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An Ecological Study of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety in English as a Foreign Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language writing anxiety is an affective response to the dynamicity within the process of foreign language acquisition which made learners brave winds of change sweeping through their emotional state as a result of what they may experience a trance-like state of flux. This investigation reports on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' writing anxiety based on an ecological perspective within the framework of nested ecosystem model. Current study was conducted on four upper-intermediate EFL learners, aged 14–18. Semi-structured stimulated recall interviews, teacher observation, student journal, and task-motometer were all instrumented over ten classroom sessions to provide information regarding learners' writing anxiety which were analyzed qualitatively. Along the lines of nested ecosystem model, emerging patterns of learners' writing anxiety were analyzed under four categories of micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. Findings of the present study offered adequate decisive evidence supporting the fluctuating trajectories and variables concerning learners' writing anxiety within the interaction of the individual and environmental factors.

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Foreign language writing anxiety; ecological study; microsystem; meso-system

1. Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is one of the major individual constructs that has received extensive research attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Likely trickle-down effect of anxiety either hampering or hindering language learning has caught the eye of scholars, language teachers, and language learners themselves (e.g. Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Hilleson, 1996; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz, Tallon, & Luo, 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999; Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 2000). Besides, extensive empirical evidence covers the exploration of the following issues regarding FLA: associative/contrastive nature of FLA with other types of anxiety (e.g. Dewaele et al., 2008; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre, 2007), the influence of FLA on learners' achievement (e.g. Dewaele et al., 2008; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre, 2007;

Matsuda & Gobel, 2004), sources of FLA and the effect of instructional or socio-cultural conditions on FLA (e.g. Dewaele et al., 2008; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre, 2007), the association of FLA with other learner factors (e.g. Dewaele et al., 2008; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004), skill-specific FLA (e.g. Arnold, 1999; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Hilleson, 1996; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 2009; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Saito et al., 1999; Young, 1999), and tutorial implementations to relieve FLA (e.g. Arnold, 1999; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz et al., 2009; Saito et al., 1999; Young, 1999). Therefore, consistent with Horwitz's (2010) review, dynamicity of FLA is supported by the previous empirical studies. On the other hand, although a number of studies have been conducted exploring skill-specific FLA, no study has been performed to delve into EFL learners' writing anxiety from an ecological perspective. Hence, we have not still arrived at a deep understanding of the nature of the EFL writing anxiety. Deep ecological worldview rejects sufficiency of remedying a situation, but opens up an opportunity through which a sense of vision, purpose, and an overt ideology of transformation (a critical perspective) can be developed. Since in the literature, there is a lack of reference to ecological investigation of EFL learners' writing anxiety, exploring students' classroom writing anxiety within the ecological context of Iran is highly required.

1.1. The FLA Research

FLA, emerged in 1970s (Kleinmann, 1977; Scovel, 1978), has played a crucial role in developing L2 acquisition theories and teaching methods and in explaining individual differences in L2 acquisition. Scovel (1978) defined anxiety as "apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (p. 134) and, holding a trait-oriented perspective as well as a more permanent disposition towards anxiety, maintained that it is seen as an aspect of personality. Later, scholars distinguished between trait, state and situation-specific types of anxiety (MacIntyre, 1999) along with Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, and Jacobs (1983) assertion that state anxiety is an apprehension experienced at a specific moment in time as a response to a definite situation. Finally, as Ellis (1998) noted, situation-specific anxiety pertains to apprehension that is unique to specific situations and events, which have been mostly investigated in SLA (Mates & Joaquin, 2013). Nature of anxiety is per se multi-faced (Horwitz, 2010). Commonly, FLA is a ubiquitous phenomenon in language classrooms. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) have conceptually determined FLA as a distinct kind of situation-specific anxiety peculiar to foreign language learning which arises out of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors triggered by the uniqueness of the language learning process in the language learning classroom. In other words, repeated momentary experiences of anxiety (state anxiety) are linked to the context of language learning in particular (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

FLA research has been in the pursuit of two main orientations encompassing quantitative and qualitative research methods. Casting around the insightful studies on EFL anxiety, we can see gradual paradigm shift of attention in FLA research from quantitative etic perspectives and trait-oriented approaches to qualitatively state-oriented emic ones since quantitative explorations could not map out learners' idiosyncrasy of FLA.

Horwitz (2010), conducting a review on foreign and second language anxiety, provided a timeline encompassing the development of the language teachers' and learners' understanding of anxiety. Although this timeline is set up based on the author's judgment of

impact, significance, and prominence, it comprises studies with high citation frequencies (Horwitz, 2010).

Moreover, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, a standard quantitative scale of language anxiety, has been mostly used in favor with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) to investigate situation-specific anxiety. Empirical research concerning the effects of FLA on learning achievement has illustrated both deleterious and salutary effects of FLA (e.g. Aida, 1994; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000; Chen & Lin, 2009; Elkhafaifi, 2005; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Pappamihel, 2002; Sellers, 2000; Woodrow, 2006; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). With FLA under scrutiny, to put perplexing inconsistency in foreign language achievement into plain words, some researchers (e.g. Horwitz & Young, 1991; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 2000; Sanchez-Herrero & Sanchez, 1992) verified that FLA research is rather shaky at making prediction of foreign language achievement. Concluded findings confirm that the hypothesis of viewing FLA as one of the factors influencing students' performance and achievement still stands the test of scrutiny. Empirical evidence has also supported the interaction of FLA with other learner factors (Dewaele et al., 2008; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Sparks et al., 2000), the effect of instructional or socio-cultural conditions on FLA (Dewaele et al., 2008; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz et al., 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre, 2007; Saito et al., 1999), skill-specific rush of FLA (Dewaele et al., 2008; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999; Sparks et al., 2000), and delivery of instructional implementations to allay FLA (Hilleson, 1996; Arnold, 1999; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 1996; Horwitz et al., 2009; Saito et al., 1999; Young, 1999).

Furthermore, excepted from the string of the previous quantitative approaches to FLA, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) as well as Pavlenko (2005, 2013) went against the reductive nature of anxiety to cover the dynamicity of FLA, neglected by previous researchers, using emic perspectives. After on, Yan and Horwitz (2008) carried out a qualitative study on how learners' anxiety affects language learning in association with other variables. A theoretical model and a sequential list of affective variables among some main corresponding variables- regional differences, language aptitude, gender, FLA, language learning interest and motivation, class arrangements, teacher characteristics, test types, parental influence, comparison with peers, achievement, and language learning anxiety- were developed with the 21 students being interviewed for the study. In line with the learners' perception, this model indicates that anxiety emerges out of other factors concerned with their language learning. In other words, the ebb and flow of anxiety is under the influence of the major infinities involved in language learning.

Previous discoveries verifying traces of anxiety in students' learning language, without fail, bring justification to the application of an ecological approach. Ecology addresses the interactive associations within and between organisms (Haeckel, 1866) which simultaneously voices and alleviates the concerns over the dynamic relationship between the learners and different environments they attend to. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) nested ecosystems model is one of the applicable frameworks for ecological studies (van Lier, 2004).

1.2. The Nested Ecosystems Model

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993) provided a hierarchy of four dynamics, each one nested inside the next, listed below, that components of an educational context can fall into, within and across which their behavior and development can be explored.

1.2.1. *Microsystem*

A microsystem addresses a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in the immediate environment (e.g. students' attitudes, beliefs, and behavior; classroom environment; teaching methods; tasks) (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

1.2.2. *Mesosystem*

A mesosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person. Special attention is focused on the synergistic effects created by the interaction of developmentally instigative or inhibitory features and processes present in each setting (e.g. students' past outside-the-classroom experience and activities affecting their classroom foreign language writing anxiety level) (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

1.2.3. *Exosystem*

An exosystem includes the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that directly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives (e.g. curriculum design; course assessment) (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

1.2.4. *Macrosystem*

A macrosystem consists of the overarching patterns of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure, with particular reference to the developmental instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in such overarching systems (e.g. significance of national standardized English tests; indigenous culture of learning and communication) (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

With the ecological dynamic system theory applied to map out dynamic patterns of EFL learners' writing anxiety, we attended to study the emergence, quality, values, variability, diversity, and activity within the interconnection between learner organisms and the organisms that they come into contact with (van Lier, 2004). Therefore, a number of reasons inform the significance of the current study. First off, the two-way trade between people and the world concerns the ecological attendance to FLA anxiety the most. That is, an ecological research approach explores the association between within-classroom affective, cognitive, and linguistic variables (Halliday, 1993; Harris, 1996). Hence, an ecological approach towards EFL learners' writing anxiety can provide us with brand new understanding addressing agents of emergent trajectories regarding writing anxiety in a foreign language.

In addition, consistent with Drew & Heritage, 1992 paper, this study allows for the exploration of students' surrounding context stimuli to fluctuations in their writing anxiety level significance of what has been tackled in Larsen-Freeman's assertion (2016) denoting that full understanding of learning/teaching process is achieved within the contexts it is embedded. Therefore, application of an ecological perspective offers us a suitable opportunity to dig up both human and non-human contextual factors underpinning EFL learners' writing anxiety.

Furthermore, approaching writing anxiety from an ecological standpoint, we attend to survey haphazard patterns of anxiety resting within the nest of interactive ecosystems which were also reflected through Capra's study in which language was viewed as patterns of patterns and systems of systems (1996).

Besides, our investigation adapting an ecological framework of analysis is to reveal the contribution of the interactive association between different agents within various contextual levels to the emergence of foreign language writing anxiety patterns firmly supported by Larsen-Freeman's paper (2016, p. 378) in which emergence is referred as "the arising of something new, often unanticipated, from the interaction of components which comprise it."

As a final point, Bourdieu (1991) and McLaren (1998) emphasized the significance of different treatments applied for different students. Hence, tracing learners' individual anxiety patterns, an ecological perspective takes care of the between-learners variability or diversity.

The application of nested ecosystem model was proposed by van Lier (2004) as a promising framework for ecological studies. He used this model to ecologically study the use of computer in language classes (Van Lier, 2003). Cao (2009) also used nested ecosystems model to ecologically investigate L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) in language classes.

Successful employment of Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems model in SLA research has been confirmed through a number of ecological studies (e.g. Cao, 2009; Elahi Shirvan, Rahmani, & Sorayyaee, 2016; Elahi Shirvan & Taherian, 2016; Gkonou, 2017; Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017; Peng, 2012; Van Lier, 2003). This model has been first practiced by Van Lier (2003) to put the interdependent forces affecting computer technology use in language classes under investigation. Nested ecosystem model was subsequently adapted by Cao (2009) to study the non-linearity within the nature of L2 WTC in language classrooms. Peng (2012) used this model to ecologically explore the issue of L2 WTC in Chinese EFL classrooms which was then revisited in the context of Iran by Elahi Shirvan and Taherian (2016). Bridging the gap between theoretical tenets and empirical second language development (SLD) research designs, Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2016) offered a framework concerning methodological considerations termed "the dynamic ensemble" relating to which scholars can perform and evaluate their SLD research applying a complexity/dynamic system theory. This template included nine considerations which fell into four subcategories of operational, contextual, macro-system, and micro-structure; therefore, the two later categories of the dynamic ensemble template are the same as micro-and-macro-system layers of the nested ecosystem model providing for the significance of the Bronfenbrenner's model. Elahi Shirvan et al. (2016) also employed this model to study the ecology of English language teachers' personal styles in Iran. Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan (2017) have made the most recent use of this model to delve into foreign language speaking anxiety. Furthermore, Joe, Hiver, and Al-Hoorie (2017) have recently brought quantitative support indicating the contexts to which learners attend encompass critical factors which serve an influential role in the emergence of L2 learning outcomes.

Through the high-powered microscope of the current multiple-case investigation, we attend to the following questions revisiting EFL learners' foreign language writing anxiety from an ecological perspective:

- (1) What are the individual factors provoking foreign language writing anxiety in Iranian EFL classrooms?

- (2) What are the contextual factors arousing foreign language writing anxiety in Iranian classrooms?
- (3) To what extent does an ecological perspective contribute to understanding foreign language writing anxiety in Iranian EFL classrooms?

2. Method

2.1. Context and Participants

This study aimed to delve deep into the procedural, individual, and contextual factors affecting foreign language writing anxiety; therefore, in order to allow for the intensive concentration and observation, a limit of four participants (only females) from the context of a language institute in Iran was decided. The study was conducted through a task-supported writing course consisting four upper-intermediate students. The students were asked to fill out consent forms. It was emphasized that the students’ participation in this course was voluntary and their withdrawal was possible at any time. Table 1 represents participants’ demographic information.

2.2. Instruments

Different sorts of data was collected through the following instruments:

- (1) Demographic information of the participants elicited through questionnaire
- (2) Preparing classroom observation forms by the teacher
- (3) Journals provided by students for each classroom session
- (4) A task-motometer filled based on the tasks and assignments in the class
- (5) Semi-structured stimulated recall interviews after each session

2.3. Design and Procedure

This study was conducted within 10 classroom sessions. Students were instructed to show the level of writing anxiety based on their success and failure on achievement of classroom tasks and assignments into the task-motometer. Task-motometer is an A4 size paper sheet

Table 1. Demographic information of case study participants.

Case	Shadi	Ziba	Melika	Maryam
Age	18	17	16	14
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female
High school degree	6th	5th	4th	2th
Level of foreign language writing anxiety	Low	Low	High	High
Experience in formal English learning	5 years	3 years	4 years	4 years
Experience in informal English learning	2 years of living in England	3 years of watching English movies, listening to English songs, and reading English short-stories	1 year of listening to English songs	1 years of constant use of English learning software

comprised of a graph with two axes; the horizontal axis shows the sequence of classroom tasks and the vertical axis shows the attributed number for writing anxiety ranging on a continuum of 0–10 on the vertical axis (0 indicates no writing anxiety and 10 indicates the highest writing anxiety level). There was some free space at the bottom of the task-motometer for the learners to provide elaborations on their anxiety rates. Simultaneously, the first researcher of the study observed the class and provided the observation form to unfold the class activities, tasks and assignments, and tracked the students under study on its basis. After each session a semi-structured interview was conducted separately with each of the students. A semi-structured interview was employed on the basis of its flexibility in treating different respondents differently without any deviation from the overall framework of data collection. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed into English. Students had to write a classroom journal after each class elaborating on their attribution of their anxiety based on that session tasks achievements. Students were allowed to perform in Persian on their journals, interviews, and task-motometer to escape the occasional limitation caused by English linguistic deficiencies. A qualitative content analysis was applied to analyze the data through reading, coding and revising the codes. NVivo 8.0 was utilized to facilitate the analytical process of coding, querying. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) nested ecosystems model was practiced as the analytical framework to study EFL learners' writing anxiety.

3. Findings

In accordance with Bronfenbrenner's (1993) four ecosystems (see also Van Lier, 2003), findings of the current exploration casts light on the issue of foreign language classroom writing anxiety at four levels within each a number of themes are discussed below. Moreover, outcomes of the study indicated the existence of meso-, exo-, and macrosystems of which classroom writing anxiety is substantially under influence.

3.1. At the Microsystemic Level

3.1.1. Learner Beliefs and Motivation

The data mostly demonstrated that the participants held different beliefs about their classroom. They mostly believed that they should be guided on the vocabularies and grammatical structures each writing genre and topic call for; however, they all stated that they cannot capture their teacher's supplementary pamphlet including the required vocabulary items at the one-week shot between the class sessions. Therefore, they were asked to devote selective attention to the vocabulary bank they were provided with.

Besides, some believed in the facilitating role of task-supported teaching of genre writing in applying their teacher's instruction to practice as Melika stated:

With the tasks coming up, for me writing is a dream come true. In this case, I'm not left with a capped pen, a piece of blank paper, and my tapping on the desk with the time going off and anxiety fraying my nerve to breaking point. It seemed like this fear of writing has been preying on my mind since ever. But with the tasks, there are hints to hang on and move forward. Thus, no fear clouds my mind ever since I'm practicing with these babies. Doing these, we can engage and stretch our mind under our teacher's supervision through a little warm-up they bring about and after on surprisingly slip to the next round.

On the other hand, some found the use of tasks in the classroom face-threatening as they were supposed to speak up and talk their friends into the answers they provided for each

task as Maryam noted, “I hate it when I’m wrong.” She also claimed, “real-life writing scenarios do not involve the assignment of such tasks to get to grips with.” In this regard, tasks are criticized for inauthenticity. Shadi, however, espoused deep-seated conflicting beliefs about the use of tasks in class. She asserted:

Although I agree on how informative these tasks have come to be, I cannot help feeling sorry for the students who can’t handle their difficulty level as well as the rest. Granting gradual exposure of the tasks from easy to hard, I suppose some students can’t keep up with the pace to engage in the classroom activities as much as the others. I have learned a lot with the tasks but hate it to be the last standing guy to complete them as I see my friends rolling eyes in regret. Just feel so uncomfi!

Furthermore, the students’ reflecting motivation at different levels influenced their foreign language writing anxiety in the classroom. Ziba and Shadi evinced intense interest in acquiring English writing skill since Ziba said, “I love writing! I’m taking Persian short-story narration courses and I love to try my hand at writing English stories too”; however, Maryam and Melika expressed no interest in picking up writing skill as Melika stated, “me?! No good at creating with the words. I just don’t have it in me! I like the controlled tasks but that’s enough for me.”

In addition, students’ expectations and attitudes toward their language learning had an impact on their writing anxiety. The learners cultivating process-oriented attitudes expressed more and the students adapting more product-oriented attitudes took less interest in developing their writing skill since Melika noted, “I’m learning English to pass the entrance exam in Iran which calls for no writing skill” and Ziba stated, “I’m planning for immigration to Canada and I need writing skills to survive in there.” As a result, the learners who were passionately interested in English experienced less anxiety and more courage on this journey.

3.1.2. *Cognitive, Linguistic, and Affective Factors*

This investigation verified that the cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors involved in task-supported language learning are more influential in learners’ writing anxiety compared to their beliefs and motivation. Cognitive factors encompass learners’ reasoning skills and background knowledge that manipulate their writing anxiety level. In this study, Maryam and Melika both reported the lack of topical knowledge and interest to be one of the most effective factors in provoking writing anxiety as Melika stated:

I don’t know a thing about war. As soon as I switch on the TV and see some newsperson reporting on a war, I flip through the channel on the double. I just can’t take all the killing and blood! Honestly, writing about war freaks me out!

In this case, feeling of reluctance flooding her mind and the lack of background knowledge, disrupting her reasoning process, aroused her writing anxiety.

On the other hand, Ziba who has lived in Afghanistan for a year appeared highly interested in writing about war to make a change since she came from a place where innocent people might fade into the background. She reflected:

My father is an ambassador. My family and I have lived a year in Afghanistan in war. From then on, I can’t put the soldier’s unquenchable thirst for blood behind me or switch the news channel to avoid them. Avoidance makes me angry and anxious for I believe that we can challenge such critical issues to make a difference in case we have faith in the power of the constructive discourse we can introduce to the world.

In the case of Ziba, topic interest and background knowledge lowered her writing anxiety.

Moreover, high-anxiety learners addressed critical thinking as a factor arousing their anxiety as Maryam denoted:

I can't truly patch up my mind to write argumentative essays. Although my mind whirls to think of ways challenging an issue, nothing special flashes across since I have neither received any systematic instruction on argumentative writing skills nor practiced them. My being incapable of critical thinking poisons my mind and increases my writing anxiety every time I'm assigned to write.

In contrast, Shadi who is a low-anxiety participant asserts:

I have lived and received school education in London for 2 years. I was dogged by a host of problems at school among people of a different culture. Therefore, I had to apply a critical way of thinking to every new exposure to survive my Iranian identity. Acquiring argumentative skills in real life language use helped me approach writing in English at ease since my mind has been stretched enough.

Furthermore, this study confirmed that linguistic block was the major hindrance to the learners' writing putting the participants into a run-down state of mind; however, some participants reacted differently to this issue as Shadi and Ziba said that they had experienced linguistic block as well, but tried to use compensatory strategies to make up for it. Ziba stated:

Sky is the limit! Although there were times that my vocabulary bank didn't work out much for me, I tried to provide an unambiguous definition of the word I couldn't recall or I didn't know. My friends sweating bullets over it never made sense to me.

Melika and Maryam, instead, reported that as they encountered lack of the required vocabulary while writing, they felt anxious and uneasy. Melika denoted, "in such cases, I feel a mad panic rising within me in fear of being grossly misunderstood and pointless."

In addition, affective factors such as learners' self-perception of their writing competence, willingness, feeling of writing obligation, out-put impressiveness concerns have demonstrated to influence learners' writing anxiety level. It was found that students who think low of their writing competency, are obliged, unwilling, and uninterested to write, and have concerns about the impressiveness of what they write and are worried about their teachers' and peers' judgment on their performance, thus, experiencing more writing anxiety. For example, Maryam stated, "while reading my drafts, I catch my peer's look implying 'stop the nonsense, freak!' which haunts my mind during the writing time."

3.1.3. Classroom Environment

Classroom environment has been pointed out by the learners to manipulate their writing anxiety, which was analyzed within three categories of classroom atmosphere, teacher factors, and learning tasks in the current study.

Classroom atmosphere stands for the emotional states that learners share and experience. Learners' impression of classroom atmosphere seemed to initiate changes in their anxiety level yet students' perceptions of ideal classroom atmosphere were different from one another. While Ziba and Shadi perceived an interactive writing class family, Maryam and Melika supposed such atmosphere thorny and oppressive as a result of rise in their writing anxiety because they were afraid of their classmates' negative judgments in case they committed an error. Maryam admitted:

Such atmospheres put strain on me to play an active role answering the writing tasks or reading aloud my writing drafts in class. I don't like it when my classmates address my errors and make repeated corrections to my drafts. I'm afraid of being judged as the lazy one.

Shadi also hinted at the slight “overall effect” of the oppressions interactive classes impose on Maryam and Melika in the class group that they usually pass over.

Besides, teacher factors consisting of teaching styles, methods, and classroom procedures were reported influential in fluctuations of writing anxiety. Learners addressed their teacher’s supportive interactions and intimate behavior helpful in alleviating their writing anxiety. As mentioned before, Maryam was uncomfortable and anxious making errors in front of her classmates but she did not reference the fear of being negatively judged to her teacher.

On the other hand, although they all shared a high opinion of the task-supported teaching method, Maryam and Melika stated that they could not keep up with the pace their teacher moved from easy to hard tasks rendering them highly anxious. Besides, all of the participants reported that they remained unruffled practicing authentic writing tasks since they could make a good sense of them.

Additionally, the data indicated that the intricate pattern of synergistic interaction between individual and contextual factors produced the fluctuations in students’ writing anxiety. For instance, although Melika showed low interest and motivation in writing and she could hardly survive the difficulty of the last tasks covered in the class, she found the use of tasks helpful and comforting since she was given a number of writing hints and samples and; as a consequence, her fear of puzzlement had been quelled.

3.2. *At the Meso-systemic Level*

Collected data also supported the association between the classroom setting and other settings that the participants attend to, mesosystem. Participants of this study repeatedly pointed at the effect of their past learning experience and participation in extracurricular activities on their microsystemic writing anxiety level. Shadi stated, “Two years of studying in England taught me how to deal with every real-life issue in English. Now, I can write easily and confidently.”

Moreover, as a result of Maryam and Melika’s traumatic past learning experiences plaguing their mind, their writing anxiety aroused in a large measure. Maryam said:

My second-grade teacher used to interrupt me repeatedly while reading aloud my writing drafts in class to make corrections which strangled my enthusiasm to write with all the fun my classmates made of me during and after the class time. Today, every writing assignment dredges up the haunting memory of those days in whispers dulling my mind and increasing my writing anxiety.

Furthermore, the data revealed that extracurricular activities such as watching, reading, and listening English and working with English learning software reduced the participants’ anxiety level in a number of ways. For instance, Ziba indicated that watching English movies, listening to English songs, and reading English short-stories contributed to her vocabulary bank and genre-based acquisition of grammatical structures which, as a result, reduced her anxiety. In addition, Maryam and Melika said that the use of English learning software programs and listening to English songs advanced their vocabulary bank, helped them to cope with the issue of linguistic block, and; hence, dispelled their writing anxiety. Shadi also denoted that her exposure to a different culture and constant use of English during the immigration time helped her speed up with the generation of insightful ideas and extend her linguistic knowledge which assuaged her writing anxiety.

3.3. At the *Exo-systemic Level*

Findings of this study verified the association between the classroom setting and curriculum design and course criteria for evaluation, the *exo-system*. All the participants agreed on the incapacitating role of the curriculum design of English language learning courses, those for acquiring writing skills in particular, in arousing their anxiety. They cried that although most English language learning courses are comprised of activities, tasks, and instructions on the four language skills, writing is either paid less space and attention to by the designers or skipped by the teacher to save more time for speaking activities which fuels learners' reluctance to perform writing and increases their writing anxiety consequently.

Melika also blames school education and university entrance exam in Iran for the exam-oriented attitudes toward writing imposed on them. She stated:

Since we've passed a long run dispensing with learning and practicing English writing skill, we have received inadequate instruction on writing. Our mind hasn't been exercised enough, we have difficulty applying current instructions to practice and feel unconfident and uneasy to write.

Since this investigation has been performed during a genre-based task-supported writing course, students hinted at the efficiency of the meticulous full attention devoted to enhance their writing skill. Ziba claimed:

It was a sobering experience to attend a writing course. This journey made us all realize the cosmic significance of learning and practicing writing as a single course. We also came to understand that becoming a successful writer is not all about expanding linguistic knowledge but is more about generating brilliant ideas and arguments and building a personal inspiring discourse which has escaped our eyes since we have seen it through a mist of tears for help and blanked over it with the speaking concerns flooding our mind.

3.4. At the *Macro-systemic Level*

The macrosystem encompasses overarching social, educational, and cultural factors that have an effect on learners' anxiety level in the immediate learning context. Findings of the investigation indicates that dawning awareness of the significance of developing writing skill has recently increased learners' willingness and attendance at English writing courses during which they can develop the required linguistic and strategic knowledge to write competently and confidently. Shadi stated:

Nowadays, immigration and job related necessities overrides any other concerns of some of my-age teenagers. Since, to do so, we have to pass academic IELTS to find a job or immigrate, we should pick up the requisite qualifications to perform well on the writing section of this test.

This study has also verified that Iranian cultural themes influenced students' writing anxiety. Among all, the continuing dominance of extrinsic motivation over intrinsic motivation was confirmed to be one of the greatest sources of hindrance to learners' writing competence reducing their writing anxiety. Weaknesses regarding curriculum design and course evaluation criteria, mentioned before, also stoke this issue. As a result, learners who have neither received adequate instruction on and care about developing their writing skills nor strived to acquire it on their own are now gripped by fear and anxiety to do writing.

4. Discussion

Current exploration held a multiple-shot gallery of the foreign language writing anxiety construct in EFL classrooms. Outcomes of the recent study suggested that a number of individual and environmental factors, synergistically interacting, account for variation in learners' foreign language writing anxiety level. The cognitive, linguistic, affective, and cultural factors were reported to most reliably explain learners' writing anxiety level. Although some learners stumbled over the linguistic factors such as lack of genre-based vocabulary and grammatical knowledge and; thus, experienced high anxiety, the learners who owned high self-confidence and problem solving skills were not dogged by the same tragedy. Affective factors such as peers' and teacher's negative judgment of learners' performance may cause them experience moments of anxiety attacks although learners who do not hang onto others' perception of their abilities do not cave in this statement. Besides, students' self-perception of their writing proficiency, their background knowledge, and topic familiarity appeared to influence their anxiety level. That is, students with positive self-perception, rich background knowledge, and adequate topic familiarity suffered from high anxiety level the least. High self-confidence and essential problem solving skills were reported to be the most influential factors alleviating students' anxiety among the others since having great sense of self-confidence can make up for a number of anxiety-provoking factors overriding learners inside and outside the system. For instance, learners who have mastered problem solving skills and are of high self-confidence can easily weather the worst language learning crisis they may be hit by using compensatory strategies. In this regard, Ziba who owned both high self-confidence and sufficient skills stated that facing linguistic block, which was addressed as the greatest hindrance to learners' successful performance raising their anxiety level, she would provide the definition of the words she could not recall or did not know. On the other hand, their success in accomplishing different writing tasks would boost their self-confidence and polish their skills. Since learners' high self-confidence and great problem-solving skills and their satisfactory performance as well as low sense of anxiety are inspired synergistically, students' empowering educational background serves a prominent role in the development of their self-confidence and skills. Moreover, learners' social and cultural background were reported to take a big part in building, upgrading, or undermining them as Melika stated that since her family overestimated her mistakes and underestimated her capabilities as a writer, she felt unconfident, uneasy, and unwilling when it came to writing. On the other hand, Ziba comes from a family who celebrates even her little accomplishments and encouraged her to learn from and build on her mistakes. As a result, she has hardly ever experienced anxiety and made the best use of her problem-solving skills as she was not emotionally pressured by her family. Hence, we can conclude that we are all almost suggested by a dominant social and cultural discourse that might run our native public behavior. To put it another way, the empowering social and cultural experiences and discourse can develop and improve learners' self-confidence and skills. However, taking within-learner variations into account, threatening environments may still overpower confident and skillful learners as some learners reported that exam nerves still hold sway at the time.

At the contextual level, the interactive association between foreign language writing anxiety and the classroom environment has been also verified. Since an ecological perspective indicates that a learner is an organism within his or her surrounding environment, any fluctuations in his or her behavior echoes through the environment and the involved parties.

Furthermore, classroom environment has a manipulative role at the level of microsystem. Empowering classroom atmosphere can lift learners' mood and channel a trace of positive emotions; therefore, students' anxiety reduces. Besides, teachers' styles, methods, procedures, and learning tasks were addressed to take the biggest part providing a family classroom atmosphere. For instance, Maryam found classroom procedure of reading writing drafts aloud face-threatening and anxiety provoking but group brain-storming anxiety reducing since they could reach a higher stand point. In addition, this study demonstrated that not only participants' anxiety level is under the influence of the classroom atmosphere but also has each participant received a different impression from the classroom atmosphere based on her own beliefs and attitudes which is inconsistent with Wen and Clément (2003) study underlying the effect of construing oneself as other-directed. For example, while peers' judgment appeared face-threatening to Maryam, Ziba was not much haunted by the judgmental air.

In addition, this investigation revealed supporting evidence for the interconnection between classroom setting and other settings learners are in touch or have been in touch with. That is, students' past unsettling language learning experiences may come back to bite them during their recent experiences and provoke their anxiety. Since participants also attended other institute language courses and received school English instructions during this study, Maryam, Melika, and Shadi claimed that such multiple exposures to different teaching styles, methods, procedures, and learning tasks did not contribute much to quell their anxiety but instead caused too much contradictions during their language learning experience. In contrast, such diversity seemed to work out for Ziba as she noted "no matter what method they use to put their intentions, they are approaching the same issue from different dimensions." Since Ziba had a more adaptive and eager personality in comparison with the others, she mostly survived the touch of roughs. In this regard she stated "some feel haunted by the learning confusions and some feel curiously challenged to dispel them." Moreover, family pressure, inadequate and subjective curriculum design and course assessment, and classroom monolingualism are other mesosystemic factors increasing learners' anxiety which were also reported provoking to learners' speaking anxiety as well (Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017).

Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems framework applied to the study of foreign language writing anxiety in the Iranian EFL classrooms, we arrived at a comprehensively contextualized understanding of this issue. Interactive factors inside and outside the learner and the classroom nurture the fluctuations in their writing anxiety in the immediate classroom context. Studies by Cao's (2011) and Peng (2012) also supported the interactive association between individual, environmental, and linguistic factors affecting learners' WTC in ESL classrooms which is reported to influence writing anxiety in the current study. In addition, three recently published explorations provide significant evidence offering these interactions within an ecosystem as well (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2016; Gkonou, 2017; Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017).

A heuristic framework can be carried on the basis of the ecological understanding of foreign language writing anxiety to determine the cause of, and work out a solution to, learners' high writing anxiety. In this regard, teachers should first survey learners' beliefs, motivations, writing dispositions, and the available classroom affordance. For instance, students should be assigned to write an essay regarding writing difficulties foreign language learners are fraught with instead of world war two of which they have no inside knowledge.

Reflecting on certain limitations of the recent study, we should first address that this exploration was a preliminary shot to ecologically scrutinize foreign language writing

anxiety. Thus, findings of this study carried within the framework of the nested ecosystems model cannot be put out into universe since this investigation is conducted on a small number of EFL learners. Besides, more factors in the ecosystem may be influential in producing fluctuations in EFL learners' writing anxiety which should be provided by further research on. In addition, this investigation has lent profound insight into the issue of EFL learners' writing anxiety yet has not proposed any straightforward solution to dispel writing anxiety in EFL classrooms since only bottom-up micro-systemic innovations and top-down eco-systemic intervention can fashion a classroom alleviating foreign language writing anxiety.

5. Conclusion

Current study allows a yet-to-mature understanding of writing anxiety in Iranian EFL classrooms within the analytical framework of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993) nested ecosystems model which underscores social embeddedness of EFL writing anxiety. Outcomes of the study imply socio-culturally constructed nature of EFL students' classroom writing anxiety within the interactive relation of external and internal individual and environmental factors. Mapping out the emergence of the dynamic patterns of EFL learners' writing anxiety in terms of quality, values, variability, diversity, and activity within the ecology of the classroom, we arrived at the following outcomes at a multi-systemic level: dominant effect of learners' beliefs and motivation, affective, linguistic as well as cognitive factors, and classroom environment at the micro-system, prominent influence of learners' past learning experience and participation in extracurricular activities at the mesosystem; significant impact of classroom setting, course curriculum, and course assessment at the exo-system; and decisive role of social, educational and cultural factors at the macro-system.

However, regarding the findings, it is worth noting that due to the ecological nature of this study, the explored emerging patterns of the participants' writing anxiety within the interaction of their cognitive, affective, and linguistic factors and the contextual parameters of the teaching/learning/performance processes cannot be put out into universe. In other words, they cannot be fully predictive of the future cases and are of limited nature in terms of the generalisability of the findings to other cases in other contexts (Ricca, 2012).

Although Iranian EFL learners are offered little favorable opportunities to develop, exercise, polish, and update their writing skill, shifting social, cultural, and educational paradigms has shed the early light on the significance of acquiring EFL writing skill. As a result, the more stretched their minds become, the more confident and stress-free they write. Hence, EFL learners' anxiety-free state and their adequate EFL writing exposure and practice emerge recurrently.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

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