RESEARCH ARTICLE

Students' Anxiety and Attitudes towards Writing at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Sungai Baging

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ABSTRACT - This study examined the challenges faced by rural secondary school students in writing, focusing primarily on their anxiety and attitudes towards this skill. Grounded in Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, it examined how affective factors, such as anxiety and attitudes, influence second language writing performance. Local secondary students, particularly those in remote areas, often encounter difficulties in English writing, largely due to anxiety and negative attitudes that impede their performance and motivation. Therefore, exploring ways to address these emotional challenges is indispensable for enhancing writing outcomes, as recognising students' anxiety can improve writing instruction and foster a supportive classroom environment. A quantitative survey design was utilised, focusing on three key aspects: variations in writing anxiety by gender, proficiency, and educational level; differences in attitudes towards writing; and the correlation between writing attitudes and anxiety. A 40-item, five-point Likert scale agreement questionnaire was adapted and distributed to 300 students aged between 13 and 17 years from SMK Sungai Baging, Kuantan. Results were analysed using an independent samples t-test and Pearson correlation coefficient. Results indicated moderate levels of writing anxiety and attitudes, revealing a significant positive correlation between anxiety and attitudes. Higher levels of anxiety and negative attitudes were associated with low self-confidence and diminished creativity. Consequently, writing classes should incorporate engaging activities and constructive feedback to foster positive attitudes and alleviate anxiety. Further in-depth research is recommended with larger samples, particularly in Malaysian rural secondary schools.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Several factors influence ESL students' writing proficiency; among these, attitudes and anxiety play a significant role (Ratha & Shah, 2018). Many English students, regardless of proficiency level, often describe writing as intimidating, tedious, or even frustrating, reflecting a negative perception of the task (Elbow, 1998). Jabali (2018) further supports this view, noting that this productive skill has long been regarded as students' most challenging and demanding aspect of language learning. Given these challenges, exploring students' perceptions of writing and their strategies to cope with or overcome these difficulties becomes essential. Understanding their attitudes and approaches can inform more effective teaching methods and targeted support to enhance writing skills in English language learners.

These challenges in writing proficiency become even more pronounced in rural or remote school settings, where students often face additional barriers, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and fewer opportunities for language enrichment (Cuong, 2021). The situation is further compounded when 'non-optionist' teachers instruct in English; these educators are not formally trained in English language teaching and may lack the pedagogical tools necessary to support writing development effectively (Zulkefly & Razali, 2019; Shan & Aziz, 2022). Without specialised training, these teachers may struggle to address students' writing anxiety, provide constructive feedback, or implement strategies that build confidence and skill (Ratha & Shah, 2018; Jabali, 2018). In such contexts, students' negative attitudes toward writing may remain unchallenged, and their learning needs may remain unmet.

Research must, therefore, be conducted to determine why many students at this school struggle to develop their writing skills. Based on the five-year Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) results, or Malaysian Certificate of Education, for Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK) Sungai Baging, the percentage of students who passed English between 2014 and 2018 was less than 76%. The national examination taken by Form Five students in Malaysia, equivalent to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) or O-Level, includes a wide range of writing tasks. Conducting a comprehensive study to ascertain why writing-related learning challenges have persisted at this institution for such a long time is crucial. Consequently, it is essential to understand what these students think about writing and how they approach it. The focus is on students' writing-related attitudes and anxiety at SMK Sungai Baging. This rural school is in Kuantan, Pahang, with 812 students, nine administrators, 72 academic staff members, and 11 non-academic staff. Among the academic staff, five English 'optionists' and four 'non-optionists' teach English.

1.1   Writing as a Productive Skill

In the Malaysian education system, English language teachers are often classified as English 'optionists' or 'non-optionists', a distinction based on their academic background and training. English optionists are educators who have formally specialised in English language teaching, typically through degree programmes in TESL, TESOL, TEFL, or related fields. They are specifically trained to teach English and are usually assigned the subject as their primary teaching responsibility. Due to their specialised training, English optionists are generally expected to possess stronger linguistic proficiency, pedagogical skills, and a deeper understanding of language teaching methodologies.

In contrast, non-optionists are teachers who did not major in English but are nonetheless assigned to teach the subject, often due to staffing shortages or contextual needs in rural or under-resourced schools (Ismail et al., 2020). These educators may possess academic backgrounds in other subjects, such as science, mathematics, or moral education, and frequently have limited formal training in English language instruction. Consequently, non-optionists may encounter challenges related to language proficiency, confidence building, and the utilisation of effective ELT strategies. Understanding the differences between these two groups is essential when designing professional development programmes, assessing teaching effectiveness, or conducting research on English language education in Malaysia.

The current situation has raised concerns among the English committee of SMK Baging. The committee is worried about students' difficulties in developing their writing skills. They find implementing effective methods to reduce and eliminate the issue challenging. Nevertheless, the committee has not taken significant steps to address this troubling concern effectively. Therefore, this study is one of the few initiatives undertaken to analyse SMK Baging students' anxiety levels in writing and their attitudes towards it. This research is anticipated to provide a breakthrough in resolving the problem. As it explores attitudes, adverse effects, causes, and solutions to English language anxiety, this study aims to examine the anxiety associated with English among lower and upper-secondary students of SMK Baging. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine whether students' levels of writing anxiety and attitudes towards writing vary according to gender, level of language proficiency, and level of secondary education (lower or upper secondary).
2. To explore the relationship between students' writing anxiety and their attitudes towards writing.

1.1   Writing as a Productive Skill

Writing is crucial for students learning a second language (Zulkefly & Razali, 2019). Several studies acknowledge that writing is challenging because it requires the integration of multiple cognitive, memory, linguistic, motor, and emotional systems that underpin the writing process (Issa & Shyamala, 2021; Kormos, 2023). This skill is productive and necessitates various ideas and thoughts connected to one's affective systems (Jabali, 2018). Writing is a productive skill that students must master to achieve communicative competence (Bora, 2023). To excel in writing, students should maintain a low level of anxiety and a positive attitude, as confirmed by numerous studies conducted in recent years.

In the context of second language acquisition, writing demonstrates language proficiency and promotes critical thinking, organisation, and self-expression (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). However, for many students, particularly those in ESL or EFL contexts, writing remains one of the least practised and most anxiety-inducing skills due to limited opportunities for meaningful practice and feedback (Jawas, 2019). This notion is especially true in environments where heavily examination-focused writing instruction can result in mechanical and disengaged writing habits. As noted by Razali et al. (2023), students struggle with generating content, organising ideas, and maintaining coherence when they perceive writing merely as a task to complete rather than a process to engage with. Therefore, educators must foster positive writing environments that emphasise process-based approaches, reduce fear of judgement, and support learners' cognitive and emotional engagement with writing tasks.

1.2   Language Anxiety

Anxiety significantly impacts learning, particularly in language education (Pan & Zhang, 2023). It manifests in various forms, including affective, cognitive, and behavioural responses to perceived future threats (Cocuk et al., 2016). Krashen (1982) contends that anxiety is the most detrimental affective factor influencing the learning outcomes of second language acquisition. Specifically, writing anxiety has been identified as a crucial construct for understanding the factors that affect students' development of writing skills (Zheng, 2024). This anxiety is characterised by students' general avoidance of writing tasks and situations in which writing may be required or assessed.

Anxiety has been identified as a significant factor contributing to poor English proficiency, particularly in writing (Haryanti et al., 2022). Elevated anxiety levels among students are often associated with productive language skills, especially writing and speaking. Despite its crucial role in academic success, writing presents a considerable challenge for second-language learners, particularly at the secondary level. Haryanti et al. (2022) found that students with weaker writing skills experienced higher levels of anxiety, while more proficient writers reported lower anxiety. Furthermore, students from monolingual backgrounds typically experience more anxiety than those who are bilingual or multilingual.

Research has shown that students' language acquisition is significantly affected by their writing anxiety. A study on Turkish language courses found that students with a positive attitude towards the class also exhibited higher anxiety levels, suggesting a complex relationship between interest and anxiety (Cocuk et al., 2016). They emphasised the importance of addressing writing anxiety, as it can hinder the development of writing skills. Furthermore, female students are more likely than male students to experience writing anxiety (Hossain et al., 2022; Zhan et al., 2021). Additionally, Sari and Han (2024) underscored the detrimental effects of writing anxiety

on foreign language proficiency, which is often driven by a fear of being evaluated negatively. Highly anxious students may experience significant stress when required to write and might even choose to avoid written tasks entirely (Haryanti et al., 2022). Generally, ESL writing encompasses cognitive, emotional, and cultural elements; hence, teachers, researchers, and students must recognise the existence and consequences of writing anxiety to address it effectively.

1.3   Attitudes towards Writing

It was reported that their attitudes strongly influence the degree to which students write in English (Ramzan et al., 2023). Understanding these perspectives enables teachers to gain deeper insights into students' anxieties, concerns, and writing preferences. Students' views on writing vary significantly due to their differing backgrounds, learning styles, and linguistic experiences. Writing attitudes are shaped by past experiences, self-perceived writing ability, and gender (Setyowati, 2017). The scholar emphasises that male students were also more comfortable with writing than their female counterparts. Ultimately, students' attitudes towards writing significantly impact their writing proficiency.

Several other studies have proposed a direct correlation between attitudes and success (Ramzan et al., 2023), indicating that students with positive attitudes scored significantly better on writing tasks than those with negative attitudes (Uddu, 2021). Dhadhodara and Joshi (2017) confirmed that positive attitudes and writing interests can enhance students' skills and performance in writing, leading to greater overall academic success and potentially future professional achievements. The study concluded that moderate attitudes towards writing lead to increased engagement in writing activities. It was found that when students enjoyed participating in writing-related tasks, their academic and writing success was positively affected. Conversely, the researchers found no difference in attitudes towards writing based on gender, social class, field of study, parents' educational level, or native language. The study concluded that the gender factor did not influence students' attitudes towards writing.

In other words, a person's mindset plays a significant role in how well they learn languages and write. Students need favourable attitudes to excel in language skills, as such attitudes increase their exposure to language input and eagerness to learn (Krashen, 1987). Jabali (2018) perceives writing attitudes as students' emotional reactions to the writing process, ranging from favourable to unfavourable. However, Camacho et al. (2021) found that negative attitudes towards advanced writing tasks do not typically demonstrate a direct relationship between students' attitudes and writing output. Research consistently indicates that, although attitudes towards writing differ, favourable attitudes usually correlate with better writing achievement.

2.0   METHODOLOGY

2.1   Research Design

This study employed a survey method, utilising a quantitative research design to collect data from a sample of individuals through their responses to structured questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The survey method was utilised to gather measurable data on students' agreements with statements regarding writing in English as a second language and their anxiety and attitudes towards it in a systematic manner.

2.2   Sample of Population

A sample is a group selected from a larger population for measurement (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The population consists of N = 812 students from 33 lower and upper secondary classes at SMK Sungai Baging. During the academic year 2024, there were 171 students in Form One, 172 students in Form Two, 182 students in Form Three, 137 students in Form Four, and 150 students in Form Five studying at SMK Sungai Baging.

As the sample under study is relatively small, this research utilises simple random sampling from the 812 students at SMK Sungai Baging. The objective is to select a sample from a population so that every member has an equal probability of being chosen, reducing bias and allowing researchers to generalise their findings to the larger population. The selected sample adequately reflects the population, enabling generalisable conclusions; consequently, the researcher selected n = 300 respondents after calculating the sample size using Raosoft software. The researcher employed simple random sampling through Select Cases in SPSS version 29. The questionnaires were administered face-to-face during classroom visits. Informed consent procedures and approval from relevant authorities were obtained before the commencement of the study.

2.3   Second Language Writing Anxiety and Attitudes Questionnaire

This is a quantitative study; data were collected by adapting several existing questionnaires. The adapted questionnaires were initially developed by Cheng (2016), Zhang (2011), Setyowati (2017), Rafanello (2008), and Ansarimoghaddam and Tan (2014). The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended questions based on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), modelled after well-known measures of writing anxiety and writing attitudes. The data were appropriate for a quantitative study as the questionnaire encouraged consistent responses.

The instrument is composed of three sections. Section A includes four demographic questions. Sections B and C contain 20 statements related to writing anxiety and another 20 statements about writing attitudes (Table 1). The items were phrased to ensure comprehension by secondary rural students. Since the survey aimed to optimise the students' responses towards writing anxiety and writing attitudes, a translated version in Bahasa Melayu was made available in case the students encountered difficulties understanding the statements.

The researchers conducted a pilot test to assess the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The first objective was to evaluate whether the language used in each item was sufficiently comprehensive for the respondents. The second objective was to determine the time taken by respondents to complete all items in the questionnaire. Thirty respondents from a different school, SMK Pelindung in Kuantan, participated in this test, achieving a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7.

Table 1

Sections of the Instrument

Section	Variables	Items/ Statements
A	Demographics	4
B	Writing Anxiety	20
C	Writing Attitudes	20

3.0   RESULTS

3.1   Students' Levels of Writing Anxiety and Writing Attitudes

This section presents the results of students' level of writing anxiety and writing attitudes, organised by gender, level of language proficiency, and secondary education. This will address the first research question. Descriptive statistics focusing on the mean scores and standard deviations are reported. The mean scores in this study were interpreted using the Dyer and Osborne (1999) scale, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Interpretations of mean scores using the Dyer and Osborne (1999) scale

Level	Mean Score Range
Very low	1.00 to 1.49
Low	1.50 to 2.49
Average	2.50 to 3.49
High	3.50 to 4.49
Very High Level	4.50 to 5.00

The overall result of students' levels of writing anxiety is average (M = 3.17, SD = 0.38), indicating students' average level of anxiety when learning English language writing. Similarly, the overall result of students' attitudes towards writing is average (M = 3.18, SD = 0.43). Table 3 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of both variables and their levels.

Table 3

Mean scores of writing anxiety and writing attitudes

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
Writing Anxiety	3.17	.38	Average
Writing Attitudes	3.18	.43	Average

Table 4 shows the results of students' writing anxiety and writing attitudes compared against gender. The mean writing anxiety score for male students at SMK Sungai Baging was 3.17 (SD = 0.42), while the mean score for female students was 3.16 (SD = 0.32). Both scores fall within the average range, indicating that students of both genders experienced a moderate level of writing anxiety. Although male students reported a slightly higher level of anxiety than female students, the difference is minimal. Overall, it can be concluded that both male and female students exhibited an average level of writing anxiety. In terms of writing attitudes, male students had a mean score of 3.12 (SD = 0.43), and female students had a slightly higher mean of 3.25 (SD = 0.43). Both scores fall within the average range, suggesting that students of both genders generally held moderate attitudes toward writing.

Table 4

Mean scores of students' writing anxiety levels and attitudes towards writing by gender

Gender	Writing Anxiety		Level of Writing Anxiety	Writing Attitudes		Level of Writing Attitudes
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	
Male (n=150)	3.17	.42	Average	3.12	.43	Average
Female (n=150)	3.16	.32	Average	3.25	.43	Average

Table 5 presents the results of students' writing anxiety and writing attitudes compared against students' level of language proficiency, which can be categorised into two levels: students with a moderate level (n=249) and low level (n=51). The mean writing anxiety score for students with moderate language proficiency level was 3.19 (SD = 0.35), while the mean score for students with low language proficiency was 3.09 (SD = 0.49). Both scores fall within the average range, indicating that regardless of their proficiency level, all students experienced a moderate level of writing anxiety. It is interesting to note that the mean score of students with better language proficiency is marginally higher than that of students with lower language proficiency. Similar results were reported for students' writing attitudes compared against their level of language proficiency. As indicated in Table 5, the mean scores of students' writing attitudes for both the moderate level of language proficiency (M = 3.24, SD = 0.40) and the low level of language proficiency (M = 2.90, SD = 0.49) are average. Students with better proficiency, however, showed a higher mean score.

Table 5

Mean scores of students' writing anxiety levels and attitudes towards writing by language proficiency level

Language Proficiency	Writing Anxiety		Level of Writing Anxiety	Writing Attitudes		Level of Writing Attitudes
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	
Moderate level (n=249)	3.19	.35	Average	3.24	.40	Average
Low level (n=51)	3.09	.49	Average	2.90	.49	Average

Lastly, Table 6 illustrates the results of students' writing anxiety and writing attitudes compared against students' level of secondary education, which can be categorised into two levels: upper secondary education (Forms 4 and 5) and lower secondary education (Forms 1 to 3). The mean writing anxiety score for upper secondary students (Forms 4 and 5) was 3.20 (SD = 0.29), while the mean score for lower secondary students (Forms 1 to 3) was 3.12 (SD = 0.47). Both scores fall within the average range, indicating a moderate level of writing anxiety across both groups. Although upper secondary students reported slightly higher anxiety than their lower secondary peers, the difference in mean scores is minimal, suggesting that both groups experienced relatively similar levels of writing anxiety. Meanwhile, the mean scores of students' writing attitudes for both the upper secondary (Forms 4 and 5) (M = 3.25, SD = 0.37), and the lower secondary (Forms 1 to 3) (M = 3.08, SD = 0.50) are also average although students in the older age group scored slightly higher mean.

Table 6

Mean scores of students' writing anxiety levels and attitudes towards writing by level of secondary education

Language Proficiency	Writing Anxiety		Level of Writing Anxiety	Writing Attitudes		Level of Writing Attitudes
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	
Upper secondary (n=180)	3.20	.29	Average	3.25	.37	Average
Lower secondary (n=120)	3.12	.47	Average	3.08	.50	Average

Generally, it can be concluded that the mean scores for both students' writing anxiety and writing attitudes are average. When compared against all three variables, the results also showed an average level for all groups and variables.

3.3 Influences of Gender, Language Proficiency, and Secondary Education Level on Writing Anxiety and Writing Attitudes

3.3.1 Influence of Gender on Writing Anxiety and Writing Attitudes

This section presents the results of the influences of gender on students' writing anxiety and writing attitudes, which addresses the second research question. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the writing anxiety scores for males and females. Table 7 illustrates that there was no significant difference in scores for males (*M* = 3.17, *SD* = .42) and females (*M* = 3.16, *SD* = .32; *t* (279.94) = .22, *p* = .826, two-tailed). Levene's test indicated unequal variances (*F* = 4.651, *p* = .032); thus, the result was interpreted using adjusted degrees of freedom. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .0097, 95% *CI:* –0.77 to 0.96) was very small (eta squared = .0002), indicating virtually no practical difference in writing anxiety between male and female students.

An independent-samples t-test was also conducted to compare the writing attitudes scores for male and female students. Table 7 illustrates that there was a statistically significant difference in scores for male students (*M* = 3.12, *SD* = .43) and female students (*M* = 3.25, *SD* = .43; *t* (298) = -2.489, *p* < .05 level). Levene's test indicated equal variances (*F* = 0.69, *p* = .783). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -.125, 95% *CI:* –0.224 to -0.026) was very small (eta squared = .027), indicating a small effect. The statistics indicated that for gender differences, there is a statistically significant difference for writing attitudes with a modest practical difference, but no such difference was found for writing anxiety.

Table 7

Results of the independent samples t-tests examining the influences of gender differences on writing anxiety and writing attitudes

Measure	Male		Female		*t*(df)	*p*	η²
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Writing Anxiety	3.17	.42	3.16	.32	0.22 (298)	.826	.0002
Writing Attitudes	3.12	.43	3.25	.43	-2.489 (298)	.013	.020

3.3.2   Influence of Language Proficiency Levels on Writing Anxiety and Writing Attitudes

This section presents the results of the influences of language proficiency levels on students' writing anxiety and writing attitudes, which addresses the second research question. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the writing anxiety scores for students with moderate and low levels of language proficiency. Table 8 illustrates that there was no significant difference in scores for moderate-level students (*M* = 3.19, *SD* = .35) and low-level students (*M* = 3.09, *SD* = .50), *t* (60.72) = 1.36, *p* = .180). Levene's test indicated unequal variances (*F* = 7.964, *p* = .005); thus, the result was interpreted using adjusted degrees of freedom. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .0998, 95% *CI:* –0.047 to 0.244) was very small (eta squared = .029), indicating a small non-significant difference between students of different language proficiency levels.

On the other hand, the inferential statistics of the independent-samples t-test, which was conducted to measure the influences of language proficiency on writing attitudes scores, revealed a significant difference. Table 8 illustrates that students with moderate language proficiency (M = 3.25, SD = 0.40) reported more positive attitudes than those with low proficiency (M = 2.90, SD = 0.49), *t* (298) *p* = <.001. Levene's test indicated equal variances, *F*(1, 298) = 3.16, *p* = .076. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .346, 95% *CI:* .219 to .472) was moderate (eta squared = .088), indicating a meaningful difference in writing attitudes between proficiency levels. Generally, it can be concluded that students with better language proficiency demonstrated a more positive attitude toward writing, while showing similar levels of anxiety regardless of their language proficiency.

Table 8

Results of the independent samples t-tests examining the influences of levels of language proficiency on writing anxiety and writing attitudes

Measure	Moderate Level		Low Level		*t*(df)	*p*	η²
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Writing Anxiety	3.19	.35	3.09	.49	1.357 (298)	.091	.029
Writing Attitudes	3.24	.40	2.90	.49	5.365 (298)	.001	.088

3.3.3   Influence of Secondary Education Levels on Writing Anxiety and Writing Attitudes

This section presents the results of the influences of secondary education levels on students' writing anxiety and writing attitudes, which addresses the second research question. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the writing anxiety scores of students from the upper secondary and lower secondary forms at SMK Sungai Baging. Table 9 illustrates that there was no significant difference in scores for upper secondary students (*M* = 3.20, *SD* = .29) and lower secondary students (*M* = 3.12, *SD* = .47), *t* (295.72) = .066, *p* = .180. Levene's test indicated unequal variances (*F* = 4.713, *p* = .031); thus, the result was interpreted using adjusted degrees of freedom. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .00278, 95% *CI:* –0.080 to 0.086) was negligible (eta squared = .00002), indicating a small non-significant difference between students of different secondary education levels.

Table 9

Results of the independent samples t-tests examining the influences of levels of secondary education on writing anxiety and writing attitudes

Measure	Upper Secondary		Lower Secondary		*t*(df)	*p*	η²
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Writing Anxiety	3.20	.29	3.12	.47	.066 (298)	.095	.00002
Writing Attitudes	3.25	.37	3.08	.50	2.025 (298)	.004	.014

In contrast, the independent samples t-test, which was run to compare the writing attitude scores of students from the upper secondary and lower secondary levels, reported a significant difference. Table 9 illustrates that the upper secondary students scored higher (M = 3.25, SD = 0.37) than the lower secondary students (M = 3.08, SD = 0.50), *t* (298) *p* = <.05. Levene's test indicated equal variances, *F*(1, 298) = 1.15, *p* = .285. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .104, 95% *CI:* .003 to .205) was small (eta squared = .014), indicating a small difference in writing attitudes between secondary education levels. Generally, it can

be concluded that older students demonstrated a more positive attitude toward writing, while showing similar levels of anxiety regardless of their age.

3.3 The Relationship between Writing Anxiety and Writing Attitude among ESL Learners

This section reports the relationship between writing anxiety and writing attitude among ESL secondary school students in SMK Baging. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was conducted to examine this relationship, and preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. There was a moderate, positive and statistically significant correlation between writing anxiety and writing attitudes

The overall correlation analysis of the total score indicated a significant and positive correlation between anxiety and attitudes among the students of SMK Sungai Baging in the context of learning writing. The Pearson r statistic was $r = 0.441$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the increase in writing anxiety level positively impacts attitudes toward learning writing among lower and upper secondary students. Overall, the findings may suggest a complex emotional and motivational dynamics that affect their writing ability.

Table 10

Pearson Correlation Coefficients between writing anxiety and attitudes towards writing

	n	Mean	SD	Writing Anxiety	Writing Attitudes
Writing Anxiety	300	3.17	.38	1	.441**
Writing Attitudes	300	3.18	.43	.441**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.0   DISCUSSION

The analyses presented earlier anchor the discussion of the study's findings regarding students' anxiety and attitudes towards writing in SMK Sungai Baging. Connections were drawn with related literature, thereby strengthening the study's contributions.

4.1 Students' Levels of Writing Anxiety by Gender, Proficiency, Lower and Upper Secondary

The results indicate that the writing anxiety of SMK Sungai Baging students is moderate. The students exhibit moderate anxiety towards writing. However, female students reported feeling less anxious about writing than their male counterparts. This finding contrasts with the results of Cocuk et al. (2016), who determined that the level of writing anxiety among female Turkish students (M=85.32) was higher compared to male Turkish students (M=82.42). In another context, Bakhtyari and Kassim (2022) found that female Afghan students have higher speaking anxiety. This indicates that female students in the Middle Eastern contexts may have higher anxiety levels despite different language skills. This discrepancy in the results of the current study underscores a new avenue for investigating the factors contributing to these differences, such as common psychological and instructional implications, societal background or other contextual influences unique to SMK Sungai Baging.

The mean scores of students' writing anxiety at both medium and low levels of language proficiency are average. It was found that the anxiety level of SMK Sungai Baging students was average, as their language proficiency ranged between medium and low. However, it was also found that significantly more students were at the medium level of proficiency. This is supported by research conducted by Haryanti et al. (2022), which revealed that low-achieving students experienced higher anxiety than their high-achieving peers. After all, they lacked specific writing skills, particularly in vocabulary and language use. The mean score of writing anxiety for students in the upper secondary is also average, similar to the findings of Ratha and Shah (2018), which concluded that 120 upper secondary students also had moderate levels of anxiety (M = 3.13, SD = 0.67) since their mean scores were between 2.50 and 3.49.

4.2 Students' Levels of Writing Attitudes by Gender, Proficiency, Lower and Upper Secondary

The results indicated that the writing attitudes of SMK Sungai Baging students were average. Students at SMK Baging generally exhibit an average positive attitude towards writing. Surprisingly, it was discovered that male students at this school have lower writing attitudes than their female counterparts. This suggests that female students may be more positively inclined towards writing. The results, however, contradict the research conducted by Dhadhodara and Joshi (2017), which suggested that there was no difference in attitude towards writing based on students' gender. This finding also aligns with the study by Ahmed et al. (2021), which concluded that females and males exhibited equally positive attitudes towards learning how to write.

It was also revealed that the attitude of SMK Sungai Baging students was average, as their language level fell midway between low and medium levels. However, significantly more students exhibited a medium level of proficiency compared to those at the low level, according to Dhadhodara and Joshi's (2017) study, which yielded 13.58% of students with low and 70.52% of students with moderate attitudes towards writing. These results suggest that language proficiency may play an essential role in shaping learners' self-efficacy, motivation, and affective focus in learning a language, and can act as a barrier to academic engagement and success (Dhadhodara & Joshi, 2017; Dong et al., 2021).

Moreover, the mean attitude scores towards writing in upper and lower secondary age groups are average. This finding aligns with the research of Ratha and Shah (2018), which reported that 120 upper-secondary students also have a moderate level of attitudes (M = 3.13, SD = 0.67), as their mean scores range from 2.50 to 3.49. Ratha and Shah (2018) also concluded that intermediate students

possess positive attitudes towards writing in English, with a mean score of 3.60. In contrast, lower intermediate students, with a score of 3.45, demonstrate neither positive nor negative attitudes towards writing.

4.3 The Relationship Between Writing Anxiety and Writing Attitudes by Gender, Proficiency, and Lower and Upper Secondary Students

The overall correlation analysis of total scores revealed a significant positive correlation between anxiety and attitudes among the students of SMK Sungai Baging regarding their writing learning. The Pearson r statistic was r = 0.441, p = 0.000, indicating that an increased level of anxiety is associated with more negative attitudes toward learning writing among lower and upper secondary students. The findings also demonstrated a significant relationship between anxiety and attitudes towards learning writing among both lower and upper-secondary students. These results contrast with the findings of Ratha and Shah (2018), which concluded that the relationship between anxiety and attitude among lower and upper-secondary students in learning writing relates to their gender and language proficiency.

The overall total score correlation analysis also indicated a significant negative correlation between anxiety and attitudes towards learning writing among both lower and upper-secondary students. The Pearson r statistic was (r = -0.676, p = 0.000), suggesting that increased anxiety adversely affects attitudes towards learning writing in secondary students. Overall, the findings revealed a significant relationship between anxiety and attitudes towards learning writing as a second language among these students. Therefore, the results can be summarised as follows:

1. Students' levels of writing anxiety differ by gender, proficiency, and whether they are in lower or upper secondary, and the overall attitude towards writing is average.

2. Students' writing attitudes vary by gender and proficiency, but they are average in lower and upper secondary education.

3. The relationship between language anxiety and language attitudes in writing displays a positive correlation.

This study has provided a plausible reason for the low pass rate in the five-year SPM results at SMK Sungai Baging. It then suggests ways to address the issue and enhance writing skills among students by focusing on the impact of language anxiety and attitude. The findings are hoped to benefit the English committee in setting up measures that include changing students' negative perceptions towards writing, which causes the average level of writing anxiety and resistance and increases their interest and motivation to acquire the skill. Several researchers have suggested that students may benefit from writing in a positive language environment, which helps alleviate language anxiety and improve attitude (Ramzan et al., 2023; Zheng, 2024).

5.0 CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that students at SMK Sungai Baging exhibit an average level of writing anxiety and attitudes towards writing (e.g., group differences by gender, proficiency, and school level; the significance of the correlation between anxiety and attitudes). Furthermore, improved writing skills and enhanced language performance correlate with reduced anxiety and positive attitudes among students at SMK Sungai Baging. English teachers ought to support students by providing ample opportunities for them to refine their writing while concurrently alleviating their anxiety and fostering positive attitudes towards writing. Thus, comprehending students' perceptions of writing and offering targeted professional development for non-optionist teachers is particularly vital in these contexts. Such efforts can aid in bridging the learning gap and enhancing writing outcomes for students who are already disadvantaged due to their geographic and educational circumstances.

The results of this study suggest that students at SMK Sungai Baging experience an average level of writing anxiety and generally hold positive attitudes towards writing. Furthermore, with reduced anxiety and more positive attitudes, these students can become more competent writers and more literate overall. Both optionists and non-optionists should support English teachers by providing practical strategies that enhance their writing skills, alleviate anxiety, and improve their attitudes towards writing. It is hoped that a study of anxiety and attitudes towards writing among lower and upper secondary students at the secondary level will provide valuable insights to the District Officer of Kuantan (PPD Kuantan), the State Education Department of Pahang (JPNP), and the Ministry of Higher Education.

Additionally, the study will provide recommendations for enhancing students' writing proficiency while they remain in educational institutions. Thus, this study supports the existing body of research highlighting the need for the educational process to be structured and designed to meet students' needs and preferences, considering their attitudes and anxiety, which may affect their overall academic performance and writing skills. Consequently, writing classes should incorporate engaging activities and constructive feedback to foster positive attitudes and alleviate anxiety. Further in-depth research is recommended with larger samples, particularly in Malaysian rural secondary schools.

The scope of this study is limited to 300 students from SMK Sungai Baging and does not include all low-performing schools in Kuantan. Additionally, the study excludes the entire student population of SMK Sungai Baging. It is based solely on a survey examining students' anxiety and attitudes towards writing, which was conducted via a questionnaire. Further in-depth exploration, incorporating qualitative inquiries, is strongly recommended to investigate the students' personal experiences, perceptions, and the underlying factors contributing to their writing anxiety and attitudes. Such approaches could provide richer, more nuanced insights that quantitative data alone may not reveal and assist in identifying specific challenges students face in this context.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Mohd Hasharudin Che Shamsudin (Conceptualisation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing)

Hafizoah Kassim (Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – review & editing)

Abdullah Adnan Mohamed (Methodology, Supervision)

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