

TTLIC 2013

A glimpse into E-Mail Dialogue Journal Writing (EDJW) and writing anxiety among gifted learners

Anna Florence Thevasigamoney*, Melor Md. Yunus

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Abstract

Writing is often seen as a difficult, complex cognitive task that can be anxiety producing for many individuals including the gifted learners. Those who possess high aptitude and talent (DeMent, 2009) could also face challenges in excelling in writing as many learners choose to ignore or simply not to write because it is perceived as an exasperating experience. Gifted learners (GL) are often assumed to be competent in English language but not all gifted children have the ability to use a second language as they can be gifted in one academic area but learning disabled in another. Clearly, the severity of writing apprehension cannot be disregarded since it drains the gifted learners' motivation to write and could easily go unnoticed, crippling their efforts of becoming competent writers. Hence, teachers face an exhausting task of dealing with and reducing writing anxiety among gifted learners so as not to have their talent withering on the vine. In view of that, this paper discusses writing anxiety among gifted learners while promoting e-mail dialogue journal writing (EDJW) as a contemporary approach that gives more opportunities for gifted learners to write besides helping them to reduce their writing apprehension.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of TTLIC2013.

Keywords: E-mail dialogue journal writing; writing anxiety; gifted learners

1. Introduction

Writing anxiety among second language learners has been a fairly common topic whereby gifted learners (GL) who have an exceptional ability to learn, and capable of uncommonly high performance (Kamarulzaman, et al., 2013) could also face challenges in writing as the existence of writing anxiety among them could go unnoticed due to their competence in speaking, listening and reading which could mask the gravity of the issue. However, studies on writing anxiety among GL is still lacking in Malaysia largely due to the misconception that GL are gifted in

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +019-570-7038; fax: +06-978-1672

E-mail address: florencemalar@yahoo.com

every academic area. Hence, the current study attempts to fill the gap by looking at the aforementioned issue and incorporating technology through the use of e-mail as a medium for journal writing. It is also hoped that the present findings would assist educators to assuage writing anxiety among GL and use e-mail dialogue journal writing (EDJW) as a tool for that means.

2. Background

Dialogue journals, also known as interactive journals are a way for the teacher and students to interact in writing, on an individual basis that allows students to freely express their opinions in a non-threatening environment (Morrell, 2010). Today, the growing use of technology enables e-mail as a medium of communication between a teacher and learners by successfully integrating technology and the idea of expressing opinions through dialogue journals.

A clear benefit of dialogue journal writing (DJW) is the theory of journaling which usually advises against error correction as it is a form of free writing; a way of getting students to write more, to write for an authentic purpose (write to communicate), and to write in a low-anxiety environment (Walter-Echols, 2008). Liao & Wong (2010) stressed that creating a writing context which is anxiety-free may encourage learners' willingness to explore their thinking and express their ideas. It is essential to provide gifted students with an environment where risk-taking is tolerated, ideas are cherished and encouraged (irrespective of conformity) and where independence, creativity and autonomy are the norm (Watters & Diezmann, 2003). Thus, journals offer students the opportunity to explore and express their thoughts and ideas uninhibited by the constraining rules of language.

Today, EDJW, an extension of DJW is becoming fast accepted as a medium to promote writing. Shanmuganathan (2001) stated that e-journaling allows students to communicate with their teacher in English without much pressure and at a relaxed pace. This non-threatening environment enables learners including the GL to feel less repressed to express themselves which in turn helps to ease their writing anxiety. Nonetheless, the teachers of the gifted have the responsibility to provide opportunities for their students to develop their skills in a way that challenges and motivates them to learn (Atwell, 2008) and EDJW is highly recommended for that purpose.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Anxiety and gifted learners

Writing apprehension cannot be seen lightly as it can be devastating to any learner and more so for the GL. Onwuegbuzie (1980) in Atkinson (2011) estimates that 10-25% of all people experience writing apprehension to some degree. Many people, who are good learners in other subject areas, can experience anxiety when learning a second language (Conway, 2007) and it was believed that the GL of PERMATApintar National Gifted Center (PpNGC) experienced certain level of language anxiety despite their good performance in tests (Kamarulzaman, et al., 2013). According to Yamat, et al. (2009), some tend to assume that they must be competent in English language as the language is often associated with being gifted and its role as the language of knowledge but this is a notion that must be proven as not all GL have the ability to use a second language, because one would think in a language they are comfortable. Children can even be gifted in one academic area and learning disabled in another. Thus, abilities can be independent of one another (Winner, 1996) whereby GL may perform at an average level in some academic domain (Winner, 2000).

Yamat, et al. (2009) also pointed out an example in UKM1 and UKM2 Test for the PpNGC where only 31 out of 405 gifted children (7.6%) answered questions fully in English (they were allowed to answer in Malay or English), an indication that many gifted children are more comfortable using their native language. This may be used to reject the notion that GL are sure to have the language capability in a second language. Moreover, GL with writing anxiety may pose a bigger challenge as they may be considered to be excellent in other language skills but not writing. Hence, teachers face an exhausting task of dealing with and reducing the writing anxiety among the GL so as not to have their talent withering on the vine.

Not only that, writing demands a great deal of skills and conventions such as writing readiness and grammatical rules for the students to become proficient and effective writers. This highly demanding process of writing requires a number of skills and conventions like organization in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy in choosing the right words so there is no ambiguity of meaning and also the right use of grammatical devices to focus and emphasize ideas (Nik, et al., 2010). It is more complex in L2 contexts where learners write in language systems that may be completely different from their first language systems. As for the current study, GL who are learning English as their L2 may also face the aforementioned difficulties as they may be familiar with the L1 language system but not L2 which could be incapacitating their ability to write without feeling fretful about the task.

In fact, within the local context, Kamarulzaman, et al. (2013) explored GLs' English language anxiety in ESL setting in PpNGC, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia and found that GL have a certain level of language anxiety in the English language setting and language anxiety negatively correlates with GLs' English language performance. It was also emphasized that GL have the potential to develop their language proficiency in an appropriate language learning condition tailored according to their preference mode of learning but simultaneously allows supervision for teachers in guiding throughout the program. Thus, EDJW can potentially be a new, challenging task that propounds not only independence in deciding the topic but also the maximum length of each entry as EDJW thrives on the learner's freedom to express his opinions and navigate his learning process without feeling the need to conform to a traditional writing class whereby the topic is assigned and teacher decides the technicalities of the task.

Nonetheless, this study did not look at writing anxiety specifically so, it is apparent that there is a need for the current study so that the GLs' writing apprehension may be addressed and in turn abridged. Therefore, the gap in the research done on GL and their writing anxiety (beginning from the local context) should be filled as Smith (1997) aptly mentioned that a teacher's ignorance and avoidance of writing anxiety can only further hinder their students from improving their writing and this can be certainly true in the case of GL.

3.2. *Theory*

- Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1985) suggests that language learners might be distracted by emotional factors in language learning process (Lin, 2008) which acts as a filter either permitting or preventing input that is necessary for language acquisition (Cote, 2004). He has further claimed that the best acquisition will occur in environments where anxiety is low and defensiveness absent, or, in Krashen's terms, in contexts where the "affective filter" is low (Brown, 2000, p. 279) since environment as a nurturing tool plays a crucial role in the development of giftedness to become a distinguished talent (Al-Shabatat, et al., 2003).

Furthermore, Krashen also argued that people acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input 'in' and in his theory, affect includes motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence (Gass & Selinker, 2001 in Cote, 2004; Du, 2009). This means, if the affective filters are not lowered enough or are high, language input could not be accepted by the learner even if the learner is gifted. Additionally, Lin (2008) pointed out Krashen's view that states negative emotions are formed through the passive moods, including low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety. In certain cases, the individual may be proficient but the situation may be a fertile ground for feelings of apprehension especially when there is trepidation of negative evaluation which Vielhaber (1983) view as a characteristic of writing anxiety. Hence, this theory acknowledges the role of DJW as a motivational method of learning (Foroutan & Noordin, 2012) which could be extended to EDJW as it is able to lower learners' affective filter without negative evaluation.

3.3. *Research Questions*

The present study aims to find out if EDJW could minimize the writing anxiety among GL specifically by addressing the following questions:

- To what extent do the GL in the PERMATApintar National Gifted Center (PpNGC) have writing anxiety?
- Is there any significant difference in the GLs' pre and posttest mean scores in writing anxiety level after using EDJW?

4. Method

An intact class of 16 GL was chosen because of the familiarity with the teacher and their access to internet in the lab at PpNGC, UKM. The subjects were asked to fill in a demographic questionnaire to obtain information on gender, race and experience in using e-mail. Data were collected using the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) adapted from Cheng (2004) which measures the degree of anxiety one experiences when writing in a second language through 22 items on a four-point Likert Scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' The Cronbach alpha coefficient reported by Cheng (2004) was .91 and it was .89 for the present study. The SLWAI was administered at the beginning and end of the study and paired sample t-test was run to find out the differences between the anxiety levels.

The SLWAI was administered to find out the level of anxiety and the scores were grouped into low-anxious (LA), average-anxious (AA) and high-anxious (HA) based on Atay & Kurt (2006). Then, a pre-test was given whereby the subjects were asked to choose a topic from a list of five topics given and write a composition of about 350 words. After which, the process of writing EDJ for 14 weeks begun with a short briefing given and each subject is required to write at least one entry per week. It was not obligatory for them to write based on the topics given as they are free to choose to write about any topic of interest or continue writing about the same topic from their previous entry. After the treatment is completed, the subjects were given a writing test as a post test and SLWAI was again administered to collect the post test data.

5. Results

As suggested by Atay & Kurt (2006), the subjects were divided into groups whereby those whose mean scores obtained were equal or smaller than 58 were considered as low-anxious (LA); those with the mean scores more than 83 were categorized as high-anxious (HA), and those between 58 and 83 were labeled as average anxious (AA) in writing. Table 1 shows the subjects' level of anxiety in pre-SLWAI and post-SLWAI. Out of 16 subjects for the pre-SLWAI; 7 (43.8%), 9 (56.3%) and none were labeled as LA, AA and HA respectively while for the post-SLWAI, 9 (56.3%), 7 (43.8%) and none were categorized as LA, AA and HA respectively. Comparing the frequency of participants in the pre and post-SLWAI, it was clear that the number of LA and AA subjects have changed from pre to post-SLWAI.

Table 1. Frequency of subjects in anxiety levels

	Pre-SLWAI	Post-SLWAI
Low Anxious (LA)	7	9
Average Anxious (AA)	9	7
High Anxious (HA)	0	0

The results obtained from the paired sample t-test (Table 2) showed the mean score for the pre-SLWAI was 61.06 and the standard deviation was 10.37 while the mean score for the post-SLWAI was 58.56 and the standard deviation was 10.39. When *Sig.* value (.000) was compared with alpha (.05), it was obvious that there was a significant difference [$t(16) = 9.682, p < 0.05$] between the pre and post-SLWAI mean scores. The decrease in the mean scores obtained indicated that the level of anxiety had been lessened.

Table 2. Comparing pre and post anxiety level

	Mean	SD	t	p.
Pre	61.06	10.37		
Post	58.56	10.39	9.682	.000

6. Discussion

The present study found that the GL of PpNGC had a certain level of writing anxiety. It is revealed that the majority of the subjects in the pre-SLWAI ($f=9$) were average level and the rest ($f=7$) were at low level while the frequency of the subjects in the post-SLWAI for average was ($f=7$) and low level was ($f=9$). Nonetheless, there were no subjects categorized as high anxious in both the pre and post-SLWAI. When the frequencies were compared, it was clear that the number of average anxious (AA) subjects were reduced while the subjects with low anxiety (LA) were increased. The current finding is supported by Kamarulzaman, et al. (2013) whereby it was pointed out that gifted students are not necessarily well-versed in all fields; and it should be noted that they have hidden learning disabilities that may go unnoticed due to their compensation ability. Thus, it is evident that the GL in PpNGC do have writing anxiety to a particular level although they are not categorized as highly anxious.

Furthermore, comparing the mean scores for the pre and post-SLWAI showed that there was a significant difference and the means have decreased, an indication that writing anxiety among GL have reduced after the treatment, EDJW. It is in line with the findings of Foroutan & Noordin (2012) which showed that the e-mail group's writing anxiety has been alleviated greater than their counterparts in the conventional group. Kupelian (2001) in Foroutan & Noordin (2012) postulated that e-mail's delay system reduces anxiety higher than other forms of communication while Dillon (2011) underlined that digital writing in email form is advantageous over face-to-face methods when employed to gifted young adolescents who may be reluctant to disclose information within school-based settings. Moreover, Shanmuganathan (2001) concur that this is mainly due to the role of e-mail that helps create a comfortable and relaxed learning environment where writing apprehension is reduced tremendously.

7. Conclusion

Writing anxiety can be detrimental especially to GL as they are able to mask it under layers of other superior abilities. Although they may not be highly anxious but if left unnoticed or unaddressed, it could certainly snowball into a lack of ability to express themselves clearly. Based on the findings of the current study, the notion that GL are exceptional in all the skills should be revisited as they may very well be lacking in certain skills.

Not only that, the use of technology in the gifted classroom is imperative (Atwell, 2008) whereby incorporation of instruction that uses the computer and other technology as a mind tool is essential in gifted education (Sheffield, 2007). This is possible through EDJW, a tool to alleviate writing anxiety and to promote writing skills among GL who may feel less enthusiastic about writing. Perhaps teachers need to think of in terms of encouraging tomorrow's minds rather than yesterday's minds (Labuda, 1974) and promoting EDJW to reduce writing anxiety is indeed stepping into what the future holds for the gifted learners.

References

- Al-Shabatat, A. M., Abbas, M. & Ismail, H. N. 2003. The Direct and Indirect Effects of Environmental Factors on Nurturing Intellectual Giftedness. *International Journal of Special Education* Vol 24 No 3 20. <http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ877944.pdf>
- Atay, D. & Kurt, G. 2006. Prospective Teachers and L2 Writing Anxiety. *Asian EFL Journal* Vol. 8, No. 4. http://asian-efl-journal.com/December_2006_EBook.pdf#page=100
- Atkinson, P.B. 2011. Exploring Correlations between Writing Apprehension, Academic Rational Beliefs, and Stress and Coping behaviors in College Students. *Proceedings of the NewYork State Communication Association*: Vol. 2010, Article 1. <http://docs.rwu.edu/nycsaproceedings/vol2010/iss1/1>
- Atwell, L. 2008. Technology in the Gifted Classroom. <http://www2.muw.edu/~aatwell/PORTFOLIO/paper.doc>
- Brown, H. D. 2000. *Principles of Language Learning & Teaching* (4th Ed). New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Cheng, Y. S. 2004. A measure of second language writing anxiety: Scale development and preliminary validation. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 13 (2004) 313–335. [http://www.bwgriffin.com/gsu/courses/edur9131/content/5_FA_anxiety_somatic\(body\)_cognitive.pdf](http://www.bwgriffin.com/gsu/courses/edur9131/content/5_FA_anxiety_somatic(body)_cognitive.pdf)

- Conway, J. 2007. Anxiety in Second Language Learning: Causes and Solutions. purple.niagara.edu/jhuang/380PaperJennifer.doc
- Cote, R. A. 2004. Adult Second Language Acquisition in Negative Environments. <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~rcote/SPH541/AdultSecondLanguageAcquisitioninNegativeEnvironments.pdf>
- DeMent, L. 2009. The Relationship of Self-Evaluation, Writing Ability, and Attitudes toward Writing among Gifted Grade 7 Language Arts Students. <http://gradworks.umi.com/3342482.pdf>
- Du, X. 2009. The Affective Filter in Second Language Teaching. *Asian Social Science* Vol. 5, No. 8 August 2009. <http://journal.ccsenet.org/index.php/ass/article/viewFile/3457/3131>
- Foroutan, M. & Noordin, N. 2012. Effect of Dialogue Journal Writing through the Use of Conventional Tools and E-mail on Writing Anxiety in the ESL Context. *English Language Teaching* Vol. 5, No. 1; January 2012. <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/viewFile/13872/9518>, <http://iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol7-issue2/H0723542.pdf>
- Kamarulzaman, MH., Ibrahim, N., Yunus, MM. & Ishak, NM. 2013. Language Anxiety among Gifted Learners in Malaysia. *English Language Teaching*; Vol. 6, No. 3; 2013. <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/download/24449/15454>
- Labuda, M. 1974. Gifted and Creative Pupils: Reasons for Concern. In. Labuda, M. *Creative Reading for Gifted Learners: A Design for Excellence*. <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED094357.pdf>
- Liao, M. & Wong, C. 2010. Effects of Dialogue Journals on L2 Students' Writing Fluency, Reflections, Anxiety, and Motivation. http://www.nus.edu.sg/ceic/research/books/relt/vol9/no2/139to170_liao.pdf
- Lin, G. H. C. 2008. Pedagogies Proving Krashen's Theory of Affective Filter. *Hwa Kang Journal of English Language & Literature*, No. 14 (July 2008) 113-131. <http://ir.cmu.edu.tw/ir/bitstream/310903500/42152/1/ED503681.pdf>
- Morrell, S. B. 2010. Dialogue Journals: A Non-Threatening Way to Correct Written Language Errors. <http://digitalcommons.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi>
- Nik, Y. A., Hamzah, A. & Rafidee, H. 2010. A Comparative Study on the Factors Affecting the Writing Performance among Bachelor Students. *International Journal of Educational Research and Technology*, Vol. 1 (1) June 2010 54-59. <http://www.soeagra.com/ijert/vol1/ijert7.pdf>
- Shanmuganathan, T. 2001. E-mail: A Tool for Teaching Writing. *Journal of NELTA* Vol6, No.1 July, 2001. <http://www.nepjol.info/index.php/NELTA/article/download/3531/3045>
- Sheffield, C.C. 2007. Technology and the Gifted Adolescent: Higher Order Thinking, 21st Century Literacy, and the Digital Native. http://www.ncsu.edu/project/meridian/sum2007/gifted/meridian_summer102007.pdf
- Smith, L. 1997. Writing anxiety and the adult student: causes, effects, and solutions. <http://thekeep.eiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1253&context=theses>
- Vielhaber, M. E. 1983. Coping with Communication Anxiety: Strategies to Reduce Writing Apprehension. *Business Communication Quarterly* 1983 46: 22. <http://bcq.sagepub.com/content/46/1/22.full.pdf+html>
- Winner, E. 1996. *Gifted Children: Myths and Realities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Winner, E. 2000. The Origins and Ends of Giftedness. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.110.1265&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Walter-Echols, E. 2008. Journaling as writing practice, reflection, and personal expression. *CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching: Selected Papers*, Volume 4, 2008, pp. 120-131. http://www.camtesol.org/Download/Earlier_Publications/Selected_Papers_Vol.4_2008.pdf
- Watters, J. J. & Diezmann, C. M. 2003. The Gifted Student in Science: Fulfilling Potential. *Australian Science Teachers Journal* 49(3):46-53. <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/1692/1/1692.pdf>
- Yamat, H., Alias, A. & Aziz, A. A. 2009. Bahasa dan Pengajaran Bahasa bagi Kanak-kanak Pintar Cerdas. In. Noriah Mohd Ishak, Rosadah Abd. Majid & Siti Fatimah Mohd. Yassin (Eds.). *PERMATAPintar NEGARA: Pengalaman UKM*, pg 145 – 154. Bangi: Pusat PERMATAPintar Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia