International Journal of Instruction *January 2027 ● Vol.20, No.1*
e-ISSN: 1308-1470 ● www.e-iji.net *p-ISSN: 1694-609X*
pp. 453-470

Article submission code: 20260411173105
Received: 11/04/2026 Revision: 18/07/2026
Accepted: 29/07/2026 OnlineFirst: 01/10/2026

Exploring Writing Anxiety Among EFL Postgraduates During Thesis Preparation: Levels, Types, Causes, and Coping Strategies

Hind Ghulayfis Alotaibi
Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Al-Majmaah, 11952, Saudi Arabia, *451204855@s.mu.edu.sa*

Zaha Alanazi
Dr., corresponding author, Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Al-Majmaah, 11952, Saudi Arabia, *z.alonazi@mu.edu.sa*

This study explored writing anxiety among postgraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students during thesis writing, with a particular focus on anxiety levels, dimensions, causes, and coping strategies. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a survey with open-ended responses and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that the majority of students in both English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs experienced moderate levels of overall writing anxiety, as well as comparable levels of cognitive and somatic anxiety, regardless of EFL instructional context or language proficiency. However, ESP students reported significantly higher levels of avoidance anxiety. Gender was a significant predictor of overall writing anxiety and somatic anxiety within the EAP group but not among ESP students, suggesting that the relationship between gender and writing anxiety may vary across disciplinary contexts. The study concludes with recommendations for improving the thesis-writing experience at the tertiary level and highlights the need for greater cognitive and psychological support for postgraduate students engaged in the demanding process of thesis writing.

Keywords: EFL students, thesis writing, writing anxiety, anxiety levels, anxiety causes, anxiety types, writing, Saudi students

INTRODUCTION

Writing is considered one of the four essential language skills that students must master in a successful learning journey; writing is also regarded as one of the most difficult competencies to develop in second and foreign language learning (Richards & Renandya, 2008). Writing is therefore recognized as a fundamental skill that is closely associated with students' anxiety (Kassem, 2017). Writing anxiety (WA) refers to the overwhelming or excessive fear that may manifest in behavioral avoidance of evaluated writing tasks. In Daly's (1979) terms, WA is defined as "the general avoidance of

Citation: Alotaibi, H. G., & Alanazi, Z. (2027). Exploring writing anxiety among EFL postgraduates during thesis preparation: Levels, types, causes, and coping strategies. *International Journal of Instruction*, *20*(1), 453-470.

writing situations perceived by individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing" (p. 37).

Anxiety often appears as nervousness, stress, and excessive worry, which may be triggered by various factors, including fear of negative evaluation, fear of tests, linguistic difficulties, time constraints, and limited topical knowledge **(Jawas, 2019;** Harahap & Syarif, 2022; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Wern & Rahmat, 2021; Zhang, 2011). Similarly, pressure to achieve high standards in writing and the fear of making errors (Hudayani, Husein, & Dirgeyasa, 2020; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), as well as avoidance of situations that require writing tasks and fear of writing evaluation (Hassan, 2001), can also contribute to writing anxiety.

These psychological manifestations of anxiety may hinder the development of writing ability (Zheng & Cheng, 2018) and have been found to correlate negatively with linguistic knowledge, particularly vocabulary and grammar (Abdel Latif, 2015), which may ultimately lead to lower-quality writing (Hassan, 2001). Writing anxiety has also been associated with procrastination and avoidance of writing tasks, where the perceived stress of writing outweighs the anticipated benefits of developing writing competence. Beyond its academic impact, WA is also associated with other affective dimensions. Research has shown that WA is negatively correlated with self-efficacy and self-esteem (Rankin-Brown, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2023). Learners with higher levels of anxiety tend to report lower levels of self-efficacy and weaker self-regulation compared with peers who experience lower levels of anxiety (Paul et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2015).

Levels of anxiety, however, may vary across gender, though studies findings are not consistent. Some studies have reported that female students tend to experience higher levels of anxiety than their male counterparts (Kumar & Bhukar, 2013; Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012). Other EFL learners who are males have been shown to experience higher levels of anxiety (Jebreil et al., 2015).

Previous research findings suggest that WA is influenced by various cognitive and emotional factors that may vary across learning environments, academic demands, and across gender. Nevertheless, despite the ample research on WA in various EFL contexts, limited attention has been paid to the experiences of EAP and ESP students at the post-tertiary level and to how the academic demands associated with different fields of study may influence WA and its potential variation across gender. At the post-tertiary stage, students often experience a shift from essay-level writing during their undergraduate studies to more advanced and professional research writing requirements. This transition, along with the academic expectations associated with disciplinary contexts, may increase writing-related stress and anxiety. Understanding the level and triggers of anxiety at this critical stage of students' academic development is important for designing institutionally appropriate strategies that help students manage the emotional and cognitive demands of time-constrained academic writing tasks.

Therefore, the present study aims to identify the levels, types, and sources contributing to writing anxiety (WA) among EFL graduate students at Saudi universities in EAP and ESP majors as they compose their theses. This line of research is particularly important

in the Saudi EFL context, where many learners face difficulties in academic writing and have been reported to display moderate levels of writing anxiety at the undergraduate level (Al-Shammari, 2025). Specifically, the following questions are explored:

1-To what extent do EFL postgraduate students majoring in both EAP and ESP at Saudi universities differ in the level and type of WA during their thesis writing process?

2-To what extent do factors of language proficiency level and gender (EAP vs. ESP) predict the level and types of WA among EFL postgraduate students?

3-What are the most common causes of WA among EAP vs. ESP postgraduate students?

4-What are potential strategies for handling WA for both EAP and ESP postgraduate students?

The next sections will focus on the theoretical underpinnings of WA and underscore the areas of limitations in the relevant literature that motivated the current research.

EFL Writing Anxiety in EFL Context

Foreign language anxiety, particularly writing anxiety (WA), is widely reported as a major source of tension and stress EFL learners face during the learning process (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Syahid, Fitrian, & Kusumaningrum, 2024). WA is often linked to "threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening" (Pappamihiel, 2002, p. 331). Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is manifested in feelings of fear, stress, or irritability associated with the learning process. Uncontrolled levels of anxiety, especially WA, can significantly affect students' academic performance and their self-confidence in their linguistic abilities (Lawal, Idemudia, & Adewale, 2017) and may negatively affect learners' sense of professional identity (e.g., Ding et al., 2025). According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, high levels of anxiety may hinder input intake and thus slow down the language acquisition process. In particular, writing anxiety may be manifested in difficulties expressing and generating ideas as well as disengagement from writing tasks (Erkan & Saban, 2011).

Although previous studies suggest that WA generally has a negative influence on EFL learners, Negari & Rezaabadi (2012) argue that high-anxiety settings may also promote greater attention to word choice and grammar. Likewise, facilitating anxiety has been found to be associated with achievement-oriented goals, encouraging students to concentrate on improving their writing (Sabti, Rashid, & Hummadi, 2019). These contrasting findings suggest that the effects of WA may vary based on the level of anxiety, individual learners' characteristics, and the educational context.

In the literature, WA is generally divided into three types: cognitive, somatic, and avoidance anxiety (Cheng, 2004). Cognitive anxiety refers to the psychological aspects of anxiety, including worries, negative expectations, and concerns about others' evaluations. The expectations of both students and teachers can influence students' writing performance. For example, when teachers have high expectations, students may feel increased pressure to meet those expectations. Instead of concentrating on their writing, students may become overly focused on the teacher's expectations, which can

negatively affect their ability to write. A study conducted on 303 EFL students in Indonesia revealed that both males and females were concerned about others' perceptions of their writing (Kurniasih, Cahyono, Astuti, & Suryati, 2023) and that cognitive anxiety was the dominant anxiety type (Varadika & Zuhriyah, 2025).

Somatic anxiety refers to the physical aspects of anxiety that individuals may experience, including tension, sweating, and nervousness (Cheng, 2004). This type of anxiety may occur when students work under time constraints. In some studies, female students were found to experience more pronounced physical symptoms, such as difficulty breathing and chills, during writing tasks (Fajaryani et al., 2024). Avoidance anxiety, the third type, occurs when learners avoid, hesitate, or withdraw from writing classes or EFL writing tasks due to fear of making mistakes (Cheng, 2004). Gender-based variations in engagement with writing tasks have also been reported, with female students exhibiting higher levels of avoidance anxiety than their male counterparts (Sabti, Hassan, Turki, & Hummadi, 2024).

Writing anxiety within the broader context of foreign language anxiety (FLA) is commonly associated with three main categories of factors: learners' personal characteristics, learning-related challenges, and teachers' instructional practices (Fitriani, 2022; Harahap & Syarif, 2022; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Rasool, Aslam, Mahmood, Barzani, & Qian, 2023; Wern & Rahmat, 2021). In terms of learners' personal characteristics, factors such as low self-perception and lack of self-confidence (Harahap & Syarif, 2022), as well as fear of criticism (Rasool et al., 2023), are positively associated with writing anxiety. Learning-related challenges, such as linguistic difficulties and problems organizing ideas, have also been reported as prominent triggers of anxiety (Fitriani, 2022; Ruslan, Tahir, & Patak, 2025; Wern & Rahmat, 2021). Additionally, students with lower levels of writing performance are more likely to experience higher levels of writing anxiety than their higher-performing peers (Sabti et al., 2024; Zhang, 2011).

Teacher-related factors, particularly feedback, evaluation, and encouragement, can also contribute to students' anxiety. A quantitative study investigating the causes of WA among 365 university students indicated that writing anxiety may occur when teachers fail to provide adequate feedback (Omar & Chaqmaqchee, 2023). Teachers' negative evaluation has also been identified as a major cause of WA among EFL students in Afghanistan, as reported in a qualitative study by Quvanch and Si Na (2022). Similar findings were reported by Rasool et al. (2023) and Ruslan et al. (2025).

Overall, WA has been recognized as a major challenge for students learning a foreign language, highlighting the need to establish effective strategies to help students manage their anxiety. Common strategies reported in the literature include extensive writing practice (Khatami, Calafato, Sabeki, & Çelik, 2025), recognizing one's own anxiety triggers (Arnold, 1999; Oxford, 2001), seeking feedback from peers and teachers, receiving encouragement, and improving time management (Al-Khawaldeh & Burhani, 2025; Cheng, 2002; Erdel, 2024)**,** and stayed calm during writing tasks **(Jawas, 2019)** Teachers must aim to foster a positive and realistic perception of students' writing

abilities and assist them in overcoming potential obstacles without losing confidence (Cheng, 2002).

Although studies on WA have expanded considerably, those focusing specifically on EFL postgraduate students remain relatively limited. Existing research has examined several causes of WA during thesis writing, including a lack of topical knowledge **(**Nonthakoth & Poonpon, 2025), Linguistic difficulties, such as producing cohesive and coherent arguments, and limited grammatical competence (Wu & Buripakdi, 2022). Insufficient time management, along with family-related issues, also led to WA **(**Kurniawati & Atmojo, 2022).In addition, Kawengian and Subekti (2024) found that students' WA mainly stemmed from challenges in expressing their ideas clearly and fear of negative evaluation from supervisors. To alleviate anxiety, students in the above studies adopted various coping strategies, including seeking support, establishing time management, identifying problems and seeking solutions, using grammar-checking tools, and reading previous studies.

As shown in the previous discussion, empirical studies on WA have been conducted in various contexts, including Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, and China (Erdel, 2024; Erkan & Saban; Fajaryani et al., 2024; Fitriani, 2022; Harahap & Syarif, 2022; Kawengian & Subekti, 2024; Khatami et al., 2025; Kurniasih et al., 2023; Kurniawati & Atmojo, 2022; Nonthakoth & Poonpon, 2025; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Rasool et al., 2023; Ruslan et al., 2025; Wern & Rahmat, 2021; Wu & Buripakdi, 2022). Despite these extensive investigations, comparatively less attention has been given to the Arabic context, particularly to EFL postgraduate students at Saudi universities. The shift from essay writing to thesis writing, which represents a culmination of learners' language competence, is expected to be especially challenging for Saudi EFL learners who already reported moderate levels of writing anxiety at the undergraduate level (Al-Shammari, 2025).

In addition, many previous empirical studies did not clearly specify participants' gender (Al-Khawaldeh & Burhani, 2025; Fitriani, 2022; Harahap & Syarif, 2022; Kurniasih et al., 2023; Nonthakoth & Poonpon, 2025; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Wern & Rahmat, 2021). Differences in gender and age may influence values, expectations, and learning experiences, which, in turn, may affect the levels, causes, and coping strategies related to writing anxiety across different EFL settings. Other underexplored variables include postgraduate students' field of study and language proficiency, particularly comparisons between EAP and ESP programs, which have received limited attention in previous research. Because academic writing practices and expectations differ across disciplinary contexts, (Gardner et al., 2019), EAP and ESP students may experience writing anxiety differently. EAP students may have certain advantages over their ESP counterparts because they typically receive more extensive instruction in academic writing, potentially influencing the manifestation and levels of writing anxiety, particularly at the postgraduate level. To our knowledge, no previous study has simultaneously compared writing anxiety among postgraduate EAP and ESP students while examining the predictive roles of gender and language proficiency in the Saudi EFL context. The present study addresses this gap by examining these contextual variables among Saudi postgraduate EFL students. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on factors

influencing postgraduate students' academic writing and to provide insights into the academic writing needs of both EAP and ESP students at the tertiary level.

METHOD

Research Design and Instruments

The current study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate WA among Saudi EFL students. The data in the current study were gathered through a survey and semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the research questions.

The Second Language WA Inventory (SLWAI) was adapted from Cheng (2004) to measure the level to which EFL students feel stress in second language writing. The first part of the survey elicited demographic information about the participants (gender, major, recent STEP scores). The second part included 22 statements participants rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Items (1,8,21,22) were negatively worded and were reverse-coded before conducting the statistical analysis. The 22 items are divided into three types of anxiety: cognitive anxiety, including items (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8), somatic anxiety (9,10,11,12,13,14,15), and avoidance anxiety in items (16,17,18,19,20,21,22). The overall level of writing anxiety was interpreted using the mean item scores of the SLWAI. For ease of interpretation, the following categories were adopted: mean scores of 3.0–3.4 were interpreted as indicating high anxiety, 2.5–2.9 as moderate anxiety, 2.0–2.4 as low anxiety, and scores below 2.0 as indicating no anxiety. In the last part of the survey, one open-ended question was added to explore the factors of WA among EFL students in both EAP and ESP majors. To ensure that the participants felt more comfortable and had a clear understanding of the questions, an online survey version written in both English and Arabic was utilized. To obtain comprehensive insights into the research questions, a semi-structured interview was employed to identify the source of WA and the coping strategies by students.

Participants

The participants were 100 Saudi Master's students enrolled at a Saudi public university. All participants were native Arabic speakers and were either actively engaged in thesis writing or had recently completed their master's theses at the time of data collection. The sample consisted of 53 students enrolled in ESP programs and 47 students enrolled in EAP programs, including 64 females and 36 males. The EAP participants were enrolled in English language majors, whereas the ESP participants were enrolled in health-related disciplines (Nursing, Medicine, Pharmacy, Biochemistry, and Toxicology) and Physics. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling by distributing an online questionnaire via WhatsApp to eligible postgraduate students. Participation was voluntary. From the 100 survey respondents, 40 participants (30 females and 10 males) were randomly selected from both the EAP and ESP groups for qualitative analysis of the open-ended survey responses. For the semi-structured interviews, six female students volunteered to participate, including three from the EAP group and three from the ESP group. Their ages ranged from 27 to 35 years. The interview participants were recruited through convenience sampling based on

accessibility through academic and personal networks, such as colleagues, friends, and relatives. The language that was used during the interviews depended on the participant's preference: either Arabic or English. All interviews were conducted online, lasted between eight and 10 minutes, and were transcribed and double-checked for accuracy. To maintain confidentiality, interview volunteers were referred to as 'P' (e.g., P1, P2, etc.), where 'P' stands for 'Participant'.

Data Analysis

To examine the differences in WA between EAP and ESP students, independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare EAP and ESP postgraduate students on overall writing anxiety. A MANOVA was conducted to examine differences between EAP and ESP postgraduate students across the three dimensions of writing anxiety: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance anxiety. To answer the second research question, a multiple regression analysis was used with gender and proficiency level as predictor variables for the level of WA overall and the level of different types of anxiety among EAP and ESP students. Proficiency level in this study is operationalized as students' self-reported scores on proficiency test of the Saudi Standardized Test of English Proficiency (STEP), a nationally standardized English proficiency examination administered by the Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC). The third and fourth research questions were answered through qualitative analysis of interviews and open-ended survey responses.The interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire responses were organized in Microsoft Excel and analyzed using thematic analysis. Initial coding was informed by the previous literature while allowing new themes to emerge from the data. The coding was conducted by the first author and subsequently cross-checked with the co-author until agreement on final themes was reached.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Analysis

To address RQ1, descriptive statistics (see Table 1) indicated that ESP students (M = 2.88, SD = .76) reported slightly higher overall WA than EAP students (M = 2.71, SD = .63). However,the results from independent-sample t-test indicated that this difference was not statistically significant, t(98) = 1.18, *p*=.240.

Table 1
Independent-samples t-Test comparing EAP and ESP students on the overall writing anxiety

Anxiety Variable	EAP M (SD)	ESP M (SD)	t	df	p	Mean Difference	95% CI
Overall writing anxiety	2.71 (0.63)	2.88 (0.76)	1.18	98	.240	-0.17	[0.44, 0.11]

Descriptive statistics, as shown in Table 2, revealed also minor variations between the two groups in the types of WA. A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine whether EAP and ESP students differed in cognitive, somatic, and avoidance writing anxiety. The multivariate effect of major was

not statistically significant**,** Pillai's Trace = .072, F(3, 96) = 2.50, p = .064**,** indicating that the combined writing anxiety profile did not differ significantly between the two groups

The follow-up univariate ANOVAs revealed no significant differences between EAP and ESP students in cognitive anxiety, F(1, 98) = 0.06, p = .804, or somatic anxiety, F(1, 98) = 0.04, p = .840. However, there was a significant difference in avoidance anxiety, F(1, 98) = 7.45, p = .008, with ESP students reporting higher avoidance anxiety than EAP students, with moderate effect size (η^2_p = .071).

Table 2
Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) of writing anxiety dimensions by major

Dependent Variable	EAP M (SD)	ESP M (SD)	F(1, 98)	p	Partial η^2
Cognitive anxiety	2.87 (0.37)	2.89 (0.57)	0.06	.809	.001
Somatic anxiety	2.75 (1.04)	2.79 (1.02)	0.04	.839	< .001
Avoidance anxiety	2.85 (0.30)	3.02 (0.32)	7.45	.008	.071

To address the second research question, which examined whether language proficiency and gender predicted the overall level and dimensions of writing anxiety among EAP and ESP postgraduate students, eight multiple regression analyses were conducted, with four models estimated separately for each group (EAP and ESP). Prior to the regression analyses, the assumptions of multiple linear regression were evaluated for all models within each group. For the EAP group, visual inspection of the Q–Q plots of the standardized residuals and the residuals-versus-predicted-values plots indicated that the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were adequately met. No evidence of problematic multicollinearity was observed, as tolerance values (.948) exceeded the recommended threshold and VIF values (1.055) were well below the recommended cutoff of 5. Furthermore, Cook's distance values indicated that no influential observations unduly affected the regression models.

The results for the EAP group, presented in Table 3, showed that the regression models for overall anxiety and somatic anxiety were statistically significant, with each model explaining 15.9% of the variance, $F(2, 44) = 4.17$, $p = .022$. In both models (see Table 4), gender was the only significant predictor, indicating that female students reported significantly higher levels of overall writing anxiety (B = −0.408, SE = 0.141, t = −2.89, p = .006) and somatic writing anxiety (B = −0.920, SE = 0.321, t = −2.87, p = .006) than male students.. In contrast, language proficiency was not a significant predictor in either model. The regression models for cognitive anxiety, $F(2, 44) = 1.07$, $p = .351$, and avoidance anxiety, $F(2, 44) = 2.07$, $p = .138$, were not statistically significant, and neither gender nor language proficiency significantly predicted these dimensions of writing anxiety.

Table 3
Summary of multiple regression models predicting overall writing anxiety and its dimensions among EAP students

Dependent variable	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F (df1, df2)	p
Overall anxiety	.399	.159	.121	4.17 (2, 44)	.022*
Cognitive anxiety	.216	.047	.003	1.07 (2, 44)	.351
Somatic anxiety	.399	.159	.121	4.16 (2, 44)	.022*
Avoidance anxiety	.293	.086	.044	2.07 (2, 44)	.138

Table 4
Regression coefficients for gender and language proficiency predicting overall writing anxiety and its dimensions among EAP students

Dependent variable	predictor	B	SE	β	T	P	95% CI
Overall anxiety	Gender	−0.408	0.141	—	−2.89	.006	[−0.692, −0.123]
	Language proficiency	−0.004	0.008	−.083	−0.58	.562	[−0.020, 0.011]
Cognitive anxiety	Gender	−0.176	0.121	—	−1.46	.151	[−0.420, 0.067]
	Language proficiency	−0.001	0.006	−.033	−0.22	.828	[−0.014, 0.012]
Somatic anxiety	Gender	−0.920	0.321	—	−2.87	.006	[−1.566, −0.274]
	Language proficiency	−0.016	0.017	−.133	−0.94	.353	[−0.050, 0.018]
Avoidance anxiety	Gender	−0.160	0.138	—	−1.16	.252	[−0.438, 0.118]
	Language proficiency	0.004	0.005	.111	0.75	.457	[−0.007, 0.014]

A separate set of multiple regression analyses was conducted to examine whether gender and language proficiency predicted overall writing anxiety and its dimensions among ESP students. Prior to the analyses, the assumptions of multiple linear regression were evaluated and found to be adequately satisfied. As shown in table 5 and 6, none of the regression models reached statistical significance, including overall writing anxiety, $F(2, 50) = 0.04$, $p = .964$, cognitive anxiety, $F(2, 50) = 0.12$, $p = .887$, somatic anxiety, $F(2, 50) = 0.49$, $p = .615$, and avoidance anxiety, $F(2, 50) = 0.91$, $p = .409$. Across all four models, neither gender nor language proficiency significantly predicted overall writing anxiety or any of its dimensions among ESP postgraduate students.

Table 5
Summary of multiple regression models predicting overall writing anxiety and its dimensions among ESP students

Dependent variable	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F (df1, df2)	p
Overall anxiety	.034	.001	−.038	0.04 (2, 50)	.964
Cognitive anxiety	.069	.005	−.035	0.12 (2, 50)	.887
Somatic anxiety	.139	.019	−.020	0.49 (2, 50)	.615
Avoidance anxiety	.188	.035	−.003	0.91 (2, 50)	.409

Table 6
Regression coefficients for gender and language proficiency predicting overall writing anxiety and its dimensions among ESP students

Dependent variable	predictor	B	SE	β	T	P	95% CI
Overall anxiety	Gender	−0.039	0.148	—	−0.27	.791	[−0.336, 0.258]
	Language proficiency	0.0002	0.007	.004	0.03	.977	[−0.014, 0.015]
Cognitive anxiety	Gender	0.030	0.162	—	0.18	.855	[−0.296, 0.355]
	Language proficiency	0.004	0.008	.065	0.46	.649	[−0.012, 0.020]
Somatic anxiety	Gender	−0.278	0.289	—	−0.96	.341	[−0.858, 0.302]
	Language proficiency	−0.004	0.014	−.037	−0.26	.795	[−0.032, 0.025]
Avoidance anxiety	Gender	0.120	0.089	—	1.35	.183	[−0.058, 0.298]
	Language proficiency	0.0002	0.004	.047	0.05	.963	[−0.009, 0.009]

Qualitative Analysis

To address RQ3, both an open-ended question and semi-structured interviews were used to explore the primary causes of writing anxiety (WA) from students' perspectives. From the survey responses, 40 participants were randomly selected from the EAP and ESP groups for qualitative analysis. Among them were 30 females and 10 males. In addition, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with female postgraduate students, including three EAP students majoring in English and three ESP students (two in Biochemistry and one in Toxicology) from Saudi universities. After reviewing and organizing the responses, the data were analyzed thematically. The analysis revealed three main sources of WA: time constraints, linguistic difficulties, and supervisor-related issues.

Time constraints emerged as one of the leading causes of writing anxiety. Participants expressed concerns about balancing thesis writing with other academic responsibilities. One student reported facing "difficulty in dedicating time for writing the thesis," while another explained, "I write and do practical work at the same time, which makes things more difficult."

Linguistic difficulties were another major concern. Many participants expressed insecurity about their linguistic knowledge, particularly grammar, tenses, and academic vocabulary. One participant stated that she felt anxious due to "doubting my linguistic knowledge and grammar, especially tenses." Another reported experiencing stress because of "ignorance and unfamiliarity with research writing or structuring methods." Similarly, one participant noted difficulty in selecting appropriate academic vocabulary, explaining, "I don't know the accuracy of my writing. I need to choose academic vocabulary."

Supervisor-related factors also contributed to students' anxiety. Some participants described their supervisors' style as "too strict" or mentioned that the supervisor "doesn't provide any feedback." In addition, fear of negative evaluation from supervisors affected students' confidence. As one student explained, "I worry about the comments of the supervisor if the writing is not good, that could put much pressure on me."

To address RQ4, the semi-structured interviews also explored the strategies students used to manage their writing anxiety. The findings indicate that students employed a combination of academic, psychological, and cognitive strategies to manage their writing anxiety. One common approach was reading previous studies to gain familiarity with academic writing. For example, P3 stated, "I read studies so I can get the best ideas from them," and noted that digital tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT helped in correcting writing errors. Similarly, P4 reported improving her writing by examining previous studies: "I used to go back to previous studies and see how they write, then I write in my own way." Seeking support from supervisors and setting realistic goals were also identified as helpful strategies.

DISCUSSION

The current study investigated the levels, types, causes, and coping strategies of writing anxiety (WA) among Saudi EFL postgraduate students. The findings indicated comparable levels of overall, cognitive, and somatic anxiety across EAP and ESP students. However, ESP students reported significantly higher levels of avoidance anxiety, suggesting a greater tendency to avoid writing tasks despite experiencing similar overall levels of writing anxiety. Language proficiency did not predict overall writing anxiety or any of its subtypes in either discipline. These findings suggest that, despite the more extensive academic writing instruction typically received by EAP students, overall, cognitive, and somatic writing anxiety remain comparable across disciplinary contexts and language proficiency levels at the postgraduate stage, particularly in the demanding context of thesis writing. The results align partly with those of Varadika and Zuhriyah (2025), who found that the majority of EFL students experience moderate levels of writing anxiety during thesis writing. The significantly lower levels of avoidance anxiety among EAP students may be explained by their greater exposure to academic writing and more frequent writing practice throughout their programs. Conversely, the significantly higher tendency of ESP students to avoid writing tasks suggests that they perceive thesis writing as more challenging and threatening. This interpretation is consistent with Pappamihiel's (2002) argument that writing anxiety is associated with threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of writing situations as threatening. However, because self-efficacy and threat appraisals were not directly measured in the present study, this interpretation should be considered with caution.

The moderate level of WA observed in the present study partially contrasts with the findings of Syahid et al. (2024), who reported that EFL students experienced high levels of anxiety during writing tasks. Differences in task type and context may explain this contrast. While thesis writing involves extended academic work developed over time,

the writing tasks examined in Syahid et al. (2024) were likely timed or test-based, which may generate higher levels of anxiety. Differences in participant characteristics, writing tasks, and educational contexts may also contribute to variation in reported anxiety levels across studies.

These results were further supported by the qualitative data, as linguistic difficulties and lack of confidence in linguistic competence were frequently voiced as major obstacles during thesis writing among both ESP and EAP students across different disciplines and proficiency levels. While students often attributed their anxiety to linguistic challenges, the absence of a relationship between proficiency level and writing anxiety suggests that such difficulties may represent shared challenges associated with producing extended academic texts in a second language rather than differences attributable solely to language proficiency. One possible explanation for the absence of a relationship between language proficiency and writing anxiety in the present study, in contrast to the findings of Sabti et al. (2024) and Zhang (2011), is the relatively advanced proficiency of the participants, as all participants were MA students who had met the minimum English language proficiency requirements for admission.

Gender emerged as a significant predictor of both overall writing anxiety and somatic anxiety only within the EAP group, with female students reporting higher anxiety levels than males. This finding is consistent with Fajaryani et al. (2024), who found that female EFL learners experienced higher somatic writing anxiety than males, and is broadly in line with Sabti et al. (2024), who reported higher levels of writing anxiety among female students. Gender, however, was not a significant predictor of any anxiety dimension among ESP students. These findings extend previous research by suggesting that the relationship between gender and writing anxiety may depend on the disciplinary and instructional context rather than representing a universal gender difference. In EAP programs, writing proficiency—particularly at the postgraduate level—often functions as an important marker of disciplinary competence and professional identity. In contrast, in ESP contexts, English writing is more commonly viewed as a means of communicating subject-specific knowledge. Consequently, in EAP contexts, where language competence is more closely tied to academic and professional identity, female students may be more likely to experience stronger WA and specifically more somatic symptoms of writing anxiety. However, because professional identity and performance expectations were not directly measured in the present study, this interpretation should be considered tentative.

The Saudi EFL postgraduate students reported several coping strategies that are consistent with previous research, including reading previous studies to familiarize themselves with academic writing conventions and organization, as well as using physical relaxation techniques such as deep breathing (Al-Khawaldeh & Burhani, 2025; Khatami et al., 2025). In addition, participants reported using AI tools, such as ChatGPT and Grammarly, to improve writing accuracy and receive immediate writing feedback. These findings suggest that students combined traditional academic strategies with emerging technological tools to manage writing anxiety and increase confidence during the thesis-writing process. Nevertheless, the moderate level of anxiety reported by both EAP and ESP students indicates that thesis writing remains a challenging stage

for postgraduate learners, highlighting the need for pedagogical support that promotes the effective and ethical use of AI tools for brainstorming, organizing ideas, and improving writing quality while avoiding plagiarism.

Pedagogical practices should therefore be responsive to the contextual needs of postgraduate EFL learners by enhancing students' competence in academic writing and increasing supervisors' awareness of effective strategies for providing constructive feedback during thesis writing. The findings also suggest that the academic writing skills acquired in regular writing courses may not automatically transfer to the more complex demands of thesis writing. Therefore, universities should consider offering thesis-writing courses or dedicated writing support centers to scaffold postgraduate students throughout the thesis-writing process. While all postgraduate students may benefit from sustained instruction in research writing, the higher avoidance anxiety observed among ESP students suggests a need for greater discipline-specific writing scaffolding integrated within their content courses. Conversely, the gender differences observed only among EAP students suggest that anxiety-management strategies and supportive learning environments may be particularly beneficial alongside academic writing instruction. This need is particularly important given that many participants identified linguistic challenges, such as insufficient lexical knowledge, difficulties with writing techniques, and limited writing experience, as major contributors to writing anxiety, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Fitriani, 2022; Harahap & Syarif, 2022; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Ruslan et al., 2025; Wern & Rahmat, 2021; Zhang, 2011). In addition, fear of negative evaluation was frequently reported as another contributor to writing anxiety, which is consistent with earlier studies (Omar & Chaqmaqchee, 2023; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Rasool et al., 2023; Ruslan et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The current study explored potential variations in the levels and sources of writing anxiety between ESP and EAP postgraduate learners. The findings highlighted the demanding nature of thesis writing and its impact on anxiety across both groups. Despite differences in disciplinary context and language proficiency, students reported comparable levels of overall, cognitive, and somatic writing anxiety, suggesting that thesis writing represents a shared challenge for postgraduate EFL learners. However, ESP students reported significantly higher levels of avoidance anxiety, indicating a greater tendency to evade or postpone writing tasks during the thesis-writing process. These findings highlight the need for institutional efforts to provide writing support services that address not only academic writing skills but also emotional support during the thesis-writing process. In addition, the current study's findings regarding the relationship between gender and writing anxiety, which emerged only among EAP students, warrant further investigation, particularly regarding the potential role of disciplinary context, professional identity, and gender-related orientations toward academic performance within EFL writing contexts.

The findings of the present study, however, should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. Although the quantitative sample included both male and female participants, the semi-structured interviews, due to accessibility constraints, involved

only female students. Consequently, the qualitative findings should be interpreted as reflecting female postgraduate students' experiences rather than as evidence of gender differences. In addition, the study was conducted at a single Saudi public university and focused primarily on students' perspectives, which may limit the generalizability and scope of the findings. Future research should include participants from multiple institutions, incorporate the perspectives of supervisors, and examine the role of disciplinary context and professional identity in shaping postgraduate writing anxiety.

DECLARATIONS

Availability of Data and Materials

The data is available upon reasonable request to the co-corresponding author.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

FUNDING

The author extends the appreciation to the Deanship of Postgraduate Studies and Scientific Research at Majmaah University for funding this research work through the project number (PGR-2026-381).

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

H. A. was responsible for manuscript preparation, data collection, and data analysis. Z. A., as the co-corresponding author, supervised the study, provided academic guidance, contributed to the data analysis, and revised the manuscript.

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