

Original Paper

A Review of the Relationships among Anxiety, Enjoyment, and Boredom in L2 Writing

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Abstract

In L2 writing emotion research, anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom are three key variables that often come up together; however, most existing studies only look at one emotion at a time or focus on pairwise relationships, without putting all three together to see how they work as a whole. This paper reviews relevant empirical studies in a systematic way, first explaining the theoretical background and conceptual boundaries of these three emotions, then summarizing how they relate to each other at both the pairwise and triadic levels: anxiety and enjoyment show a moderate negative correlation and can coexist at the same time, and this relationship is influenced by boredom level, cultural background, and the writing process; anxiety and boredom are positively correlated, but they differ in what triggers them; enjoyment can reduce boredom, but this effect has its limits. When all three emotions coexist, enjoyment has the most lasting protective effect, boredom has a clear negative main effect but can be overridden by enjoyment, and anxiety's independent effect is the least stable and is clearly influenced by learning stage. This paper also points out four gaps in current research, which are dynamic tracking, process mechanisms, cross-stage comparisons, and measurement tool development; it then suggests that future research should strengthen longitudinal tracking and real-time dynamic measurement, develop process-oriented emotion measurement tools, conduct cross-learning-stage comparative studies, and examine how cultural-psychological factors and task characteristics play a moderating role, so that we can better understand the complex emotional interactions in L2 writing.

Keywords

L2 writing, writing anxiety, writing enjoyment, writing boredom, control-value theory, emotional interplay

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, learning a second language helps people grow academically, become more

competitive at work, and communicate across cultures [1]. When it comes to L2 learning, writing is often seen as one of the most complete output skills; it shows not just how much vocabulary and grammar a learner knows, but also how well they can organize ideas, build logical structure, and manage the flow of a text [2]. Writing in a second language is a complex activity; it involves going back and forth between planning, structuring, choosing words, and revising, which takes a lot more mental effort than listening or reading. In China, students go through years of English writing practice at different school stages; still, many of them avoid writing, produce thin content, or make frequent language mistakes. These problems show that learners differ a lot in how well they write. Just looking at cognitive factors like vocabulary size, grammar knowledge, or writing strategies is not enough to explain these differences; so it is worth paying more attention to what causes individual differences in L2 writing and what factors influence them.

Earlier studies mostly looked at how cognitive factors like language ability and writing strategies affect writing performance. But in recent years, more and more evidence shows that the writing process is also strongly influenced by learners' psychological and emotional states. After positive psychology was introduced into L2 acquisition research [3], the focus has gradually moved from "getting rid of negative emotions" to "building up positive emotions"; learners' emotional experiences have become a key non-cognitive factor that helps explain why some learners write better than others [4]. Some studies have found that emotions directly affect how much learners engage in writing, how motivated they are, and how well they finally perform [5].

Among the different emotions that come up in L2 writing, three of them are seen as core variables: writing anxiety, writing enjoyment, and writing boredom. Writing anxiety means the tension, unease, and even fear that learners feel when they face a writing task [6]; writing enjoyment refers to the inner satisfaction and interest that learners get from the writing process; writing boredom shows up as low energy, doing things just to get them done, and a lack of motivation in writing. These three emotions stand for both negative and positive sides of affect, and earlier studies have already shown that they have different effects on writing performance and engagement, which makes them worth studying. However, how these three emotions relate to each other and how they together affect L2 writing still needs more work. Most of the existing research only looks at one emotion by itself or at two emotions together; not many studies put all three emotions into one framework and look at how they work when they all exist at the same time. Research on the connections among these three emotions and how they jointly shape the L2 writing process and results is still quite scattered; there is not enough systematic integration or summary.

Given these gaps in the research, this paper tries to do a systematic review of relevant empirical studies; it aims to make clear how writing anxiety, writing enjoyment, and writing boredom relate to each other, and to explain in a more complete way how these three emotions affect the L2 writing process and results in different ways when they all exist together. Based on that, the paper also points out the limits of current studies and suggests some directions for future work on the complex emotional interactions

in L2 writing.

2. The Relationships among Writing Anxiety, Writing Enjoyment, and Writing Boredom

As positive psychology gradually found its way into L2 learning research, the study of emotions in L2 has gone through a big change; the focus has moved from “staying away from negative emotions” to “building up positive emotions.” In this academic context, researchers now see foreign language anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom as three central variables in the study of achievement emotions [7]; these three emotions affect second language writing performance alone, and they also interact with each other in complicated ways, not just working separately. This review gathers what we know about the relationships between each pair of writing anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom; it also looks at how they work together when all three are present; the goal here is to show where studies agree and disagree, and to give a reference for future work.

2.1 Writing Anxiety and Writing Enjoyment

Pekrun's control-value theory [8] gives us a useful way to look at writing anxiety and writing enjoyment; in this theory, people see writing anxiety as a negative emotion, and it comes from a sense of not being in control. Learners feel nervous and uneasy because they worry that they cannot handle the writing task [9]; writing enjoyment, on the other hand, is a positive emotion, and it comes from feeling involved in the writing itself and interested in it. These two emotions are different from each other, not only in how they feel, but also in what brings them about.

In early research, people often treated writing anxiety and writing enjoyment as two ends of the same scale; the thinking was that if you were not anxious, you must be enjoying yourself, and if you were not enjoying yourself, you must be anxious. Dewaele and MacIntyre pushed back against this idea, and they said that anxiety and enjoyment are not complete opposites; instead, they are independent emotions that can exist at the same time, so a learner might feel anxious about a writing task but still enjoy parts of it. Their study found only a moderate negative link between the two; so they are related, but they are not the same thing, and this finding changed how researchers in the field thought about emotions—the shift was from “either-or” to “both-and.”

Dewaele and Alfawzan [10] moved this research forward a step, and they found that enjoyment affects learning outcomes more strongly than anxiety does; this finding matters because it suggests that positive emotions might be more powerful than negative ones, at least in some learning contexts. Researchers have confirmed the negative correlation between anxiety and enjoyment in different settings, for example, in Chinese EFL classrooms and also among students learning Spanish as a foreign language [11][12].

But things become more complicated when researchers look at how these two emotions predict writing performance, and different studies have found different results. Liu [13] looked at university students, and she found that only anxiety was a significant predictor of writing performance, with the effect going in a negative direction, while enjoyment did not reach significance; this means that for learners at

a higher level, anxiety might be the stronger force. Of course, cross-sectional studies like this one only give a picture of one moment in time, and they cannot show how things change as time goes on.

Zhao [14] used a different method, and she tracked how learners felt in real time while they were writing with a method that records moment-to-moment changes; the results were quite striking. Over the course of a 20-minute writing task, the same learner's anxiety and enjoyment were positively linked at some points, negatively linked at other points, and showed no link at all at still other points; from this we can see that the relationship between anxiety and enjoyment does not stay the same, and it keeps changing as the writing process goes on.

To sum up, writing anxiety and writing enjoyment are not simply opposites. They can appear together, and their negative correlation is shaped by cultural background, learning stage, and where the learner is in the writing process. The power of each emotion to predict performance also seems to differ depending on the learner's age and stage of development.

2.2 Writing Anxiety and Writing Boredom

Writing boredom is a negative, low-energy emotion. It shows up as lethargy, going through the motions, and a general lack of motivation when faced with a writing task. Both anxiety and boredom are negative emotions, so it is tempting to lump them together. But the control-value theory suggests that they are actually quite different under the surface.

Anxiety is high-energy and outcome-focused—it comes from worrying about failing. Boredom is low-energy and task-focused—it comes from not caring about the task itself. One is about “I’m afraid I’ll do badly.” The other is about “I don’t even want to try.” These are different psychological states, and they lead to different behaviors.

Studies confirm that anxiety and boredom are positively correlated [15]. But their effects on writing outcomes are not the same. Li and colleagues found that feeling detached from the writing task—this is the core of boredom—had a stronger negative effect on writing performance than fear of failure did. Wu and Halim [16] showed something interesting. When task complexity went up, anxiety went up as well. But boredom went down. This means anxiety is sensitive to challenge—more challenge leads to more anxiety. Boredom seems to thrive when tasks are too easy. Moderate challenge actually reduces boredom.

The takeaway is that the positive correlation between anxiety and boredom is only skin-deep. They are different emotions with different triggers and different effects. Interventions for anxiety need to focus on giving learners a sense of control. Interventions for boredom need to make the task feel more valuable and more appropriately challenging.

2.3 Writing Enjoyment and Writing Boredom

On the surface, enjoyment and boredom look like straightforward opposites. Cross-sectional studies consistently find that they are negatively correlated. But the control-value theory suggests that this is not the whole story. Enjoyment is a high-energy positive emotion. Boredom is a low-energy negative one. They sit on different dimensions—they are not just opposite ends of the same line.

Li et al. [17] looked at how these two emotions relate to writing strategy use. When they put enjoyment and boredom into the same predictive model, enjoyment came out as a strong positive predictor of all four types of writing strategies. These included metacognitive strategies, revision strategies, L1 use, and L2 use strategies. Boredom, meanwhile, had no significant effect at all. This suggests that enjoyment has a kind of suppressive effect on boredom. But it is not a simple “more enjoyment means less boredom” relationship. They are not just two sides of the same coin.

Bai [18] found something similar. Self-regulation strategies—especially planning and monitoring—were positively associated with writing enjoyment. Enjoyment also turned out to partially mediate the link between planning strategies and writing performance. In other words, enjoyment seems to work at least partly by encouraging learners to use more strategies.

Hong [19] looked at the motivational side of things. He found that focusing too much on grammatical accuracy, memorizing templates, and ignoring the pragmatics of vocabulary all weakened learners’ ideal L2 writing self. This lowered their enjoyment and increased their boredom, which ultimately held back their writing development. This shows that enjoyment and boredom are not just feelings—they are part of a chain that connects learners’ sense of who they want to become as writers to how well they actually perform.

But even this suppressive effect has limits. Li et al. found that when enjoyment was already high, the negative effect of boredom on metacognitive strategies was actually amplified rather than reduced. This is a surprising finding. It also puts a boundary on Fredrickson’s [20] “undoing hypothesis” from the broaden-and-build theory. Positive emotions can counteract high-energy negative emotions like anxiety. But when it comes to low-energy negative emotions like boredom, the buffering effect is weaker. In some cases, it might even make things worse.

So enjoyment and boredom do have a stable negative correlation. But the relationship is more complicated than it looks. Enjoyment can suppress boredom, but there is a limit to how far that suppression goes.

2.4 The Triadic Dynamic Interaction among Anxiety, Enjoyment, and Boredom

Writing is rarely just one emotion at a time. Multiple emotions are usually present and they interact with each other. Understanding how anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom coexist and influence each other is important.

Li and Wei looked at how boredom changes the relationship between anxiety and enjoyment. Once boredom enters the picture, the correlation between anxiety and enjoyment disappears. This tells us that boredom might be the reason why anxiety and enjoyment look like they are negatively related. Zhou and Liu added something else. They found that face-saving and high-context communication weaken enjoyment and make anxiety stronger. So cultural factors matter too.

Studies that followed learners over time found a consistent pattern. When anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom are all in the same model, only enjoyment stays significant after one week, five weeks, and nine weeks. Anxiety matters right away but fades. Boredom stops mattering at all once enjoyment is

included. So enjoyment is the emotion that protects learners the most. It lowers boredom, and that helps reduce anxiety's negative effects as well.

Cross-sectional studies, on the other hand, give a different picture; they often show boredom as the strongest predictor, and anxiety does not appear as a significant factor. The reason for this could be that enjoyment needs time to build up, so its full effect does not show right away; boredom, by contrast, influences performance immediately, but its effect does not last as long. The learning stage also changes how these emotions work together, and the pattern shifts from one level to the next. In senior high school, both enjoyment and anxiety predict writing performance, with enjoyment playing a bigger role; in junior high, boredom is the main problem, and anxiety does not matter much. At the university level, anxiety becomes the strongest negative predictor, and the direct effect of enjoyment grows weaker. Several factors bring about this shift, and one key reason is that the writing tasks are different at each stage. Junior high tasks are simpler and more repetitive, which makes students feel boredom more easily; senior high tasks have more variety, so both enjoyment and anxiety come into play. University writing is stricter and carries higher stakes, so anxiety tends to take over.

External factors also matter. Face culture makes anxiety worse and enjoyment weaker. Task complexity also affects the pattern—high-enjoyment groups perform better on complex tasks, while high-anxiety groups do worse.

In short, when all three emotions are present, enjoyment is the most stable factor over time. Boredom hits hard right away but can be overtaken by enjoyment. Anxiety is the least stable and depends a lot on the learning stage. This means interventions should be different for different stages: reduce boredom in junior high, reduce anxiety in university, and promote enjoyment everywhere.

3. Reflections and Implications

When we look at how these three emotions relate to each other in pairs, a fairly consistent picture emerges from the research. Anxiety and enjoyment are not opposites—they show up at the same time, and their negative correlation is only moderate. Anxiety and boredom correlate positively, but they are triggered by different things and work through different mechanisms. Enjoyment and boredom have a stable negative correlation, and enjoyment does seem to hold boredom back—but only up to a point. When all three emotions are together, the pattern is clearer. Enjoyment is the most stable and lasting positive force. Boredom hurts performance right away, but its effect does not last as long as enjoyment's protective effect. Anxiety is the least predictable of the three—how much it matters changes with the learner's age and stage of schooling. Learning stage, cultural background, and task complexity all seem to affect how these emotions interact. In terms of theory, Pekrun's control-value theory provides a solid basis for understanding why these three emotions have different activation patterns. Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory helps explain why enjoyment protects learners so well. And the idiodynamic approach gives us a useful way to think about how emotions shift during the actual writing process.

But there are still some notable gaps. Most studies are cross-sectional. They give us a snapshot, not a moving picture. Writing takes time and goes back and forth between stages, and we do not know much about how emotions rise and fall during that process. Zhao's idiodynamic study was a good start, but the sample was small and the findings need to be repeated with more participants. Also, we do not really know how emotions affect the writing process itself. Most studies look at the final outcome—scores, grades—but not at what happens during planning, drafting, or revising. The few studies that looked at strategies used self-reports, which are not great for capturing what happens in real time. So far, researchers have not done a single study that directly compares junior high, senior high, and university students; the pattern we see comes from findings pulled together from different studies, not from one study that included all three groups at once. Another problem lies in the way researchers measure emotions, because most tools ask learners to report how they felt after they finished writing; this kind of reflection cannot capture the emotional changes that happen during the writing process itself. What researchers really need are tools that can record emotions in real time, as they actually occur.

Given these limitations, researchers can approach future studies from several angles. First, they could adopt longitudinal designs or real-time tracking methods—such as idiodynamic tracking, writing logs, or instant emotion ratings—to observe how anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom shift during the writing process and how these shifts affect writing outcomes. Second, there is a clear need to move beyond static measurement tools; developing new instruments that can capture emotional fluctuations in real time would be a major step forward. Third, more direct comparisons are needed, and instead of relying on separate studies, research should examine junior high, senior high, and university students within the same framework to confirm whether the emotional differences across stages are genuine. Finally, greater attention should be paid to contextual factors, and how cultural concerns like saving face, and task features such as difficulty level and genre, shape the interaction among these emotions deserves deeper exploration. Advancing in these directions will help researchers better understand the interplay of anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom in L2 writing.

4. Conclusion

L2 writing involves more than language skills; it requires planning, structuring, word choice, and revision, and throughout these steps, learners experience a range of emotions. These feelings, whether positive or negative, influence how they approach the task, how much effort they put in, and how well they do. For a long time, however, researchers studied one emotion at a time, missing the bigger picture of how emotions interact. This paper reviews the research on three emotions in L2 writing—anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom—and examines their pairwise and three-way relationships. At the pairwise level, several patterns emerge, and anxiety and enjoyment are not opposites; they can co-occur, and their negative link depends on culture, learning stage, and the writing process itself. Anxiety and boredom are both negative but operate through different mechanisms, while enjoyment and boredom have a stable negative correlation, but enjoyment can only suppress boredom to a certain point. When

all three emotions are present, a clear pattern emerges: enjoyment is the most resilient protective factor. Performance can be hurt by boredom right away, but its effect becomes weaker over time, especially when a feeling of enjoyment is also there; among the three emotions, anxiety is the one that changes the most, and how it influences a learner depends on what stage of school they are in. In junior high, the main issue is the feeling of being bored; in senior high, both enjoyment and anxiety matter; in university, anxiety becomes the leading problem. The reason for these differences may be that writing tasks are not the same at different stages. These results can be used by teachers in their teaching; because enjoyment is stable and protective, teachers should try to make it stronger, for example by giving positive feedback, using different kinds of tasks, and creating a supportive classroom atmosphere. The patterns that are different across stages also tell us that using the same method for everyone will not work; teachers in junior high could spend more time on reducing boredom, while teachers in university should put managing anxiety first. However, there are some limits to the studies that were looked at here; most of them only look at one point in time, so we cannot see how emotions change over time; we also do not have a clear idea of how emotions affect the process of writing, and not only the final result. The differences between different learning stages have not been tested directly in one study, so they still need to be confirmed. In the future, if we use studies that follow people over time and methods that measure emotions during writing, we can get a better understanding of how emotions shift while writing.

It would also be helpful if tools could be developed to capture emotional changes when they happen, instead of relying on self-reports that are filled out after the fact; it would also be valuable if differences related to different stages could be tested directly, with the same framework being used across different age groups; cultural factors and factors related to the task itself are also worth looking into more.

Understanding how anxiety, enjoyment, and boredom work together is not just something that matters for theory; it also matters for how writing is taught and how learners can be supported. With more research being done, we can get a fuller picture of the emotional side of second language writing, and then use that picture to help learners do better.

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