
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hyper-Attentive Anxiety in High-Stakes L2 Writing: Foreign Language Anxiety and Grammar Awareness among Chinese IELTS Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and grammar awareness among Chinese EFL learners in IELTS writing. Analysis of 201 students revealed a significant positive correlation between FLA and grammar awareness ($p < .01$). Regression confirmed that FLA significantly predicts grammar awareness ($p < .001$). This phenomenon is described as hyper-attentive anxiety, where anxiety heightens sensitivity to grammatical accuracy. Independent samples t-tests showed no significant differences in grammar anxiety by gender ($p = .992$) or age ($p = .989$). However, significant differences were found between students from university tier ($p < 0.001$) and between grade level ($p = .002$), with higher anxiety in higher-tier universities and upper grades. These results suggest that anxiety may increase learners' focus on grammar rather than simply hindering performance. The study underscores the need to incorporate emotional regulation alongside grammar instruction in IELTS writing pedagogy, to help learners balance accuracy and fluency in high-stakes settings.

KEYWORDS

Foreign language anxiety; Grammatical errors; IELTS writing; Chinese undergraduates

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1. Introduction

IELTS writing is a crucial indicator of English proficiency and a key determinant of international opportunities for non-native English speakers, as the test is recognized in over 140 countries and plays a pivotal role in students' global mobility (Uysal, 2010). For Chinese students seeking overseas education, IELTS writing performance is particularly consequential; however, many candidates consistently underperform, with grammatical and syntactic errors, which affect their scores (Guo, 2023). These issues persist despite the increasing importance of IELTS scores in higher education admissions, highlighting a critical need for more targeted research and pedagogical interventions.

In addition to language proficiency, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has emerged as an influential affective factor in second language performance. Prior studies have shown that heightened FLA can negatively affect learners' spoken accuracy, fluency, and overall output quality (Abdulaal et al., 2022). Given the high-stakes nature of IELTS writing, anxiety-induced cognitive overload may further exacerbate students' grammatical and syntactic errors, yet this relationship has rarely been empirically examined in the IELTS context. Furthermore, little is known about how students' heightened grammatical awareness—when shaped by test anxiety—can lead to over-monitoring, hesitation, and excessive focus on accuracy at the expense of fluency.

Recent research on IELTS writing has addressed diverse themes, including teaching models, feedback mechanisms, and the linguistic features of high-scoring essays (Ashraf & Ashraf, 2024). Studies have also explored the validity and reliability of IELTS writing assessments and the emerging application of AI-based scoring systems (Koraishi, 2024). Collectively, these investigations have provided valuable insights into pedagogy, assessment, and learner performance. However, most of the existing literature either focuses on generalized error taxonomies or centers on teaching strategies and scoring mechanisms, with limited attention to the specific grammatical and syntactic errors produced by Chinese undergraduates in IELTS argumentative writing. Moreover,

few empirical studies have examined how students perceive such errors or how affective variables—particularly FLA—may influence error occurrence and writing quality.

Building upon these theoretical and empirical insights, the present study investigates how Chinese undergraduate students engage with grammatical and syntactic structures during IELTS argumentative writing, and whether foreign language anxiety (FLA) contributes to the occurrence of such errors. To this end, the study introduces the concept of hyper-attentive anxiety, defined as a cognitive-affective condition in which learners' excessive attention to grammatical correctness—amplified by test pressure—intensifies their anxiety and disrupts writing fluency and coherence [6]. While collaborative writing and affective factors have both been studied in L2 contexts, their combined influence on test-oriented academic writing—particularly grammar-related outcomes—remains uncertain. By analyzing learner-reported errors and anxiety levels, this research aims to illuminate the cognitive-affective mechanisms that underlie linguistic performance in high-stakes writing assessments. It also seeks to offer pedagogical insights for reducing grammar-related anxiety and improving L2 writing instruction for test-oriented learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 IELTS and L2 Writing: Pedagogical Challenges

IELTS writing has become a key point in L2 pedagogy due to its high-stakes nature and emphasis on communicative competence. Early studies largely centered on test-takers' challenges in interpreting task demands and maintaining coherence under time pressure. Instructional interventions have since evolved to emphasize structured feedback, task familiarity, and writing fluency. For example, a pedagogical framework combining time-managed drills, task classification, and instructor-led feedback was found to significantly improve writing quality among IELTS candidates, especially in areas like lexical diversity and coherence (Ashraf & Ashraf, 2024).

As attention shifted toward the linguistic characteristics of high-scoring responses, research found marked differences in cohesive device use and topic elaboration across proficiency bands, prompting calls for genre-based instruction and enhanced rhetorical training (Ashraf & Ashraf, 2024). Meanwhile, the rise of artificial intelligence has stimulated debate over the validity and fairness of automated scoring. A study assessing ChatGPT-4's scoring of IELTS Task 2 revealed general alignment with human raters, yet also exposed inconsistencies in more nuanced cases, suggesting that AI may support but not replace human judgment (Koraishi, 2024). In a related comparison, researchers noted that test-takers often scored higher on the PTE due to automated scoring systems and task design differences, whereas IELTS prioritizes human rating and emphasizes grammatical accuracy and cohesion (Ghaemi & Khorsand, 2024).

Parallel research in L2 writing has explored the integration of digital tools such as Grammarly. A recent literature review found that the tool enhances grammar awareness, learner confidence, and self-regulated learning, though it falls short in supporting higher-order writing development and may encourage over-reliance on correction algorithms (Llausas et al., 2024). These findings collectively suggest that IELTS writing instruction must integrate pedagogical scaffolding, feedback mechanisms, and digital technologies, while remaining sensitive to assessment formats and learner variability.

2.2 IELTS and L2 Writing: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)

Parallel to cognitive-interactionist studies, affective variables—especially foreign language anxiety (FLA)—have emerged as crucial predictors of second language writing performance. FLA as a specific set of self-perceptions and emotional responses related to second language learning, distinct from general anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Research has consistently found that FLA negatively correlates with writing fluency, organization, and linguistic complexity ((Ruiz-Funes, 2015)).

In Chinese EFL contexts, FLA is particularly salient due to exam-oriented culture and high linguistic expectations. FLA among Chinese undergraduates may be significantly associated with decreased syntactic accuracy and increased cognitive overload during timed writing tasks. Students often experience anxiety-induced disfluency and overreliance on formulaic expressions to avoid grammar mistakes (Liu & Ni, 2015). However, most of these studies focus on general writing proficiency rather than specific error types such as subject-verb disagreement, tense consistency, or article misuse.

In IELTS writing studies, few have directly examined how FLA influences grammatical and syntactic errors. While some research acknowledges that stress impacts coherence and lexical choices (ChegeNdumia & Kirimilreri, 2018), the precise relationship between anxiety and specific structural error patterns remains uncertain. Moreover, learner perceptions of how grammar affects their band score—and their anxiety around these perceptions—have been largely neglected.

This study addresses this gap by examining Chinese students' grammatical and syntactic errors in IELTS writing alongside their self-reported foreign language anxiety (FLA). Using a grammar-anxiety scale, it explores how anxiety relates to both the frequency and types of grammar errors, as well as students' perceptions of their impact on writing performance (EkiNci ÇeliKpazu & Taşdemir, 2022). By combining affective and structural perspectives, the study offers a clearer understanding of how anxiety influences L2 writing in high-stakes test settings.

3. Methodology and Data Analysis

3.1 Participants and Questionnaire Design

To investigate Chinese learners' perceptions of grammatical and syntactic errors in IELTS writing, along with the potential influence of foreign language anxiety, this study employed a questionnaire-based methodology. The survey was conducted on the Chinese questionnaire survey platform Wenjuanxing (<https://www.wjx.cn/>) in October 2024. A total of 325 complete responses were received, among which 201 were valid responses (excluding 124 responses completed within 30 seconds), with an effective response rate of approximately 60%. No additional exclusion criteria were applied. Respondents whose answers are valid could receive a lottery service provided by the platform. This group was deliberately chosen for several reasons. First, their age range (typically 18–23) aligns closely with that of typical IELTS candidates, many of whom are preparing for study abroad or international programs. Second, college students are often key participants in global educational mobility and possess relatively high media literacy and peer influence, making their attitudes and behaviors highly representative of broader trends among young Chinese test-takers.

The questionnaire, administered online, was designed to explore Chinese EFL learners' awareness of grammatical and syntactic errors in IELTS writing, as well as their beliefs, attitudes, and perceived challenges regarding these errors.

The instrument consisted of 14 close-ended items, using multiple-choice and Likert-scale formats. It covered 2 primary domains:

Demographic information (e.g., age, gender, grade, and university tier);

Attitudes and beliefs (e.g., perceived importance of grammar, instructional support, and feedback).

The questionnaire items related to grammar awareness (Q5–Q14) were conceptually divided into two dimensions: cognitive recognition of grammatical/syntactic errors and affective responses toward such errors (i.e., anxiety or concern about grammar). This distinction aligns with prior research distinguishing between metalinguistic awareness and emotional factors in second language learning [4].

The full original questionnaire, including all items and adaptation sources, is provided in the Appendix for transparency and replicability. To provide a clear overview of the sample characteristics, Table 1 summarizing participant basic information. It forms the basis for the descriptive and inferential statistical analyses reported in the next sections.

Table 1: Final sample description statistics (N=201)

Basic information	Sort	Sample size	Sample percentage
University tier	985 Project University	40	19.9%
	211 Project University	78	38.8%
	Double First-Class University	51	25.4%
	First Batch Bachelor's Degree University (Tier 1)	18	9.0%
	Second Batch Bachelor's Degree University (Tier 2)	7	3.5%
	Private University	5	2.5%
	Top-Up	2	1.0%
	Male	106	52.7%
Gender	Female	95	47.3%
	17-19	9	4.5%
Age	19-21	133	66.2%
	21-23	50	24.9%
	23+	9	4.5%
Grade	Freshman	27	13.4%
	Sophomore	123	61.2%
	Junior	42	20.9%
	Senior	9	4.5%

3.2 Questionnaire Reliability and Validity Test

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the questionnaire data, both reliability and validity tests were conducted prior to formal data analysis.

As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the attitude and perception scale reached 0.914, indicating excellent internal consistency and high reliability. This suggests that the items reliably measured participants' beliefs and experiences regarding grammatical and syntactic errors in IELTS writing.

Table 2: Questionnaire Reliability Analysis (N=201)

	Klonbach Alpha based on standardized terms	Number of terms
Klonbach Alpha	.914	10

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, this study adopted a writing situation scale for English learners that has been empirically validated, combined with undergraduates' perceptions of grammatical and syntactic errors in IELTS writing and psychological theories of attitudes. Some items were moderately adjusted to better align with the research topic, incorporating both multiple-choice and open-ended formats.

Validity was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The overall KMO value was 0.853, and Bartlett's test was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis and the scale structure was statistically sound (see Table 3).

Table 3: Questionnaire Validity Analysis (N=201)

KMO sample appropriateness measure		.853
Bartlett sphericity analysis	Approximate chi-square	1371.455
	Degree of freedom	45
	Sig	<0.001

Subsequently, principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted to explore the underlying structure of the questionnaire. As shown in Table 4, two principal components with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted. These two components accounted for a total of 71.5% of the variance, with the first component alone explaining 56.77%. This suggests that the majority of the variability in responses can be captured by a single dominant construct, while the second component accounts for an additional 14.73%, likely reflecting secondary or less prominent aspects of the data.

The high explained variance by the first component supports the conceptual coherence of the questionnaire and indicates that the items largely converge around a central theme. The results of the PCA confirm the structural validity of the instrument and justify its use in subsequent statistical analyses.

Table 4: Total Variance Explained by Principal Components

Component	Initial Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Cumulative (%)
1	5.677	56.773	56.773
2	1.473	14.727	71.499

Thus, the questionnaire has relatively good overall validity and a reasonable structure. The principal component analysis results provide a solid data foundation for subsequent research.

3.3 Correlation Analysis: FLA and Grammar Awareness

This section aims to investigate whether foreign language anxiety (FLA) is significantly correlated with the total score of grammatical and syntactic error awareness (Grammar_awareness_total) among Chinese university students. To examine this relationship, two composite variables were constructed based on questionnaire data::

Grammar_awareness_total: computed by summing responses to items Q5 through Q8, which assess participants' cognitive awareness and attitudes toward the importance of grammar errors.

FLA_total: computed by summing responses to items Q9 through Q14, which reflect anxiety-related emotions and perceived difficulties regarding grammar in writing. Items Q10 and Q14 were reverse-coded to ensure consistent measurement direction.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted with a sample of $N = 201$ Chinese university students to examine the linear association between these two variables. The results indicated a statistically significant positive correlation between Grammar_awareness_total and FLA_total, $r = .388$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 5: Correlation Analysis

		Grammar_awareness_total	FLA_total
Grammar_awareness_total	Pearson correlation	1	.388**
	Sig. (double tail)		.000
	Number of cases	201	201
FLA_total	Pearson correlation	.388**	1
	Sig. (double tail)	.000	
	Number of cases	201	201

**. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

The positive correlation suggests that higher levels of foreign language anxiety are associated with greater awareness of grammatical and syntactic errors among Chinese EFL learners. This may indicate that anxious students tend to pay more attention to grammar details, or that increased anxiety heightens sensitivity to errors in their writing.

3.4 Regression Analysis: FLA and Grammar Awareness

To investigate the predictive effect of foreign language anxiety (FLA_total) on the total score of grammatical and syntactic error awareness (Grammar_awareness_total), a linear regression analysis was conducted with Grammar_awareness_total as the dependent variable and FLA_total as the independent variable. The regression model was built using the enter method.

As shown in Table 6, Table 7 and Table 8, the model was significant ($F(1, 199) = 35.21, p < .001$), with FLA_total explaining 15.0% of the variance in Grammar_awareness_total ($R^2 = .150$, adjusted $R^2 = .146$). The standardized regression coefficient was 0.388, indicating a significant positive predictive effect of FLA_total on Grammar_awareness_total ($\beta = .388, t = 5.93, p < .001$). The tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) values indicated no serious multicollinearity issues in the model.

Table 6: Linear Regression Analysis

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		Collinear statistics	
		B	SE	Beta	t	p	Tolerance VIF
1	(Constant)	-.631	1.423		-.443	.658	
	FLA_total	.602	.101	.388	5.934	.000	1.000 1.000

a. Dependent variable : Grammar_awareness_total

Table 7: Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.388	.150	.146	2.927

Table 8: ANOVA Analysis

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	sig.
Regression	301.650	1	35.212	301.650	.000
Residual	1704.748	199	8.567		
Total	2006.398	200			

The regression analysis in this study indicated that foreign language anxiety (FLA_total) had a significant positive predictive effect on students' awareness of grammatical and syntactic errors (Grammar_awareness_total). Specifically, higher levels of anxiety were associated with higher scores in grammar error awareness. This finding supports the notion that anxiety may heighten learners' attention and vigilance toward potential grammatical mistakes in their writing.

In terms of explanatory power, the model accounted for approximately 15% of the variance in grammar awareness scores, suggesting that foreign language anxiety is one of the important influencing factors. However, it is not the sole contributor—other variables may also affect students' grammar awareness.

These results highlight the importance of addressing students' emotional states in pedagogical practice. Proper guidance and anxiety-reducing strategies may help learners develop a more positive attitude toward grammar learning, thereby enhancing their writing performance. Future research could incorporate additional variables and adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to further explore the causal relationship and underlying mechanisms between anxiety and grammar awareness.

3.5 T-Test: Demographics and Grammar Anxiety

To examine group differences in grammar-related foreign language anxiety, this study constructed another composite variable named grammar_anxiety_total. This variable was calculated by summing participants' responses to Items Q5 to Q14 of the questionnaire, which specifically measured anxiety concerning grammar and syntactic errors in IELTS writing. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), and the total score reflects the overall level of grammar-focused anxiety.

Four categorical demographic variables were used as grouping factors:

Gender was coded as 1 = Male and 2 = Female, based on self-identification.

Age was recoded into two groups: 1 = 21 years old or younger (original options A and B: 17 - 19, 19 - 21), 2 = Older than 21 (original options C and D: 21 - 23, 23+).

Tier of University was collapsed into two categories to reflect institutional prestige: 1 = Higher-tier universities (985, 211, Double First-Class), 2 = Lower-tier universities (First Batch, Second Batch, Private, Top-Up).

Grade Level was grouped into: 1 = Lower grades (Freshman, Sophomore), 2 = Upper grades (Junior, Senior).

These groupings enable independent-samples t-tests to compare participants' grammar anxiety levels across socially and educationally meaningful categories.

Table 9: Group Statistics

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	106	20.08	7.03	0.68
Female	95	20.07	8.71	0.89

Table 10: Independent Samples T-test Between Grammar Anxiety and Gender

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE Diff	95% CI Lower	95% Upper	CI
1.442	.231	0.010	199	.992	0.011	1.113	-2.183	2.205	

Table 9 and 10 indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met, $F(1,199) = 1.442$, $p = .231$. Thus, the t-test results assuming equal variances were adopted. The t-test revealed no statistically significant difference in grammar anxiety between male and female students, $t(199) = 0.010$, $p = .992$. Specifically, male students ($M = 20.08$, $SD = 7.04$) and female students ($M = 20.07$, $SD = 8.72$) reported nearly identical levels of grammar anxiety. The mean difference was 0.01, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -2.18 to 2.21, indicating a negligible effect of gender on grammar-related writing anxiety.

Table 11: Group Statistics

Age	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
21 years old or younger	142	20.08	8.13	0.68
Older than 21	59	20.07	7.21	0.94

Table 12: Independent Samples T-test Between Grammar Anxiety and Age

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE Diff	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	
2.307	.130	0.014	199	.989	0.017	1.220	-2.389	2.422	

Table 11 and 12 indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met, $F(1,199) = 2.307$, $p = .130$. Thus, the t-test results assuming equal variances were adopted. The t-test revealed no statistically significant difference in grammar anxiety between the two age groups, $t(199) = 0.014$, $p = .989$. Specifically, students in group 1 ($M = 20.08$, $SD = 8.13$) and group 2 ($M = 20.07$, $SD = 7.21$) reported nearly identical levels of grammar anxiety. The mean difference was 0.02, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -2.39 to 2.42, indicating a negligible effect of age on grammar-related writing anxiety.

Table 13: Group Statistics

University Tier	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Higher-tier universities	169	18.82	6.9	0.53
Lower-tier universities	32	26.72	9.28	1.64

Table 14: Independent Samples T-test Between Grammar Anxiety and University Tiers

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE Diff	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	
11.246	.001	-5.595	199	.000	-7.896	1.411	-10.679	-5.113	

Table 13 and 14 indicated that the assumption of equal variances was not met, $F(1, 199) = 11.25, p = .001$. Thus, the t-test results not assuming equal variances were adopted. The t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in grammar anxiety between students from Tier 1 and Tier 2 universities, $t(37.75) = -4.58, p < .001$. Specifically, students from Tier 2 universities reported significantly higher levels of grammar anxiety ($M = 26.72, SD = 9.28$) than those from Tier 1 institutions ($M = 18.82, SD = 6.90$). The mean difference was -7.90 , with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -11.39 to -4.41 .

Table 15: Group Statistics

Grade Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Lower grades	150	19.09	7.22	0.59
Upper grades	51	23.00	8.94	1.25

Table 16: Independent Samples T-test Between Grammar Anxiety and Grade Level

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	MD	SE Diff	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
6.768	.010	-3.141	199	.002	-3.913	1.246	-6.370	-1.456

Table 15 and 16 indicated that the assumption of equal variances was violated, $F(1,199) = 6.768, p = .010$. Therefore, the t-test results not assuming equal variances should be considered. However, since both equal and unequal variance results indicate statistical significance, the following explanation is based on the equal variances assumed row for consistency. The t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in grammar anxiety between different grade levels, $t(199) = -3.141, p = .002$. Specifically, students in group 1 ($M = 19.09, SD = 7.22$) reported significantly lower levels of grammar anxiety than students in group 2 ($M = 23.00, SD = 8.94$). The mean difference was -3.91 , with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -6.37 to -1.46 , indicating that higher grade level is associated with greater grammar-related writing anxiety.

4. Results and Discussion

This study identified a nuanced pattern in how Chinese EFL learners experience grammar-related writing anxiety in high-stakes contexts. A significant positive correlation between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and students' awareness of grammatical and syntactic errors suggests that anxiety may sharpen learners' attentional focus on linguistic accuracy. Regression analysis further confirmed FLA as a significant predictor of grammar awareness, yet the model explained only 15.0 % of the variance ($R^2 = 0.150$), indicating that additional factors also shape grammar awareness. To capture this mechanism, we introduce the notion of hyper-attentive anxiety—a cognitive-emotional state in which heightened anxiety amplifies learners' sensitivity to form-related aspects of writing.

Contrary to the dominant view that FLA uniformly undermines writing performance, the current findings indicate that anxiety may also act as a catalyst for heightened grammatical vigilance. Learners experiencing FLA may, consciously or not, engage in stricter self-monitoring to avoid perceived failure. This interpretation is supported by the fact that 84 % of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the item "I will pay special attention to grammatical and syntactic errors in my IELTS writing practice" ($M = 4.2/5$), suggesting that self-reported vigilance is not hypothetical but enacted. This hyper-attentiveness, while potentially inhibiting fluency and expressive range, appears to promote a sustained focus on accuracy. In this sense, FLA emerges not solely as a barrier, but as a potential compensatory mechanism for form control.

However, it remains unclear whether this grammar-focused attention actually translates into improved writing performance. While heightened grammatical awareness may reflect increased attentional resources, the present study did not collect or analyze students' actual writing scores or teacher assessments. Therefore, the "positive predictive" relationship should be interpreted with caution—it may signify greater error salience or anxiety-induced hyperfocus, rather than actual gains in writing quality.

These insights extend recent discussions on the role of digital grammar tools in shaping learner awareness. Technologies like Grammarly have been shown to enhance grammar consciousness and confidence (Llausas et al., 2024), yet they remain external aids. In contrast, the grammar vigilance observed in this study stems from internally regulated anxiety, especially among students from lower-tier universities, particularly among learners from lower-tier universities and higher academic levels—contexts where perceived stakes and evaluative pressure are intensified.

Moreover, these findings offer a counterpoint to earlier claims that FLA primarily results in reduced syntactic control or disfluency (ChegeNdumia & Kirimilreri, 2018). Rather than uniformly weakening structural accuracy, anxiety may motivate learners to adopt error-minimizing strategies rooted in heightened linguistic attention. This is consistent with the observation that lower-tier university students ($M = 26.72$) scored significantly higher on grammar anxiety than higher-tier peers ($M = 18.82$), indicating that anxiety-driven vigilance may be a strategic response to perceived disadvantage. However, the modest effect size ($R^2 = 0.15$) and group differences caution against overgeneralizing these effects. This supports a more dynamic view of FLA—not

simply as a negative affective variable, but as a potential source of controlled precision when appropriately managed (EkiNci ÇeliKpazu & Taşdemir, 2022). Future research should integrate actual writing performance data—such as standardized IELTS scores or expert teacher ratings—to examine whether increased grammar awareness (as measured by self-report) is associated with measurable improvements in output quality.

By foregrounding the grammar-specific dimension of FLA, this study adds depth to affective-cognitive models of L2 writing. It underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that address emotional factors alongside structural awareness. Supporting learners in regulating their anxiety may not only ease emotional burdens but also harness the constructive aspects of their hyper-attentiveness to enhance writing outcomes.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study investigated the relationship between foreign language anxiety (FLA) and grammar awareness among Chinese EFL learners preparing for the IELTS writing task. The findings revealed a significant positive association, indicating that higher anxiety levels correspond with increased attention to grammatical and syntactic accuracy. This relationship was conceptualized as hyper-attentive anxiety, a form of cognitive vigilance that emerges in high-stakes academic settings.

While these findings challenge the assumption that FLA is purely detrimental, they also point to its nuanced role in shaping learner awareness. Rather than undermining performance, moderate levels of anxiety may promote heightened error monitoring—especially in populations facing greater academic pressure. Such insights hold pedagogical value for writing instructors, who may consider not eliminating anxiety entirely but managing it constructively. Strategies such as peer editing, mindfulness-based activities, and metacognitive reflection could help students regulate emotional responses while reinforcing grammar consciousness.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-report data, which may be influenced by social desirability and may not reflect actual writing behavior. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the design precludes causal inference—whether anxiety fosters grammar awareness or vice versa remains uncertain. Third, the sample was unevenly distributed across regions and institutional tiers, limiting the generalizability of the results.

Future research should adopt longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to track the developmental trajectory of hyper-attentive anxiety and its actual effects on writing outcomes. Combining self-reports with writing performance metrics or teacher evaluations may offer a more holistic view of how affective and cognitive dimensions interact in high-stakes L2 writing.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

[1] What is the tier of your university in China?

- A. 985 Project University B. 211 Project University
 C. Double First-Class (World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines) University
 D. First Batch Bachelor's Degree University (Tier 1)
 E. Second Batch Bachelor's Degree University (Tier 2)
 F. Private University G. Top-Up
 H. Other, please specify: _____

[2] Your gender:

- A. Male B. Female

[3] Your age:

- A. 17-19 B. 19-21 C. 21-23 D. 23+

[4] Your current grade:

- A Freshman B Sophomore C Junior D Senior

[5] In your opinion, it is very important to avoid grammatical and syntactic errors in IELTS writing.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[6] In your opinion, grammar and syntax errors can affect your IELTS writing band.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[7] In your opinion, grammatical and syntactic errors may affect the reader's understanding of your essay.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[8] In your opinion, in IELTS writing, grammatical and syntactic errors affect writing band more than other errors (e.g., logic errors, irrelevant content).

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[9] In your opinion, avoiding grammatical and syntactic errors is the most difficult part of IELTS Writing exam.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[10] In your opinion, practice can reduce grammatical and syntactic errors in IELTS writing.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[11] In your opinion, you will pay special attention to grammatical and syntactic errors in your IELTS writing practice.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[12] In your opinion, it can be frustrating to find grammatical and syntactic errors in your IELTS writing.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[13] In your opinion, writing teachers should focus on grammatical and syntactic errors when marking IELTS writing band than other parts.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

[14] In your opinion, even if there are numerous grammar and syntax errors, as long as the content is good, this essay can still get a high band in IELTS writing.

- A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neutral D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree