each context and even each group of students requires a particular style of treatment for relieving the apprehension they experience by taking into consideration the demographic variables and a large number of other factors such as the “self” factors mentioned earlier. Finally, writing apprehension is a complex phenomenon that requires one to take into account a number of factors when tackling it. Taking into account only one factor might not produce conclusive results (Cheng, 2002).
The area that has produced the most conflicting and inconclusive results involves the influence of the demographic variables on writing apprehension. Most of the studies in this area can be categorized into three classes. Some studies noted significant differences in favor of one group of students but not the other, whereas other studies produced no significant differences. In our perspective, these conflicting results might come from the different educational contexts, the teaching methodologies used in them, and the various writing apprehension scales employed and a number of other factors that are peculiar to the context. Another reason behind the inconsistencies sometimes relates to defining different terms in the same way. Three important terms that have been confused in the literature include age, experience, and academic level. These need to be treated differently as they refer to different ends. Other reasons might relate to the inadequate research available on the effect of the demographic variables, particularly age, socioeconomic status, and academic level. Therefore, it is suggested more studies be conducted in the area of writing apprehension, particularly with respect to the ignored demographic factors because one cannot produce conclusive results based on the prior research.

Gender is a factor that has produced more inconsistencies than the other variables. One conclusion that can be drawn regarding gender is that gender might differently predict the experience of English writing apprehension based on whether one’s first language is English or not and one belongs to a European or non-European country. With the former, apprehension might go to males. However, apprehension goes to females when one’s first language is any language other than English or when one belongs to a non-European country. This might be attributed to the dominant role men have and the appropriation of voice in females’ writings in most non-European countries. Our sample consisted of postgraduate students from various countries and nationalities; therefore, insignificant differences between the genders might have to do with that. Most important of all, the type of anxiety should be taken into account when tackling writing apprehension in relation to gender and even the other demographic factors as each gender might suffer from a particular sort of anxiety. Future studies should consider this as master and doctoral students might record a low level of cognitive anxiety but a high level of somatic anxiety as they possess the knowledge but they might have other kinds of anxiety. One last important recommendation would be to differentiate between foreign language anxiety and foreign language writing anxiety with respect to the demographic variables. Although the latter is significantly associated with the former, these two types of anxiety are completely distinct from each other and independent constructs (Cheng, 2002). Therefore, when accounting for learner differences such as age, gender, and the others, one should not consider them the same.

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