

## Iranian EFL Students' Perceptions of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety and Perfectionism in Essay Writing

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### Abstract

*Mastering writing skills is an essential criterion for EFL students who desire to fully invest in their academic discipline. While it is crucial to develop numerous writing abilities to communicate effectively, the research shows that the affective variables, such as self-esteem, perfectionism, stress, anxiety, and burnout, exert a profound negative influence both on the process and product of writing. To explore the devastating effects of these constructs beyond, the study aims to investigate the interactive impact of anxiety and perfectionism on essay writing among Iranian EFL students (n=85). The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory of Cheng (2004) and the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale of Hewitt and Flett (1990) were employed to measure the participants' perceived writing anxiety and perfectionism. A quantitative research method was employed in the collection and analysis of the data. The results showed a medium level of FL writing anxiety and perfectionism among the participants. They also revealed that the most prevalent types of anxiety and perfectionism among them were cognitive and self-oriented, respectively. Finally, the results disclosed a strong positive relationship between their anxiety and perfectionistic tendencies. Thus, it was concluded that anxiety and perfectionism may interactively challenge EFL students more in their writing activities. The results are beneficial in deepening the understanding of teachers and researchers in the field pedagogically and practically.*

*Keywords: anxiety, EFL students, essay writing, perfectionism*

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## 1. Introduction

An academic essay is a focused piece of writing that develops an idea or argument using evidence, analysis, and interpretation. The Oxford online dictionary defines it as “a short piece of writing on a particular subject.” Likewise, Langan (2011) declares that “an essay is simply a paper of several paragraphs” supporting “a single point” (p. 337). Scholars (e.g., Caplan & Johns, 2022; Frastiwi & Sari, 2020; Siahaan & Sinaga, 2020) generally characterize it as an essentially linear and well-structured form of writing that deals with serious and objective subjects and requires clarity in purpose.

Essay writing plays an indispensable part in EFL learning. It is a great way to build up students' writing skills and increase their quest for knowledge. Writing an essay stimulates creativity and cultivates a positive sense of curiosity, which is an essential part of a successful academic career. This sense helps the students seek out knowledge on issues of interest. By gaining information on different aspects, they will be able to make better judgments in their personal and professional lives. Essay writing also helps students increase their critical thinking and analytical skills. Moreover, it enables them to become independent thinkers in accomplishing the given writing tasks, and thus helps them create their own writing style. For its adherence to certain rules, strategies, and stylistic conventions, essay writing can help students communicate their ideas clearly and effectively as well (Robertson, 2013). In addition to these, essay writing is an effective tool for students to enhance their knowledge of a topic. By writing essays, students get to review different arguments and examples, which become palpable to them during the writing. When such knowledge passes to other subjects, it makes learning effective. With practice and determination, one can become proficient in essay writing; however, essay writing is not an easy process. To write a qualified essay, students should learn how to fashion a coherent set of ideas into an argument, analyse and discuss them critically, present them through appropriate language, and evaluate them to get corrective feedback (Caplan & Johns, 2022; Dhanya & Alamelu, 2019).

Writing has been given great emphasis in the educational system of Iran. Under an integrated system, all university programs “must implement the curriculum designed by the Supreme Council of the Institute of Research and Planning in Higher Education” (Samir, 2022, p. 59). Accordingly, English departments offer various writing courses (e.g., paragraph development, essay writing, and project writing) whose objectives are to sharpen students' writing skills for academic, professional, or personal purposes. One of the most practiced writing activities is essay writing because it is believed that this form of writing will enable the students to conveniently create and practice their basic writing skills, and thus will serve as a foundation for longer, more complex forms. The essay types taught to the students in the course often include descriptive, expository, argumentative, persuasive, reflective, narrative, definition, process, cause/effect, and comparison/contrast. These are the five-paragraph essays that follow a specific pattern. According to Siahaan and Sinaga (2020), a well-organised essay has three crucial components: introduction, body, and conclusion. In a five-paragraph essay, the introduction introduces the topic, develops what will be covered, and represents three main ideas of the essay in a thesis sentence. Each of them, then, is introduced, developed, and supported in a body paragraph. Finally, the conclusion paragraph summarises the basic ideas and concludes the argument logically. Developing a writing framework like this helps the writer create a plan before writing, break down the writing task into more manageable parts, and present the argument coherently.

Research in the context of Iran has shown that a noteworthy percentage of EFL students fall behind the expected proficiency and competence in writing (e.g., Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011; Derakhshan & Karimian, 2020; Esfandiari et al., 2022; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022; Jafari & Ansari, 2012). The failure to develop a well-organized and insightful piece of writing can be attributed to a variety of factors (Dhanya & Alamelu, 2019). Researchers often consider the debilitating influences of psychological constructs (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy, stress, and anxiety) as the main agents in the way of developing skills and strategies necessary for writing (Chen, 2022; Jin et al., 2021) because emotions and moods can induce the cognitive processes relevant to learning, such as attention, memory storage

and retrieval, and problem-solving (Pekrun et al., 2018; Tyng et al., 2017). Vilhunen et al. (2022), for instance, examined the role of epistemic emotions (i.e., surprise, curiosity, enjoyment, confusion, anxiety, frustration, and boredom) in relation to learning. They revealed that the epistemic emotions of curiosity and enjoyment correlated positively with performance, whereas frustration and boredom correlated negatively. This means that the emotional stressors negatively affected the learning processes of the subjects. Similarly, Sainio et al. (2021) argued that academic emotions are fundamental to students' learning and achievement "since positive emotions can lead to higher achievement, while negative emotions have been associated with lower learning outcomes" (p.386).

A body of literature suggests that both anxiety and perfectionism are related to learning outcomes (Lee & Anderman, 2020). Perfectionism can produce a flood of anxious thoughts and feelings when an individual's performance falls below her/his excessively high standards (Fang & Liu, 2022). However, the role of a single psychological construct, such as motivation, stress, anxiety, and burnout has usually been investigated in relation to writing; that is, the survey of their interactive effects on writing processes has almost been left untouched. So, the significance of the present study lies in the fact that it examines the interaction between anxiety and perfectionism in essay writing. Thus, we believe that the negative interplay of anxiety and perfectionism will increase the hindrance of the writing process and production; that is, students experiencing writing anxiety and bearing perfectionist tendencies at the same time will find it more difficult to thrive in the actions required to produce a written piece of writing (Milena, 2015). Even, no such research has yet been conducted in the EFL context of Iran. Apart from this contribution of the study to the literature, we identified methodological inefficiencies in some previous FL writing anxiety studies done in the Iranian EFL context. Taking these reasons into account and striving to deepen our understanding of the problems of EFL students in essay writing as well, the study aims at measuring the FL writing anxiety and perfectionism levels of the subjects, determining their types, and exploring the interactive influences of these constructs on their writing processes.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Anxiety and Foreign Language Learning**

Anxiety is "a state of intense agitation, foreboding, tension, and dread, occurring from a real or perceived threat of impending danger" (Mayer, 2008, p.4). Rachman (2004) argues that "anxiety is the tense, unsettling anticipation of a threatening but vague event; a feeling of uneasy suspense" (p. 3). A distinction is often made between facilitating and debilitating anxiety in learning (Luo et al., 2020; Sabti et al., 2019). The former "motivates learners to overcome the challenge of new learning tasks, encouraging them to pay extra efforts to succeed in that task", while the latter "prompts learners to avoid the new learning task to flee from anxiety feelings" (Al-Khasawneh, 2016, pp. 138-139). According to Horwitz (2001), anxiety has been differentiated into 'trait', 'state', and 'situation specific'. The first refers to a consistent personality that is pertinent across several circumstances, the second pictures a type of anxiety experienced at a given moment, and the latter denotes a form of anxiety essentially stimulated by situational factors (e.g., speaking in the classroom, taking an exam, or being called on by someone).

Foreign language learning anxiety (FLLA) is a special kind of situation-specific anxiety. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), earlier studies in the field contemplated FLLA as trait anxiety or state anxiety. Thus they could not account for its true picture. Therefore, Horwitz et al. (1986), in their pioneering work, examined it as a separate phenomenon and argued that FLLA is distinct from all types of anxiety (He, 2018). Having shaped the theoretical framework of FLLA, they described anxiety as a "subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (He, 2018, p.2), and defined FLLA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 128).

Many studies have uncovered the negative consequence of anxiety in foreign language (FL) learning (Chen et al., 2022; Dikmen, 2021; Djafri & Wimbarti, 2018; Jin et al., 2021; Teimouri et al., 2019; Zhang, 2019b). For instance, Horwitz et al. (1986) realized the detrimental effect of FL anxiety on students' confidence, self-esteem, and participation. Moreover, MacIntyre (2017) highlighted that students with FL anxiety can experience four cascading processes: inhibition, coping, distracting thoughts, and physical reactions. In a meta-analysis of 37 studies among 26,589 students, Zhou et al. (2022) also reported a strong negative link between FL anxiety and FL self-efficacy, that is, "as many students have high FL anxiety, they often have low FL self-efficacy, and they fall short of their potential FL learning and use" (p. 10). Similarly, a significant negative correlation was observed between FL anxiety and the student's academic success in a study done by Han et al. (2022). Furthermore, Male (2018) showed that most of the Indonesian students were more anxious about writing skills, followed by reading, speaking, and listening in their language learning processes. However, the fact that FL anxiety is "an important predictor of success in foreign language learning" has been proven in the context (Kotufa & Curie-Skłodowska, 2018, p. 101).

## **2.2 Foreign Language Writing Anxiety**

Foreign language writing anxiety (FLWA) refers to the anxious feelings that negatively disrupt the process of writing when doing a writing task (Li, 2022; MacIntyre, 2017). Cheng (2004) maintained that "L2 writing anxiety is a relatively stable anxiety disposition associated with L2 writing, which involves a variety of dysfunctional thoughts, increased physiological arousal, and maladaptive behaviours" (p.319). Based on this conceptualization, he developed a self-perceived three-dimensional measure to assess the anxiety levels of the individuals and determine their types. The measure called the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) includes somatic anxiety (SA), cognitive anxiety (CA), and avoidance behaviour (AB). Somatic anxiety "refers to one's perception of the physiological effects of the anxiety experience, as reflected in increased autonomic arousal and unpleasant feeling states such as nervousness and tension" (Cheng, 2004, p.316). The physical symptoms of this type of anxiety are shown in accelerated heartbeats, perspiration, or even blushing. Cognitive anxiety denotes "the mental aspect of anxiety experience, including negative expectations, preoccupation with performance, and concern about others' perceptions" (Cheng, 2004, p.316). Finally, Avoidance behaviour picturing the behavioural aspect of the anxiety experience describes the instances of writing avoidance (Cheng, 2004).

Numerous empirical studies have established that anxiety can exert a profound inverse effect on L2 writing. Cheng (2002), for instance, observed that highly anxious writers usually tend to avoid taking writing courses. The findings of the study by Tsiriotakis et al. (2017) among Greek students also validated "that foreign language writing anxiety negatively affects foreign language learning and performance" (p. 1). Moreover, in a case study among Taiwanese graduate EFL students Meng and Tseng (2013) reported that the main cause of not being able to logically synthesize ideas was anxiety. Likewise, Jalok and Idris, (2020) revealed that Malaysian students with higher levels of writing anxiety put forward less qualified writings. When their anxiety levels were lowered with the provision of writing metacognition, their performance increased. However, studies have documented the influential role of anxiety on writing by gauging the subjects' anxiety levels (Berk & Ünal, 2017; Sabti et al, 2019; Syarifudin, 2020), determining their anxiety types (Wern & Rahmat, 2021; Quvanch & Na, 2022), describing their anxiety symptoms (Aripin & Rahmat, 2021), and exploring the sources and effects of anxiety (Lababidi, 2021; Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020). They have also highlighted its detrimental impact on writing by means of examining its relationship with factors, such as self-efficacy (Abdel Latif, 2019; Başkan, 2021; Ho, 2016), performance (Nawaz, 2021), motivation (Alico, 2016; Tsao et al., 2017), learning (Kusumaningputri et al., 2018), demographic variables (Qadir et al., 2021), writing environments (Genç & Yaylı, 2019), online resources (Zhang, 2019a), strategies (Bailey & Almusharraf, 2022; Jawas, 2019; Tsiriotakis et al., 2017), etc. As implied from these studies, writing apprehension is still a major bone of contention in EFL circles for its converse impact on both the process and product of writing.

### **2.3 Perfectionism and Writing Anxiety**

Perfectionism is viewed as a 'pervasive neurotic style' and "often involves feelings of failure, guilt, shame, and low self-esteem" (Endleman et al., 2022, p. 91). It refers to a natural tendency to consider anything short of perfection as unacceptable (Fang & Liu, 2022). Hewitt and Flett (1991) assume that "perfectionism is mainly due to the improper cognitive manipulation of the ideal self" (Fang & Liu, 2022, p. 356). Tziner and Tanami (2013) also construe it "as a constant striving for perfection" (p.65). Similarly, Curran and Hill (2019) consider it "a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluation" (p. 410). Moreover, Shafran et al. (2002) describe it as "overdependence of self-evaluation on the determined pursuit of personally demanding, self-imposed standards in at least one highly salient domain despite adverse consequences" (p.778). Although there is no consistency among scholars upon its definition, the central feature of perfectionism is the setting of high achievement standards (Molnar et al., 2023).

Two types of perfectionism have generally been identified in the literature: *Adaptive* and *maladaptive*. Adaptive perfectionism is "striving for reasonable and realistic standards" (Flett & Hewitt, 2002, p.14). It has been interconnected to a host of positive outcomes, such as work engagement, self-esteem, self-satisfaction, psychological well-being, and interaction (Kanten & Yeşiltaş, 2015; Stoeber et al., 2020). Maladaptive perfectionism, on the other hand, denotes "striving for excessively high standards due to fears of failure and concerns about disappointing others" (Flett & Hewitt, 2002, p.14). This type of perfectionism has been associated with several negative outcomes, such as higher levels of depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, chronic self-doubt, and self-criticism. It has also been argued that maladaptive perfectionism discharges one's positive emotions and leaves negative effects on the mental and psychological health of the individual (Stoeber, 2015; Stoeber et al., 2020).

Hewitt and Flett (1991), the honorable figures of the field, put forward an influential model for assessing perfectionism which includes three dimensions: *Self-oriented*, *other-oriented*, and *socially prescribed* (Martin et al., 2022). Self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) refers to a requirement for the self to be perfect. Hewitt and Flett (1991) describe SOP as "setting exacting standards for oneself and stringently evaluating and censuring one's own behaviour" (p. 457). If one fails to meet the expectations, he/she will criticize herself/himself. Other-oriented perfectionism (OOP) denotes the belief that one sets unrealistic expectations for others and demands them to strive for perfection. In other words, it "means that individuals presuppose unrealistic goals for important others and require others to achieve perfection" (Fang & Liu, 2022, p. 357). One will highly be critical of others if they fail to meet the expectations. Socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) indicates "the individual's efforts to meet the expectations of significant others for self, fearing others' disappointment in themselves, and the desire to be perfect in the eyes of others" (Fang & Liu, 2022, p. 357). Indeed, it involves the belief that others are demanding perfection from one to attain their prescribed expectations, and others will be highly critical of one if he/she fails to meet those expectations. In the model, the self-oriented and socially prescribed forms of perfectionism are directed at oneself, whereas the other-oriented form levels at others (Stoeber, 2015).

Numerous empirical studies have shown the detrimental link between perfectionism and the distress variables, such as anxiety, suicidal preoccupation, stress, depression, and burnout (Fang & Liu, 2022; Wang et al., 2019). For example, Lee and Anderman (2020) highlighted that perfectionism is "a significant predictor of a wide range of psychological problems" (p. 1). Similarly, Flett et al. (2016) confirmed that perfectionism is associated with various indices of stress, distress, and maladjustment. In fact, they proved that around 25-30 percent of adolescents were negatively impacted by perfectionism in terms of their greater risk for the development of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Moreover, Dewaele (2017) found a significant positive correlation between FL anxiety and perfectionism among three different groups of English learning students. In the study of Lababidi (2021) about the writing anxiety among freshmen Lebanese EFL learners it was also found that 53 percent of the participants suffered from perfectionism. Finally, Khosravi et al. (2023) reported no association

between perfectionism and writing performance among Iranian English translation students in performing IELTS writing tasks, while they indicated a significant negative relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance in the study.

As implied from these studies, anxiety and perfectionism often go hand in hand and can substantially contribute to the student's achievement goals. Perfectionism and anxiety are linked because perfectionists set unrealistic standards for themselves and use them to measure their self-worth. When they fail to achieve the set goals, they often become anxious. The more they worry, the more stress and anxiety they may experience. Being so focused on remaining perfect can leave the person to become distracted and less mindful of managing their emotions and lack of coping skills. To break free, perfectionists need to first identify their own perfectionist tendencies, set achievable goals for themselves, practice mindfulness and meditation, let go of control, replace negative thoughts with more positive, helpful ones, be realistic in their goals, and seek professional help. They should also learn how to manage their anxiety sources. To help Iranian EFL students alleviate maladaptive anxiety and perfectionism, the present study tries to explore the interaction of anxiety and perfectionism in writing essays by posing the following research questions:

RQ 1. To what extent do Iranian undergraduate students experience FL writing anxiety and perfectionism in essay writing?

RQ 2. What are the students' categories of FL writing anxiety (i.e., SA, CA, and AB) and perfectionism (i.e., SOP, OOP, and SPP) in essay writing?

RQ 3. What is the nature of the interplay between FL writing anxiety and perfectionism among the students in essay writing?

### **3. Research Methods**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The type of research method employed in the study was a quantitative one that relies on measuring variables using a numerical system, analyzing these measurements by a variety of statistical models, and reporting relationships and associations among the studied variables (Jung, 2019; Rana et al., 2021). The purpose is to find patterns and averages, make predictions, test causal relationships, and generalize results to wider populations.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants contributing to the present study were EFL students (n=85) majoring in English Language Literature at Azerbaijan Shahid Madani University in Tabriz/Iran. There were 27 males (31.8%) and 58 females (68.2%) in their fourth or fifth semester of study. In their first three semesters, they had taken 'Writing I' and 'Writing II' courses which focused on sentence structure and paragraph development. They followed these basic writing skills by taking an advanced writing course, i.e., 'Essay Writing', whose focus was on enabling students to develop 5-paragraph essays in different text types, such as descriptive, expository, argumentative, persuasive, reflective, narrative, definition, process, cause/effect, and comparison/contrast.

#### **3.3 Instruments**

The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) was employed to measure the self-perceived writing anxiety of EFL students. The measure consists of 22 items in three subscales of somatic anxiety (items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15 and 19), cognitive anxiety (items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20 and 21), and avoidance behaviour (items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18 and 22), where seven items (1, 4, 7, 17, 18, 21 and 22) should be reversed before counting the total score. Respondents are required to answer these items through a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score on the scale ranges from 22 to 110. High internal consistency and

reliability ( $r=0.85$ ) were reported for the scale by Cheng (2004). However, the reliability of the scale in the study was  $r=0.91$ . Moreover, the reliability of the CA, AB, and SA dimensions were  $r=0.80$ ,  $r=0.81$ , and  $r=0.85$ , respectively.

Additionally, a short version of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) developed by Hewitt and Flett (1990) was used to assess the participants' degree of perfectionism. It consists of 21 items, including self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed dimensions, each with 7 items. Participants indicate their responses on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (disagree) to 7 (agree). The total score on the scale ranges from 21 to 147, where the higher scores indicate higher levels of perfectionism. Acceptable reliability and validity were reported for the measure by Hewitt and Flett (1991). However, the reliability of the measure in the study was  $r=0.85$ . Moreover, the reliabilities of the SOP, OOP, and SPP dimensions were  $r= 0.77$ ,  $r= 0.72$ , and  $r= 0.81$ , respectively.

### 3.4 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Using a convenience sampling procedure, the researcher administered the anonymous questionnaires to the students in their regular classes. To keep with the research ethics, the research objectives were clearly explained to them before the questionnaire began. They were also reassured that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that the provided data were only used for research purposes. After granting their consent, they were asked to honestly provide their responses. No time limit was set for answering the items. However, most of them finished it in 30 minutes. To have accurate data results, some incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analysis. Our final decision was taken with the data coming from 85 participants. The collected data were entered into SPSS version 26 for analysis. To answer the research questions, descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency and percentage) were used to show the spread of the participants' perceived anxiety and perfectionism, while inferential statistics, including mean, Spearman correlation, chi-square, and t-test were employed for determining and explaining the potential relationships among the variables.

Cheng (2004) and Hewitt and Flett (1990) did not propose any cut-off points for their scales: Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety and perfectionism. As Cheng (2004) argued, "a higher score obtained thereupon indicates a higher level of L2 writing anxiety" (Cheng, 2004, p.326). To obtain an appropriate cut-off point for our study, the perfect scores of the scale were simply divided into three equal quantities; that is, the scores of those within the 33.3 percent of high, moderate, and low scores of the total range were perceived as high, moderate, and low levels of anxiety and perfectionism, respectively. Likewise, the groups for anxiety (i.e., anxious and non-anxious) and perfectionism (i.e., perfectionist and non-perfectionist) were identified based on 50 percent of the perfect scores. See Table 1.

**Table 1:** Cut-off points of anxiety and perfectionism

SCALE	PERFECT SCORE RANGE	LEVELS				GROUPS		
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Non-anxious</i>	<i>Anxious</i>	<i>Non-perfectionist</i>	<i>Perfectionist</i>
Anxiety	22-110	22-50	51-81	82-110	22-66	67-110	-	-
Cut-off Points*	F=89 100%	F=29 32.6%	F=31 34.8%	F=29 32.6%	F=45 50.6%	F=44 49.4%	-	-
Perfectionism	21-147	21-62	63-105	106-147	-	-	21-84	85-147
Cut-off Points*	F=127 100%	F=42 33.1%	F=43 33.8%	F=42 33.1%	-	-	F=64 50.4%	F=63 49.6%

*Note:* \* The cut-off points belong to the researcher.  
F refers to the frequency of perfect scores

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Levels of Writing Anxiety and Perfectionism

Based on the suggested cut-off points, the results of descriptive statistics revealed that most of the sampled students experienced a moderate level of writing anxiety (75.3%) and perfectionism (49.4%). The grouping results also disclosed that most of them were non-anxious (60%) but perfectionist (80%). See Table 2.

**Table 2:** Anxiety and perfectionism levels

SCALE	OBSERVED SCORE RANGE	LEVELS			GROUPS			
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Non-anxious</i>	<i>Anxious</i>	<i>Non-perfectionist</i>	<i>Perfectionist</i>
Anxiety	24-110	24-50	51-81	82-110	24-66	67-110	-	-
	N=85	N=16	N=64	N=5	N=51	N=34	-	-
	100%	18.8%	75.3%	5.9%	60%	40%	-	-
Perfectionism	24-142	24-62	63-105	106-142	-	-	24-84	85-142
	N=85	N=3	N=42	N=40	-	-	N=17	N=68
	100%	3.5%	49.4%	47.1%	-	-	20%	80%

### 4.2 Types of Writing Anxiety and Perfectionism

Descriptive results for writing anxiety types, calculated on the total mean score, revealed that *Cognitive Anxiety* (38.35%) was the most common type of writing anxiety among the students, followed by *Somatic Anxiety* (32.46%) and *Avoidance Behaviour* (29.18%), respectively. The perfectionism results also disclosed that *Self-oriented* (45.09%) was the most prevalent type of perfectionism among the students, followed by *Socially Prescribed* (36.72%) and *Other-oriented* (18.18%), respectively. See Table 3.

**Table 3:** Types of writing anxiety and perfectionism

SCALES	TYPES	N	PERCENT	SUM SCORE	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
Anxiety	CA	85	38.35	2041	24.01	6.36
	SA	85	32.46	1731	20.36	5.79
	AB	85	29.18	1556	18.30	5.67
	Total	85	%100	5328	62.68	15.44
Perfectionism	SOP	85	45.09	3420	40.23	7.61
	OOP	85	18.18	1379	16.22	5.73
	SPP	85	36.72	2785	32.76	8.16
	Total	85	%100	7584	89.21	13.77

*Note:* Somatic Anxiety = SA, Cognitive Anxiety = CA, and Avoidance behaviour = AB.  
Self-oriented Perfectionism = (SOP), Other-oriented Perfectionism = (OOP), and Socially Prescribed Perfectionism = (SPP).

### 4.3 The Relationship between Writing Anxiety and Perfectionism

A Pearson Product-Moment correlation was run to investigate the correlational relationship between the students' writing anxiety perceptions and their perfectionist tendencies. The results indicated a considerably positive significant correlation between the variables ( $r=.744$ ,  $p<0.000$ ). See Table 4.



**Table 4:** Correlations between writing anxiety and perfectionism

SCALES		PERFECTIONISM			
		SOP	OOP	SPP	
Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	.744**	.783**	.322**	.357**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.008	.000
	N	85	85	85	85
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.553	0.613	0.103	0.127
	R <sup>2</sup> percentage	55.3 %	61.3%	10.3%	12.7%
CA	Pearson Correlation	.662**	.711**	.353**	.488**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.015	.000
	N	85	85	85	85
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.438	0.505	0.124	0.238
	R <sup>2</sup> percentage	43.8 %	50.5%	12.4 %	23.8 %
SA	Pearson Correlation	.643**	.699**	.358**	.488**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.012	.000
	N	85	85	85	85
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.413	0.488	0.128	0.238
	R <sup>2</sup> percentage	41.3 %	48.8 %	12.8 %	23.8 %
AB	Pearson Correlation	.627**	.620**	.431**	.416**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	85	85	85	85
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.393	0.384	0.185	0.173
		39.3 %	38.4 %	18.5 %	17.3 %

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).  
R<sup>2</sup> refers to the common variance

The correlation between the CA, AB, and SA dimensions of writing anxiety and total perfectionism and its subscales were also checked. Likewise, significant positive correlations were observed between the writing anxiety dimensions of CA, AB, and SA on one hand and the total perfectionism and the SOP, OOP, and SPP subscales on the other hand. However, all three types of anxiety (i.e., CA, AB, and SA) correlated more strongly with the SOP subscale of the MPS than with its OOP and SPP subscales. See Table 4.

The statistical analyses were followed to determine the relationship between the anxious and non-anxious groups on the one hand and the perfectionist and non-perfectionist groups on the other hand. The results of a chi-square test for independence showed a significant moderate relationship between the groups  $\chi^2 (1, n=85) = 12.16, P=0.000, P<0.05; phi = 0.4$ . See Table 5.

**Table 5:** Cross-tabulation of the groups

GROUPS		PERFECTIONISM						CHI-SQUARE TEST			
		<i>Perfectionist</i>		<i>Non-perfectionist</i>		<i>Total</i>		<i>value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>phi</i>
		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>				
Anxiety	Anxious	34	100	0	0	34	100	12.16	1	.000	.40
	Non-anxious	34	66.7	17	33.3	51	100				
	Total	68	80%	17	20%	85	100%				

Lastly, the t-test results also corroborated a significantly large difference between the perfectionist and non-perfectionist groups' perception of anxiety ( $t (83) = 6.678, P=0.000, P< 0.05; \eta^2 = 0.209, \eta^2 > 0.14$ ). See Table 6.

**Table 6:** Perfectionist and non-perfectionist groups and writing anxiety

SUB-SCALES	GROUP STATISTICS				SHAPIRO-WILK'S NORMALITY TEST			LEVENE'S TEST		T-TEST			
	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Statistic	df	Sig.	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	$\eta^2$
Overall anxiety	Perfectionist	68	67.22	12.85	.983	85	.317	.090	.765	6.678	83	0.000	.209
	Non-perfectionist	17	44.53	11.08									
	Total	85	62.68	15.44									
CA	Perfectionist	68	25.57	5.48	.990	85	.747	.006	.937	5.176	83	0.000	.137
	Non-perfectionist	17	17.76	5.90									
	Total	85	24.01	6.36									
SA	Perfectionist	68	21.92	4.94	.990	85	.779	.009	.924	5.881	83	0.000	.170
	Non-perfectionist	17	14.11	4.67									
	Total	85	20.36	5.79									
AB	Perfectionist	68	19.72	5.22	.975	85	.094	2.84	.096	5.280	83	0.000	.142
	Non-perfectionist	17	12.64	3.50									
	Total	85	18.30	5.67									

## 5. Discussion

The present study aimed to determine the writing anxiety and perfectionism levels and types of Iranian EFL students and investigate the possible relationships between them. The results revealed that the participants mainly experienced a moderate level of writing anxiety (see Table 2). This result is consistent with the study of Olanezhad (2015) who observed a moderate level of writing anxiety among Iranian EFL undergraduate students majoring in English translation, teaching, and literature. It also supports the studies by Cahyono et al. (2016) and Quvanch and Na (2022) who recounted similar results among their participants. Yet, it is contradictory with the results of some studies (e.g., Cheng, 2002; Genç & Yaylı, 2019; Lababidi, 2021; Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020; Rezaei et al., 2014; Syarifudin, 2020; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2017; Wahyuni & Umam, 2017; Wern & Rahmat, 2021) which reported high levels of writing anxiety for the participants.

The moderate level of writing anxiety may be attributed to the employment of process writing techniques in our classes. In accordance with the goals of the approach, we explained the processes of text organization and construction in different text types. Following that, the explanations were substantiated by concert text models, especially those written by students themselves. This may have been effective in lowering students' anxiety levels. Studies also confirm that the use of process writing techniques could decrease students' negative views about writing and help them improve their written texts in terms of cohesion, grammaticality, content structure, and creativity (Bayat, 2014). Another possible reason behind the higher moderate level of writing anxiety may have to do with our efforts to establish the conditions that increase student interest and involvement and minimize the causes of failure. To create an anxiety-free context, the students were free to choose the topics that interested them. They were also allowed to do their writing tasks at home because some studies indicated that most of the time students appeared to be anxious when writing in the classroom (Bayat, 2014; Huerta et al., 2017; Zhang, 2019a) and under the time constraints (Genç & Yaylı, 2019, Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Syarifudin, 2020). Finally, students had the right to resubmit their homework if they found it

disastrous. In one sense, we tried to put the students as far as possible in such a position to get the impression of their own power and ability to write successful essays. As Grobler et al., (2002) claim reflective teachers design their teaching plans so that learners have no alternative but high achievement and performance. These attempts might have been effective in creating a friendly atmosphere in the classrooms, thus reducing their anxiety levels.

The results also proved that 47.1 percent of the students had high perfectionistic tendencies (see Table 2), which may mainly be attributed to the cultural values of the country. According to Markus and Kitayama (2010), the dominant cultural values of a society can shape the attitudes, values, beliefs, and personalities of its people. It is a tradition that Iranian people do want not to risk their honour by doing something shameful. In fact, they are likely to deny any fault to save their dignity and integrity if faced with criticism. This cultural ideology has certainly been involved in the high levels of perfectionistic tendencies among the participants. Moreover, “the need to be perfect, or appear perfect, is a strategy that is adopted to compensate for, repair, and protect a damaged sense of self-worth through obtaining the approval of others” (Curran & Hill, 2019, p.412). As mentioned above, the unsuccessful homework could be resubmitted. The beneficiaries’ attempts of the students to meet the corrective feedback may also have been influential in the growth of their perfectionistic levels.

Regarding the types of writing anxiety, it was found that CA ( $M= 24.01$ ) was the most prevalent type of writing anxiety among Iranian EFL students, followed by SA and AB types, respectively (see Table 3). The finding supports the theoretical CA-SA-AB order or interpretation of Cheng (2004) who claimed that FLWA first affects our thoughts (i.e., cognitive effects), and then triggers physical symptoms, such as accelerated heartbeat, perspiration, and blushing (i.e., physiological effects), finally, writing activities might be avoided as a reaction to these (i.e., psychological effects). Still, it is contrary to the results of Genç and Yaylı (2019) who put forward a SA-AB-CA paradigm in their study among Turkish students. In fact, they reported that their participants “experienced more unpleasant physical symptoms such as rapid heart rate, feeling tense, and perspiring” (Genç & Yaylı, 2019, p. 242), while least cognitive anxiety. According to Cheng et al. (2009), “people may manifest anxiety differently” across the fields, and the construct of worry which has long been regarded as the major anxiety component “alone may be insufficient to cover the full range of cognitive anxiety” (p. 272). Accordingly, an additional self-focus component was adopted to expand the scope of cognitive anxiety. The new component referring “to an attentional shift towards the self” is assumed “to lead to a self-evaluative state, which is one of the critical processes involved in anxiety” (p. 272). Self-evaluation cannot occur unless attention is focused upon the self; therefore, it can be reasoned that the presence of a different paradigm from that of Genç and Yaylı (2019) may be attributed to the fact that the Iranian students took greater responsibility for their work and more ownership of their growth than that of the Turkish ones. The point is further supported by the high index of SOP because self-oriented perfectionists tend to be overly critical of their own behaviours. Thus, it can be concluded that in the absence of a self-focus component anxiety commonly manifests itself as physical health problems.

A high index of CA among Iranian students is supported by many studies (e.g., Cheng, 2004; Jebreil et al., 2015; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Lababidi, 2021; Quvanch & Na, 2022; Rabadi & Rabadi, 2020; Syarifudin, 2020; Wern & Rahmat, 2021) in the literature. Furthermore, the result validates the research that anxiety may cognitively hinder the writing process and production by acting as an affective filter (Cheng, 2004). According to Tang et al. (2012), the cognitive-affective filter “operates to enhance, block or distort incoming information” (p.104) depending on the degree of congruence between an input and the individual’s schema. When a noticed input is cognitively processed by the system and passed the cognitive-affective filter, it can be integrated into the existing schema. As argued by Krashen (1985), anxious students have difficulty processing meaningful input and are less responsive to language output. It has been established that anxiety imposes a direct threat to the production of a written text when the cognitive processes are not sufficiently automated. This would involve in “reducing the processing constraints imposed by the limited capacity of working memory” (De Vita et al., 2021, p. 2). High levels of cognitive anxiety among our participants, however, could be rationalized by this brief

explanation that anxiety had affected their cognition in the form of gaining knowledge, comprehending, focusing, thinking, perceiving, remembering, retrieving, judging, associating, problem-solving, etc.

As regards the types of perfectionism, the findings revealed that the students demonstrated higher levels of SOP than SPP or OOP (see Table 3), meaning that the students placed more importance on the internal sources of perfectionism, thus tried to meet their own expectations rather than to satisfy the prescribed expectations of significant others. The finding supports the evidence of Smith et al. (2017) who claimed that “self-oriented perfectionists invest so heavily in being perfect” (p.362) and wish to put their whole efforts into accomplishing a job. It also confirms Villavicencio and Villavicencio’s (2021) assumption that “adolescent students tend to be more self-oriented perfectionists which enables them to evoke analytical, creative, and practical skills in doing academic tasks” (p. 53).

Concerning the relationship between anxiety and perfectionism, a strong positive correlation was observed between these variables, meaning that as the participants’ anxiety perceptions increased, their perfectionistic tendencies grew accordingly (see Table 4). This association was also proved by the chi-square test, where all anxious students were perfectionists (see Table 5), and the t-test results (see Table 6), revealing a greater mean score in favour of the perfectionist group ( $M=67.22$ ). These findings confirmed our assumption that the negative implication of perfectionism could give rise to a sense of anxiety. Thus, it might be claimed with certain that the more a student strives to be perfect in his/her writing tasks, the higher he/she will experience anxiety. As Yin et al. (2023) rightly proved that “perfectionism displayed a significant positive correlation with the unreflective approach to learning and a negative correlation with the deep approach to learning and organised studying” (p. 432).

Finally, the results disclosed that the three types of anxiety (i.e., CA, AB, and SA) had a stronger positive correlation with SOP than with OOP and SPP (see Table 4). Our finding verified the evidence suggesting people with high levels of self-oriented perfectionism perceive a high frequency of failure (Flett et al., 2014) and are more at risk of depressive symptoms (Smith et al., 2016). In fact, Smith et al. (2017) argued that self-oriented perfectionism characterizing striving rigidly for perfection is a double-edged construct. On the one hand, it is associated with positive characteristics, such as conscientiousness and emotional intelligence but on the other hand, it places people at risk for longitudinal increases in depressive symptoms. Self-oriented perfectionists “believe they are either acceptable or worthless”, and the perception of “a discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self” may lead them to a consideration of anxiety as a means of escaping aversive self-evaluation (Smith et al., 2017, p.363). All in all, it can be concluded that the negative implications of anxiety and perfectionism can hinder the writing process and production, and thus make the foreign language writing an unpleasant experience.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

The present study aimed to find out the writing anxiety and perfectionism levels and types of Iranian EFL students and investigate the possible relationships between their anxiety perceptions and perfectionist tendencies. The results showed that the sampled Iranian EFL students experienced moderate levels of anxiety and perfectionism, and the most common types of anxiety and perfectionism among them were CA and SOP, respectively. Moreover, anxiety positively correlated with perfectionism. Thus, it was concluded that students who simultaneously bear perfectionist tendencies and experience writing anxiety might find it more difficult to succeed in accomplishing their writing tasks. Therefore, teachers should apply appropriate teaching methods and techniques in their writing classes, so that students’ tension is eliminated as far as possible.

The study has a few pedagogical implications for EFL teachers and researchers. One main implication of the study for the teachers is that the findings highlight the importance of reducing the amount of negative anxiety and perfectionism for better student achievement and performance. Besides, they reveal the instructional fact that giving some freedom to students in performing their writing tasks (e.g., flexibility in topic choice, writing at home, homework submissions) and enhancing their awareness

of the negative role of perfectionism may increase student interest and motivation, and thus reduce their anxiety and maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies. Finally, the information will be of great benefit to the researchers interested in improving their picture of the concurrent roles of anxiety and perfectionism in writing classes.

## 7. Limitations and Recommendations

The first limitation of the study was its reliance on self-report data. Thus, the accuracy of the results depended on the degree to which the participants wished to release their feelings. Moreover, the participants were Iranian students majoring in English Language Literature at Azerbaijan Shahid Madani University; therefore, the results should not be generalized beyond the studied region and field. However, the author believes that writing anxiety and perfectionism are less touched topics in the EFL literature. So, there is a need to follow the study with large groups and more reliable methods to verify the robustness of the procedures and results.

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