

# ESL Writing Anxiety in the CEFR Setting: Does it Affect the Students?

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## Abstract

English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: A Roadmap (2015-2025) seeks to integrate the teaching of English in Malaysia with the Common European Framework of References (CEFR), which influences the required writing skills of secondary school students. Writing skills acquisition in English as a second language could be compromised by negative psychological implications. By disturbing students' focus, fear, anxiety, and worry can jeopardize the learning process; this is also known as ESL writing anxiety. Pursuant to the CEFR, the goal of this study is to examine the types, levels, and causes of ESL writing anxiety among 43 purposively selected secondary school students in Raub, Pahang. The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) by Cheng (2004) was used to determine the types and levels of writing anxiety, followed by semi-structured interview questions adapted from Rezaei and Jafari's Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) (2014). Cognitive anxiety is the most common type of ESL writing anxiety among these students (mean = 2.97), followed by somatic anxiety (mean = 2.93), and then avoidance behaviour (mean = 2.2). As for levels of writing anxiety, most of the respondents are at average. As causes of writing anxiety, the themes of (1) negative writing experience, (2) negative writing attitude, and (3) writing knowledge and skill were evaluated in relation to the types and levels of writing anxiety. These findings are designed to inform CEFR-aligned English writing instruction.

**Keywords:** CEFR, ESL Learners, Writing Anxiety, Types, Causes

## Introduction

CEFR or common European framework of reference (CEFR) for languages had been made public in 2001 which brought about a lasting and ongoing impact on the overall language education and how they are assessed (Council of Europe, 2006; Deygers et al., 2017; Harsch, 2017). With the introduction, many countries have answered to the call of transforming their English language education to be CEFR-aligned where they were seen to come up with their own measures. This change is apparent in countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Vietnam situated in the Asia regions (Uri & Abd Aziz, 2018). For example, Japan

has developed CEFR-j as a modified version of the original CEFR to align the learning, teaching and assessment of English in Japan (Negishi et al., 2013; Negishi & Tono, 2016).

In Malaysia, the introduction of secondary school standard curriculum or KSSM in 2017 (Nor et al., 2017) has come with the aspirations of CEFR. This is in line when the ministry of education introduces the framework in January of 2018 (Aziz et al., 2018). The cascading phases began under the cascade training model (Karalis, 2016) to guide and aid English teachers in the Familiarisation CEFR-aligned English subject which is one of the methods for improving English teaching and learning (Yunus & Suliman, 2014). This current reform shows its impact on the teaching, learning and assessment aspects of the subject. Accordingly, all of the skills of English language are affected with writing component is still a productive skill (Yaxshiboyeva, 2021). Being a second language which is important in students' daily life (Yunus et al., 2021), this change is viewed as inevitable.

Writing, in mother tongue or a second language poses its own challenges to ESL learners. Apparently, there are cognitive activities involved in writing process (Wern & Rahmat, 2021) which may or may not jeopardize students' abilities. Students are also concerned with their own psychological responses on the task at hand (Thevasigamoney, 2015) that could bring down their level of writing performance. Known as second language writing anxiety, these effects can be visible or invisible based on their severity as investigated by (Cheng, 2004). The causes could also vary from one person to another where it is worth investigated. In relation to this information, it is important to be aware as whether the current CEFR-aligned writing examinations affect students' level of writing anxiousness or otherwise; and if it is affected, how severe? While CEFR comes with its more perceivable ways to categorize learners such as whether they are in A1 as a basic user of English coming to C2 as the most proficient, the writing tasks seen in form three central assessment (Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3 or PT3) and Malaysian education certificate (SIJIL Pelajaran Malaysia or SPM) place some expectations on students' writing abilities which may drive them into a visible state of writing anxiety. Therefore, this current study sees it worthwhile to investigate the matter in the current CEFR-aligned writing examinations.

## **Literature Review**

### **A. CEFR developments in Malaysia**

The ministry of education in Malaysia has introduced English language education reform in Malaysia: a roadmap 2015-2025 where one of its vital transformations is aligning the English language education to the CEFR (Kok & Aziz, 2019). This Revitalisation is seen as inevitable in light of the country development where one of the important criteria is the position of English language as the country's second language (Rashid et al., 2017). Therefore, in aligning the English education to CEFR, numerous changes would take place which support Byram et al (2002) observation that the adoption of CEFR should impart with its additional and updated components of the education system ranging from the syllabus, teaching approach and materials, learning objectives and not to forget the methods of assessments and evaluations. These developments surely affect Malaysian English education system as well such as the ministry's approach to bring in imported CEFR-aligned English textbooks that are used in schools beginning from 2018 (Kok & Aziz, 2019) where their usage was implemented on the first two years of schooling in primary and secondary schools (standard 1 and standard 2; form 1 and form 2). Along the road, students' proficiency levels are clustered into three main groups which are proficient users in C1 and C2 levels, independent users in B1 and B2 levels and basic users in A1 and A2 levels (Uri & Abd Aziz, 2018). Ultimately, this shift in

achievement indicators affects the teaching and learning of English language among Malaysian teachers and students which also directs and redirects the English language education in Malaysia.

### ***B. CEFR-aligned Writing Examinations***

Fast forward to 2022. The implementation of CEFR has now entered its fifth year. From primary education to tertiary level education, the approach would affect all of the teachers and students in dealing with the methods that it has to offer. For example, there are "can do" statements for each of the language skills (Uri & Abd Aziz, 2018), signifying students' current level of English language mastery. Another approach includes designing and redesigning the system of examinations on all four fundamental English language skills; reading, listening, speaking, and writing. As the current study delves into ESL writing, an overlook of CEFR-aligned writing examinations in the Malaysian context could provide some insight into the purpose of the study. To begin with, the year 2019 has witnessed the introduction of Form Three Central Assessments (Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3 – PT3) (Sabbir, 2019) aligned to CEFR (Menon, 2019) by the Ministry of Education. As for the English subject, all of the four skills are tested and are given equal weightage, which is 25% for the final grade (Gemilang, 2019). Taking in the writing examination, which is the second paper, the students are required to answer two essays, which are a short communicative message (part 1) and a note expansion (part 2), each of which comes with 20 marks (Gemilang, 2019). As the students get to their Form 4 and Form 5 classes later, the weightage of each paper remains the same, but there is one additional writing task that they need to do, which is part 3 on an open subjective response where the word allocation is the highest (Malaysian Examination Syndicate, 2020). This format will be put to its first test in one of the Malaysian high-stakes examinations, which is the Malaysian Education Certificate (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia-SPM) (Malaysian Examination Syndicate, 2020), taking place in March, 2022.

In reviewing these efforts laid out by the Ministry of Education, approaches to understanding, teaching, and learning the writing examination format could not be viewed lightly by all parties. While the students have been exposed to the PT3 writing examination, there are intangible challenges in assessing students' readiness to sit for the SPM English writing examination. Teachers, as the role in the middle, play an important role in guiding students in the classroom-based learning process, which would help them perceive the writing examination with a clearer mind. In such cases, one part of the problem that students may naturally face is apprehension, or what is commonly known as ESL writing anxiety, which may act in a debilitating way when students face writing examinations (Horwitz, 2017).

### ***C. Esl Writing Anxiety***

Anxiety has been studied quite vigorously in the acquisition of language (Amiri & Saeedi, 2017) and is seen as one of the affective factors and a popular topic for research for the last decades, which has a huge impact on the process of language learning (Elif & Yayli, 2019). Presumably, anxiety is considered one of the difficulties in second language learning and is viewed as an obstacle by researchers, educators, and learners (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Second language anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension whereby the second language contexts, including listening, speaking, and writing, are related to it (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Particularly, second language writing anxiety is seen as a tendency to avoid writing and other situations where people think they have to produce writing that will be evaluated in a certain way (Hassan, 2001). Abdullah et al. (2018) also

asserted the same observation where individuals experiencing writing anxiety display a form of fear towards the process of writing and their feelings of inclination where they may prohibit themselves from any kind of motivation, help, or support while writing while facing the struggles with the writing task itself. Several effects of anxiety include uneasiness, frustration, self-doubts, and tension (Wern & Rahmat, 2021).

#### *D. Previous Studies on ESL Writing Anxiety*

To understand the cosmos of ESL writing anxiety, an inventory named the Second Language Writing Inventory, or SLWAI, was developed by (Cheng, 2004). This inventory helps classify writing anxiety in a second language into three types of anxiety, which are somatic, cognitive, and avoidance behavior, while investigating the respondents' levels of writing anxiety as well. Specific measures and methods have been taken to ensure the reliability of the inventory, where Cheng (2004) records 0.91 on the Cronbach alpha measure. In other studies, Arindra and Ardi (2020) record 0.95, while Mulyono et al (2020) record 0.95. Generally, for Cronbach alpha internal consistency, the rule of 0.6 to 0.7 indicates acceptable reliability, and 0.8 or greater indicates very good reliability (Hulin et al., 2001). Altogether, there are 22 items in SLWAI to summarise the learners' types and levels of writing anxiety. For the types of writing anxiety, the cognitive anxiety items are numbers 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, and 21. For somatic anxiety, the items are numbers 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15 and 19, and items numbers 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, and 22 are for avoidance behaviour (Ajmal & Irfan, 2020). These types of anxiety concern the learners' physiological, cognitive, and effects of anxiety on their writing processes and behaviours. On levels of writing anxiety, the inventory comes with three levels, which are low anxiety, medium anxiety, or high anxiety (Cheng, 2004). In this study, this classification was used to help figure out what kinds of writing anxiety ESL learners have.

Seemingly, second language writing anxiety poses a negative influence where many researchers have put in their efforts to identify the causes of writing anxiety among students. Heaton and Pray (1982), who took the time to observe and question anxious writers, identified several causes of writing anxiety as follows: 1) time limitation on planning, writing, and revising; 2) lack of good writing skills, which includes instruction and practise on writing, idea generation and organization, and mechanics of writing; and 3) teachers' negative feedback. In addition, Bloom (1981) regards self-imposed pressure for perfect written tasks and problems with topic options as the foreseeable causes of writing anxiety. Anxiety can also be caused by a lack of confidence in second language writing (Cheng, 2002) and a lack of knowledge about how to express ideas in contextual English (Hyland, 2003). This study will also look into these possible reasons why ESL learners have trouble.

In line with the review of the related studies, much research has been carried out to determine the types, levels, and causes of ESL writing anxiety. The findings differ from one another, such as in some studies, the most dominant type of writing anxiety is cognitive anxiety (David et al., 2018; Iksan & Halim, 2018; Jafari, 2019; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Okubay, 2020; Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020; Tsiriotakis et al., 2017; Wern & Rahmat, 2021). As for somatic anxiety, it is found to be the most dominant in some research, such as in (Alfiansyah et al., 2017; Arindra and Ardi, 2020; Ekmekci, 2018; Rudiyanto, 2017). Other studies, such as those conducted by Elif and Yayli (2019); Mulyono et al (2020); Surur and Dengela (2019), show a higher prevalence in its avoidance behavior. When it comes to causes of writing anxiety, some researchers have also anticipated the recurring causes such as fear of writing tests and anxiousness when writing under time constraints (Wern & Rahmat, 2021). Learners are also found to be feeling rather fearful of their teacher's negative evaluations while facing

linguistic difficulties and having low self-confidence in writing (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). In Elif and Yayli (2019), among learners' highest concerns is their topical knowledge, which affects their writing in an unpleasing way.

Relating together learners' types, levels, and causes of writing anxiety, (Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2017) asserted that when learners frequently experience high levels of apprehension, they may tend to seek less input, while those with lower feelings of apprehension are in a more conducive state to acquiring a second language and display more willingness to learn the target language.

#### *E. ESL Writing Anxiety and Malaysian CEFR-aligned English Writing Examinations*

As ESL writing anxiety has been proven by a number of studies in the past, changing the climate of the writing examinations involving methods of cascading and teaching and learning of the format could not easily discard the image of writing anxiety among learners. While CEFR-aligned English writing examinations come with better descriptions of learners (Uri & Abd Aziz, 2018), there are measurements required from informed parties to address learners' writing anxiety before coming up with possible ways to help the learners manage their writing anxiety. Relatively, this study strives to provide more information on the topic.

The education system in Malaysia has undergone at least three important phases of reform in the last 30 years (Azman, 2016). For example, in 1988, the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Secondary School, or KBSR, was launched, emphasising the integration of knowledge, skills, and values as a foundation for holistic students (Nor et al., 2017). Almost 20 years after that, the Secondary School Standard Curriculum or KSSM was introduced in 2017 (Nor et al., 2017). This is where CEFR comes in, bringing with it standards of English language teaching and learning where teachers learn them in the Cascade Training Model (Karalis, 2016).

Relating these changes together, the future holds more plans and strategies in the transformation and reform of the education system, which would also affect Malaysian English language education. As ESL writing is one of the components of learning English, the focus should be on students as the products of these educational reforms. Learning ESL writing in a seemingly stress-and-risk-free condition could ensure students' engagement and understanding in a better way (Yunus et al. (2010), Hashim et al. (2018), Hashim et al. (2018)b). So, the goal of this study is to add to what we know about how to help ESL students who are worried about writing in light of CEFR, which is the current English language reform.

#### **Methodology**

The current study has three purposes, which are to investigate the types, levels, and causes of ESL writing anxiety among ESL secondary school students preparing for one of Malaysia's highest stakes examinations, which is the Malaysian Education Certificate or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). This study also aims to find out if respondents' types, levels, and causes of writing anxiety display some degree of relationship to one another. Thus, the following research questions are investigated in the current study:

1. What is the most dominant type of ESL writing anxiety among secondary school students?
2. What is the highest level of ESL writing anxiety among secondary school students?
3. What are the main causes of ESL writing anxiety?

A mixed methods research design is applied in this study. This method includes utilising quantitative and qualitative ways to gain more informed data on the types, levels, and causes of writing anxiety.

#### A. Sampling

The respondents of the current study were 43 secondary school students in a school in Raub, Pahang, Malaysia. Of the 43 students, 41.9% were boys (n:18) and the other 58.1% were girls (n:25). These students have learned English as a compulsory subject and were selected purposively. In addition, they have been given the freedom to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time.

#### B. Data Collection Method and Analysis

Two instruments were used in the study: the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) and the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI).

The SLWAI: Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory was used to measure the types and levels of ESL writing anxiety of the students. The SLWAI was developed by Cheng (2004) to discover the two main components of ESL writing anxiety, which are the types and levels, consisting of 22 items. The structuring and de-structuring of the SLWAI items have involved EFL students majoring in English in Taiwan (Cheng, 2004). The last stage of the SLWAI development involved 421 freshmen majoring in English who were enrolled in English writing courses from seven different colleges. The internal consistency was 0.91 on the Cronbach alpha measure (Cheng, 2004) with 5 Likert scales. As for Arindra and Ardi (2020), the results showed 0.725 and 0.95 for Mulyono et al (2020) on Cronbach alpha. For the current study, the SLWAI adapted from Thevasigamoney (2015) was used.

There are altogether 22 items which are worded in English. For the study, the items are translated into Malay language to facilitate students' understanding in response to Kumar's (2011) observation where ambiguity which presents in the wording of questions or statements can affect the reliability of the research instrument. The items had also been had also been reviewed and approved by an expert. Out of the 22 items, 6 positively worded items (1, 4, 7, 17, 21, 22) have been changed to negative as to correspond to the whole scale. The researcher had also used 4-Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree", "disagree", "agree" and "strongly agree". The Cronbach alpha obtained by the researcher was 0.89. The 4-point Likert scale is essential as they are preferable to young respondents and for respondents who are not always highly motivated in completing the questionnaire (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014). For the current study, pilot test was carried out on the SLWAI where the results was 0.81 on Cronbach alpha. As explained previously, each item is set to test different type of ESL writing anxiety as shown in the table below.

Table 1

#### *Types of writing anxiety and their items*

Type of writing anxiety	Items
Cognitive	1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, 21
Somatic	2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 19
Avoidance behaviour	4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, 22

As for levels of writing anxiety, the scores are stated as below.

Table 2

*Levels of Anxiety*

Points	Anxiety Category
Below 50	Low-anxious (LA)
51 to 64	Average-anxious (AA)
65 and above	High-anxious (HA)

CWAI: Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory was developed by Rezaei and Jafari (2014). The researchers have developed the items based on the basis of causes of writing anxiety proposed by researchers in the field which are fear of negative feedbacks from the teacher, afraid of writing tests, inadequate writing practice, insufficient writing skills, issues faced with certain writing topics, linguistic barriers, pressure for perfect written tasks, high frequency of writing assignments, time pressure and having low self-confidence (Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Bloom, 1981; Cheng, 2002; Claypool, 1980; Horwitz et al., 1986; Hyland, 2003 as cited in Rezaei and Jafari, 2014). The inventory has been adopted by a few researchers such as (Prasetyaningrum, 2021; Solangi, 2021; Wardani, 2022). For the purpose of this research, the inventory was adapted into semi-structured interview questions where the questions were reviewed and approved by an expert in the field.

Two instruments were used for this study. The SLWAI was administered to 43 students. The respondents were given a period of time to complete the survey as it was distributed online. This step was taken due to school closures in response to the pandemic COVID-19 (Huang et al., 2020). Because online distribution involves internet connectivity and device usage, a longer period of time ensures better response rates from students and reduces anxiety. The data was analysed using SPSS (Version 26) to find out the most dominant type and highest level of ESL writing anxiety in means and scores, respectively. Selected students were then interviewed to explain their views on the causes of their writing anxiety through a semi-structured interview adapted from CWAI. The responses given by the interviewees were then analysed using thematic analysis as shown below, which corresponds to (Wern and Rahmat, 2021). Each interview session lasted about 15 minutes.

Table 3

*Themes for Interview Analysis*

Theme	Item number and question
Writing experience	(3 questions- 1, 2, 8) 1. Worry about negative comments and evaluation 2. Afraid of writing tests 8. Anxious due to many writing assignments
Writing knowledge and skills	(4 questions- 3, 4, 5, 6) 3. Lack of sufficient English writing practice 4. Do not have good command of English writing techniques 5. Do not know what to write on the topic 6. Encounter linguistic problems (vocabulary, grammatical errors)
Writing attitude	(3 questions- 7, 9, 10) 7. Under pressure to offer perfect work 9. Worry to write under time constraints 10. Low confidence on English writing

**Findings***A. The Most Dominant Type of Writing Anxiety*

The first research question to be answered in this study is: what is the most dominant type of ESL writing anxiety among secondary school students? The findings are indicated in Table 4.

Table 4

*Types of Anxiety and the Mean Score*

Type of anxiety	Mean score
Cognitive anxiety	2.97
Somatic anxiety	2.93
Avoidance behaviour	2.23

Based on the table above, cognitive anxiety is the most dominant type of ESL writing anxiety, with 2.97 as the mean score. The results were followed by somatic anxiety, with 2.93 as the mean score and 2.23 for avoidance behaviour. The following table shows each mean score for the items of cognitive anxiety as described in SLWAI.



Table 5

*Items of Cognitive Anxiety and the Corresponding Means*

Items of cognitive anxiety	1. While writing in English, I am not nervous at all.	3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.	7. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others.	9. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	14. I am afraid that the other students would laugh at my English composition if they read it.	17. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.	20. I am afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	21. I am not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.
Mean	2.4884	2.8372	3.0465	3.3256	3.1163	2.6977	3.0000	3.2326

As what was apparent from the results, 5 out of 8 cognitive writing anxiety items gain more than 3.00 for their means with item number 9 (mean: 3.33) displaying most of the respondents being worried about poor grade on their writing production. This is followed by item number 21 where students are concerned if their English essays would be graded as poor (mean: 3.23). Next, item number 14 shows that the students are actually afraid if the other students would laugh at their English essays (mean: 3.12). The fourth highest mean (3.05) was seen in the item number 7 where many students are actually worried if their essays are of lower quality compared to their peers. With the mean 2.84 for item number 3, students are not too worried knowing that their essay would be evaluated. As for item number 17 (mean: 2.70), the students are not too concerned of other people's perceptions on their essays. Lastly, with the mean 2.49, students are still nervous when writing English compositions but presumably, they could manage it. These findings are consistent with that of (Rezaei and Jafari, 2014; Zhang, 2011).

*B. The Highest Level of Writing Anxiety*

The second research question addressed in this study is what level of ESL writing anxiety exists among secondary school students. The following table depicts the findings from the SLWAI.

Table 6

*Level of Writing Anxiety*

	N	Range Score	Mean	Level of Anxiety	Percentages (%)
SLWAI (Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory)	0	1.00 - 2.00		Low-anxiousness (LA)	0.00
	33	2.00 - 3.00		Average-anxiousness (AA)	76.74
	10	3.00 - 4.00		High-anxiousness (HA)	23.26

Based on the table, 33 out of 43 respondents experienced an average level of anxiety, which makes up 76.74% of the overall results. More than one fifth of the respondents have high anxiety about ESL writing tasks, or 23.26%. Notably, there was no respondent who experienced low anxiousness. Students who experience high anxiousness generally have expectations that are too high regarding their English essays. On a related note, students who experience average or medium anxiousness may have the right mindset for handling writing tasks given to them.

### C. The Causes of Writing Anxiety

The third research question is: what are the causes of ESL writing anxiety among the secondary school students. The semi-structured interview was carried out with 6 interviewees who were available and willing to give their cooperation during the home-based learning due to school closures in response to pandemic COVID-19 (Huang et al., 2020). The following table represents the interviewees' type and level of writing anxiety, which correlate to responses given during the interview session.

Table 7

*Interviewee's Type and Level of Writing Anxiety*

Pseudonym	Dominant type of writing anxiety	Level of writing anxiety
Syazleen	Somatic Anxiety	High
Fadlin	Somatic Anxiety	High
Ainul	Cognitive Anxiety	High
Suli	Cognitive Anxiety	Average
Azrina	Somatic Anxiety	Average
Ainal	Cognitive Anxiety	Average

The first theme is writing experience, which covers questions 1, 2, and 8. The following table depicts the related interview results.

Table 8

*Responses for Theme of Writing Experience*

Items under theme of writing experience	Responses
1. Worry about negative comments and evaluation	Ainal- "Yes I feel worried because I might get lower score than what I expected.. but I can make the negative comments as my improvement for my writing"
	Suli- "Yes.. because I know my grammar level. For example, when I already finished reading the instruction, I was wondering.. was it past tense or present tense"
2. Afraid of writing tests	Fadlin- "Yes, because I'm worried not having many ideas to write".
	Syazleen- "Yes.. I am scared of writing tests because I feel like so pressure to think of suitable points to write the essay"
8. Anxious due to many writing assignments	Azrina- "I would feel anxious but I think I love it because it helps me to write better."
	Ainul- "Yes because I'm worried that I can't finished all the homework in the time given."

Based on the responses, there is a recurrent use of the word "worried" among the students when responding to the questions under the theme of writing experience. For example, Ainal and Suli said that they were worried if they received a lower score, which could indicate their writing abilities when asked about their work being commented on or evaluated negatively. Fadlin and Syazleen pointed out that there is always pressure to come up with reliable points for their essays. As for Azrina and Ainul, there is a target to finish the work they received even if there are a lot of essays due, but Ainul did mention that the task may not be handled properly due to the time factor.

The second theme is writing knowledge and skills, which includes the questions numbers 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Table 9

*Responses for Theme of Writing Knowledge and Skills*

Items under theme of writing knowledge and skills	Responses
1. Lack of sufficient English writing practice	Syazleen – “Yes.. I feel anxious.. especially when time in running out during exam”
2. Do not have good command of English writing techniques	Azrina- “Yes, I got anxious and scared when I do not have the correct skills..because I could make mistakes”
3. Do not know what to write on the topic	Ainal- “Yes because when I do not know what to write, I will take a long time to think for the ideas and it will affect my time to answer the questions.”
4. Encounter linguistic problems (vocabulary, grammatical errors)	Fadlin- “Yes.. I think I need to read more to get more vocabs”

On the theme of writing knowledge and skills, Syazleen responded by saying that lack of English writing practice made her feel anxious. Azrina pointed that not having good command of English writing techniques could make her feel anxious and scared because correct skills may prevent her from writing erroneous essays. In response to not knowing what to write on the topic, Ainal shared that it could cause her more thinking time especially during

exam which altogether affected her time to write better. As for Fadlin, she responded on the problem of linguistic by saying that more vocabularies could give her a better writing.

The third theme is writing attitude which covers the questions 7, 9 and 10.

Table 10

*Responses for theme of writing attitude*

Items under theme of writing attitude	Responses
3. Under pressure to offer perfect work	Azrina- "Yes, I would feel disturbed by that. Because I really love to write well that I become scared I will disappoint my teacher and myself"
	Syazleen – "Yes, I would feel very disturbed to think of what to write.. it really disturbs"
9. Worry to write under time constraints	Ainul- "Yes, it will make me can't think any ideas for my essay."
	Suli- "Yes,,because I always feel like the time given is not enough to help me write better essays"
10. Low confidence on English writing	Fadlin- "I am confident to answer my English writing if I did a lot of exercises, read a lot of books and understand interesting phrases".
	Ainal- "I can do it but I'm not very confident because my writing skills is not great yet and there is a lot of things that I need to improve such as grammar and time management in writing."

Responding to writing attitude theme, Azrina and Syazleen both said that they felt disturbed about the pressure to offer a perfect work. Arina was thinking that it may disappoint her teacher and herself while Syazleen felt it could become burdensome to the point of unable to come up with better ideas. Responding about worry to write under time constraints, Ainul pointed that dealing with time limitation would not help her to generate more ideas while Suli thought that time given affected her abilities to come up with better writing. Talking about having low confidence on English writing, Fadlin and Ainal both shared that they need to gain more knowledge in terms of grammar, vocabularies and other writing skills to help improve their English writing.

### Discussion

While the students were found to experience cognitive anxiety as their most dominant type of writing anxiety, the results were quite predictable, which was also seen in (Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Okubay, 2020; Rabadi and Rabadi, 2020). The students may not set the target of getting excellent marks, but the effect of cognitive anxiety could drive learners to worry about negative evaluation of their work (David et al., 2018; Tsiriotakis et al.,

2017). This finding is in relation to the results of the current study, where negative evaluation of work or poor grades scored the highest mean, which is 3.33 compared to the other items of cognitive anxiety. Tsiriou et al (2017) asserted that when learners are in the state of test anxiety or fearing unfavourable evaluation towards their compositions, they undergo interference of cognitive apprehension, leading them to be unable to focus properly on the writing task given. David et al (2018) added that as their research methodology requires the participants to submit written works, the pre-test anxiety, which is somatic, has been replaced by cognitive anxiety in the post-test when students are aware that they are being graded. Cognitive anxiety makes the case inevitable, according to (Jafari, 2019; Xie and Yuan, 2020). This is because stressing linguistic challenges like grammar and a small vocabulary is part of cognitive anxiety.

Students who put in more effort on their writing assignments because they are nervous have put themselves in the category of having positive effects of anxiety, which is also helpful (Horwitz, 2017). This positive effect of anxiety helps them focus on the writing tasks at hand, which leads to improved language performance (Horwitz, 2017). Presumably, such results were seen in the study where more than 70% of the respondents experienced an average level of anxiety compared to a high level, which was only 23.26%, or 10 out of 43 respondents. But there are still things that need to be done to help students change the way they think about ESL writing tasks and lessen their anxiety, since none of the students had a low level of anxiety.

Reviewing the types and levels of ESL writing anxiety through the results of a semi-structured interview, all of the interviewees experienced some level of anxiety in terms of being scared of the possibilities that a writing task may offer and doubtful of their own capabilities to understand the instructions given and ultimately perform the writing well. Some of the interviewees have already achieved good grades in their writing examinations. Nevertheless, writing anxiety exists to a certain extent. One apparent response given was on time constraints. As for the SPM examination level, the CEFR-aligned writing examination requires students to write three essays in one hour and thirty minutes. The first essay is an email response, which is rather short, followed by part 2 where students are required to write a close-ended essay, and the last part is the most challenging as the word count must exceed part 1 and part 2, where the response is open-ended. As time constraints cannot always be dealt with efficiently, teachers and students could respond positively to the matter with informed writing classroom approaches. In response, ESL writing anxiety does affect students in the current CEFR setting.

## **Conclusion**

Generally, ESL students in Malaysia are not proficient writers. This scenario is quite apparent in researcher's teaching career dealing with secondary school students who mostly will pursue their studies to tertiary level. CEFR being an essential validation to their English writing abilities after they leave secondary school means that ESL students must master themselves as writers in order to produce better piece of writing. Apart from the difficulties in comprehending grammatical rules and sentence constructions, poor writing can be contributed to other factors. In the current study, anxiety, as an underestimated factor, was addressed. The value of this study may be found in the fact that the respondents have been subjected to the implementation of the CEFR in their English education, but their anxiety in writing has not been addressed academically. situation could spark future unforeseeable problems in their English writing abilities when the students move on to their tertiary

education, unaware that they are still bringing with them the unnoticed issues of writing anxiety. Therefore, the results gained through the application of SLWAI and CWAI are hoped to inform the author as the study conductor and other reliable parties in the field of English language education, addressing writing anxiety in the Malaysian context. While researcher always reminds her ESL students to pay more attention to learning writing well, Malaysian context of English could also interfere in students' capability to compete at higher levels as English is not spoken as a native language. It is significant to bear this in mind because the students, while not using English in their daily interactions, are more challenged in the writing process as they have to answer to the challenges that writing offers to them while feeling fearful of being erroneous due to the limitation of their L2 knowledge and capacity to improvise their ideas in the target language (Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). As the students moved to higher level of education, these limitations, if not addressed properly, could become barriers to understanding English writing better.

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