

The Mediating Effect of Professional Development on The Relationship Between Writing Anxiety and Grammatical Competence: Sequential Mixed Methods Approach

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Abstract

This study explored the grammatical competence, writing anxiety, and professional development of university secretaries, examining whether professional development mediates the relationship between grammatical competence and writing anxiety. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, data were collected from 182 secretaries via an adapted questionnaire and a focus group discussion with seven participants. Results indicated moderate grammatical competence, especially in prepositions, verb tenses, and modals, and moderate writing anxiety, with cognitive anxiety being most prominent. Professional development was rated high, reflecting active engagement in training programs. Mediation analysis showed that professional development did not significantly influence the relationship between grammatical competence and writing anxiety. Qualitative findings corroborated these results, revealing that grammatical difficulties increase anxiety and lower writing confidence. Participants acknowledged the value of professional development but noted that current programs seldom address grammar or writing skills. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating targeted language instruction into professional development to enhance workplace communication and alleviate writing apprehension.

Keywords: education, grammatical competence, writing anxiety, professional development, explanatory sequential mixed method, Philippines

Background

Writing anxiety is a common barrier to effective communication among students and professionals, including secretarial staff in academic institutions. It manifests as difficulty generating ideas, hesitation to start writing, and nervousness during tasks, all of which hinder productivity and confidence (Bastida & Saysi, 2023; Bozgün, 2023; Omar & Chaqmaqchee, 2023). While secretaries are regularly exposed to English in the workplace, errors in various types of documents remain prevalent. Writing anxiety, which develops from negative experiences with writing, is particularly concerning in administrative contexts where accurate and professional correspondence is essential (University of North Carolina, 2023). Despite the recognized importance of grammatical competence—defined as the accurate and appropriate

application of language rules—there is limited research exploring its relationship with writing anxiety, particularly in the secretarial profession.

Globally, studies indicate that writing apprehension negatively affects performance, leading to avoidance behaviors and reduced motivation (Fareed et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2024; Wei, 2024). In the Philippines, similar patterns emerge, with factors such as fear of negative feedback, low confidence, and lack of preparation contributing to writing anxiety (Bastida & Saysi, 2023; Kabigting, 2020; Ochoa, 2025). Local workplace-based studies show that targeted English training improves grammatical accuracy and confidence among administrative staff (Anar et al., 2024; Meisani, 2022). However, the mediating role of professional development in strengthening grammatical competence and reducing writing anxiety remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap, focusing on the secretaries of one of the State Universities in Caraga Region.

This research is grounded in theoretical perspectives such as Chomsky's Universal Grammar, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasize the interplay between linguistic competence, guided learning, and emotional factors. Anchored on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals—particularly Goal 4 on Quality Education and Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth—it seeks to determine whether professional development mediates the relationship between grammatical competence and writing anxiety. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, the study first examines quantitative data on secretaries' grammatical competence, writing anxiety, and professional development levels, followed by qualitative insights to deepen interpretation. Findings aim to inform institutional training programs, enhance workplace communication, and contribute to broader academic discourse on professional development in administrative roles.

Methods

This study employed a QUAN-QUAL explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, which involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to further explain and interpret the initial results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova et al., 2006). The approach was selected to examine the relationship between professional development, grammatical competence, and writing anxiety among secretarial staff.

Participants

The quantitative phase involved 182 secretaries and staff with secretarial functions from the seven campuses of a State University in Caraga Region. The qualitative phase purposively selected seven participants from this group for focus group discussions (FGDs) to provide deeper insights into the quantitative findings (Patton, 2002). Employees without secretarial roles, such as those in general services, were excluded.

Instruments

Three instruments were used. Grammatical competence was assessed using a test adapted from Balones and Gempes (2022), covering prepositions, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, modals, and voice. Writing anxiety was measured through the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) by Cheng (2004), consisting of 22 items across cognitive, somatic, and avoidance subscales. Professional development was measured using a seven-item questionnaire adapted from Asio and Jimenez (2020). All

instruments underwent expert validation, and the reliability test yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.725, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the quantitative phase, validated survey questionnaires were distributed face-to- face after securing university approval. Data were tallied, encoded, and analyzed with the assistance of a statistician. The qualitative phase used a validated semi-structured interview guide during FGDs. Data credibility was ensured through peer review and debriefing (California State University, 2007).

Result and Discussion

This part presents the study’s findings in line with the research objectives. It begins with the grammatical competence of secretaries across key areas, followed by their levels of writing anxiety (somatic, avoidance, and cognitive). It then examines the level of professional development and its mediating effect between grammatical competence and writing anxiety, concluding with secretaries’ perspectives on professional development and its link to grammar skills and writing anxiety.

Table 1. Grammatical competence in terms of Prepositions, Subject-Verb Agreement, Verb Tenses, Modals, Active and Passive Voice

Indicator	Frequency	Percent	Descriptive Level
Preposition	6	3.3	High
	72	39.6	Moderate
	78	42.9	Basic
	26	14.3	Low
	0	0	Very Low
Subject-Verb Agreement	41	22.5	High
	87	47.8	Moderate
	32	17.6	Basic
	15	8.2	Low
	7	3.8	Very Low
Verb Tenses	29	15.9	High
	87	47.8	Moderate
	51	28.0	Basic
	12	6.6	Low
	3	1.6	Very Low
Modals	0	0	High
	36	19.8	Moderate
	87	47.8	Basic
	54	29.7	Low
	5	2.7	Very Low
Active and Passive Voice	30	16.5	High
	75	41.2	Moderate
	49	26.9	Basic

	20	11.0	Low
	8	4.4	Very Low

Results show that secretaries’ grammatical competence varied across areas, with many demonstrating only basic to moderate proficiency in prepositions (42.9% and 39.6%, respectively), subject–verb agreement (47.8% moderate, 22.5% high), and verb tenses (47.8% moderate, 28.0% basic). Modals were the weakest area, with most respondents at basic (47.8%) or low (29.7%) proficiency, while active/passive voice showed moderate (41.2%) and basic (26.9%) performance. These findings align with prior studies indicating persistent grammatical challenges due to structural complexity, first-language interference, and limited contextual application (Al-Bawaleez & Abdullah, 2023; Ayaz et al., 2024; Luvuno & Ajani, 2022). In professional contexts, such gaps can hinder clarity, precision, and credibility, underscoring the need for targeted grammar instruction integrated into workplace communication tasks rather than relying solely on rote learning (Blinova, 2021; Lubis & Miranti, 2024).

The observed performance suggests that while respondents possess foundational grammar knowledge, they struggle with applying it in context—particularly with nuanced forms like complex tenses, modal distinctions, and strategic voice use. Prior research confirms that difficulties in these areas often persist among EFL learners, even at advanced levels, due to inadequate feedback, insufficient exposure to authentic writing, and lack of metalinguistic awareness (Dinh, 2023; Mehat et al., 2024; Roopa, 2024). In administrative work, where precision in correspondence, reports, and memos is essential, such weaknesses can lead to misinterpretations or reduced efficiency. Addressing these issues calls for context-driven training that emphasizes real-life tasks, critical analysis of grammatical choices, and active error correction, ensuring that grammatical competence translates into effective professional communication (Owaidah, 2024; Husin, 2022).

Table 2. Level of writing anxiety in terms of Somatic Anxiety, Avoidance Behavior, and Cognitive Anxiety

Type of Writing Anxiety	SD	Mean	Descriptive Level
Cognitive	0.50	3.43	Moderate-High
Somatic	0.81	3.26	Moderate
Avoidance	0.62	3.15	Moderate
Overall	0.51	3.28	Moderate

The present study found that secretaries exhibit moderate levels of writing anxiety across cognitive ($M = 3.43$), somatic ($M = 3.26$), and avoidance ($M = 3.15$) dimensions, with cognitive anxiety emerging as the most dominant. This reflects frequent experiences of self-doubt, excessive worry, and mental distractions during writing tasks, aligning with findings by Sun, Motevalli, and Chan (2024) that accuracy concerns and idea generation difficulties are common cognitive barriers to writing fluency. Similarly, BaşKan (2021) and Al-khresheh et al. (2023) noted that low self-efficacy, fear of errors, and negative self-perceptions significantly heighten writing apprehension. These cognitive factors, rooted in internal evaluations rather than external pressures, can undermine professional communication, leading to delays, reduced clarity, and errors in essential documents such as memos and reports.

Such effects extend beyond individual well-being, impacting workplace productivity and credibility. Combong and Napil (2025) emphasized that writing apprehension directly reduces performance, while Kojic (2025) highlighted that communication breakdowns caused by anxiety can weaken organizational effectiveness. Addressing these barriers through targeted interventions is therefore critical. Xu et al. (2025) suggest that fostering self-efficacy, even in general professional skills, can indirectly reduce writing-related cognitive anxiety by enhancing overall confidence. These insights indicate that improving self-belief and providing structured writing support could significantly enhance both the writing quality and efficiency of secretaries.

Table 3. Level of Professional Development of Secretaries

Indicators	SD	Mean	Descriptive Level
In the past year, I have had adequate training opportunities that developed my knowledge and skills to help me better perform my work.	0.90	3.73	High
My office/department makes me aware of available training and development activities and opportunities	0.77	3.90	High
Employees are provided with a variety of useful training opportunities.	0.80	3.75	High
There are career growth opportunities for me within the office/department.	0.87	3.84	High
The office/department provides me the tools and resources I need to achieve my career goals within the city.	0.83	3.82	High
My office/department encourages continual learning and development.	0.83	4.02	High
My office/department provides effective safety related training.	0.88	3.83	High
Overall	0.67	3.84	High

The findings indicate that secretaries reported a high overall level of professional development (Overall M = 3.84), with mean scores across all indicators ranging from 3.73 to 4.02. While the highest-rated aspect was continual learning and development (M = 4.02), suggesting a strong culture of lifelong learning, the lowest was adequate training opportunities in the past year (M = 3.73), hinting at possible gaps in frequency or alignment with specific job functions. These results align with prior research emphasizing the importance of relevant, diverse, and well-communicated training opportunities in enhancing employee competence and engagement (Aljasmí & Alzarooni, 2023; Ampadu & Varga, 2022; Duarte & Silva, 2023). Studies also show that employees value professional development most when it is directly applicable to their roles and supported by adequate resources and clear career pathways (Mansour et al., 2022; Haricharan, 2023; Quansah et al., 2020).

Overall, the high ratings across all indicators suggest that secretaries perceive strong institutional support for their professional growth through relevant training, career advancement opportunities, safety preparedness, and effective communication about available programs. Such support is known to improve employee satisfaction, retention, and performance (Shiri et al., 2023; Swaroop & Verma, 2024; Pinto & Uchil, 2024). Literature further underscores that investing in employee development fosters both individual success and institutional effectiveness (Kareem, 2019; Kareem & Hussein, 2019; Khairul et al., 2024). The alignment between these findings and the secretaries’ positive perceptions suggests that sustained emphasis on targeted, well-resourced, and clearly communicated professional development initiatives can significantly enhance workforce capability and organizational performance.

Table 4. Mediating Effect of Professional Development in the Relationship Between Grammatical Competence and Writing Anxiety

	Writing Anxiety	Grammatical Competence	Professional Development
Writing Anxiety	1	-.310**	.242**
Grammatical Competence	-.310**	1	-.133
Professional Development	.242**	-.133	1

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

Table 4 shows a significant negative correlation between writing anxiety and grammatical competence ($r = -.310, p < .01$), indicating that stronger grammar skills are associated with lower writing anxiety. This supports prior findings that language anxiety can impede communicative competence, while improved grammar reduces anxiety (Dalangin et al., 2023; Waked et al., 2023). Interestingly, writing anxiety was also positively correlated with professional development ($r = .242, p < .01$), suggesting that increased engagement in professional development may coincide with heightened anxiety, possibly due to elevated performance expectations. Meanwhile, the non-significant negative correlation between grammatical competence and professional development ($r = -.133$) suggests no strong direct link between these variables in this sample, consistent with literature noting that professional growth does not always translate directly to measurable grammar gains without targeted interventions (Fontanilla et al., 2024; Amante, 2024).

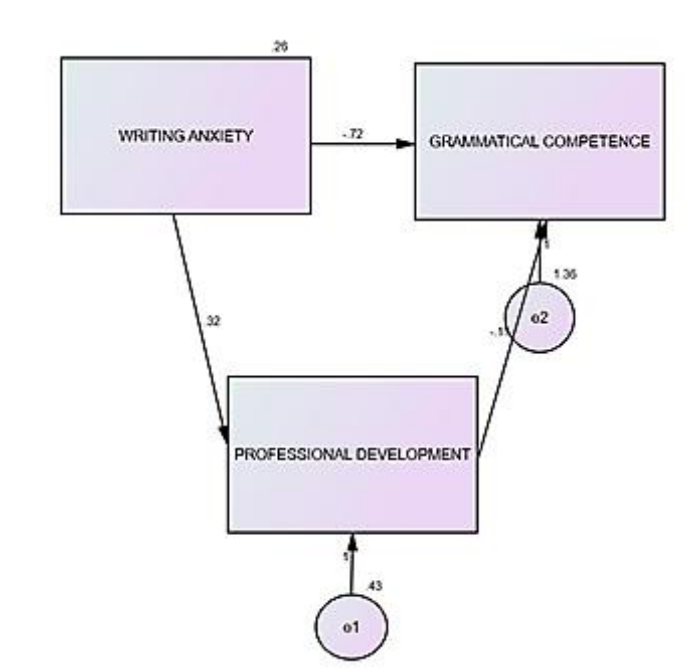


Figure 1. Mediation Model

Figure 1 presents the mediation model analyzing the role of professional development (M) between grammatical competence (X) and writing anxiety (Y). Results show a direct negative path from writing anxiety to grammatical competence ($-.72$), indicating that higher anxiety corresponds with lower grammatical competence. Writing anxiety was positively linked to professional development (0.32), while professional development showed a strong positive association with grammatical competence (1.36). These findings suggest that although writing anxiety can hinder grammatical competence, engagement in professional development may partially offset this effect by supporting grammar improvement, aligning with prior research that highlights the potential of targeted training to enhance language skills despite anxiety-related challenges (Dalangin et al., 2023; Fontanilla et al., 2024).

The analysis indicates inconsistent mediation, specifically with the sign unchanged. This occurs because the indirect effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable (through a mediator) has a different sign than the direct effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. In this specific case, the mediator (professional development) is working in the opposite direction of the direct relationship, potentially cancelling out the overall effect.

Table 5. Secretaries’ Thoughts on Professional Development and its Relationship between Grammatical Competence and Writing Anxiety

Themes	Statements
Grammatical Weaknesses Fuel Writing Anxiety	<p>“I worry about making grammatical mistakes that could affect the professionalism or clarity of the communication.” – IQ1, PQ5, FGD1</p> <p>“Sometimes, I get confused about where to put commas and periods in long sentences. I also find it</p>

	<p>difficult to construct complex sentences correctly without making mistakes in grammar.” – IQ1, PQ5, FGD7</p>
<p>Writing Anxiety Impacts Work Confidence and Output</p>	<p>“Not usually, but I do experience writing anxiety at times, especially when I’m asked to write something unfamiliar. In those cases, I become more cautious because I worry about using the correct grammar, particularly verb tenses and voice.” – IQ2, PQ1, FGD3</p> <p>“Yes, definitely. I experience writing anxiety, especially when I’m unsure about my grammar or the structure of what I’m writing. I usually feel this way during tight</p> <p>“Yes, I experience writing anxiety, especially when preparing official letters, meeting minutes, or project reports, as I am concerned about grammar accuracy, correct format, and clear presentation.” – IQ2, PQ1, FGD7</p>
<p>Self-Help Strategies are Common but Inadequate</p>	<p>“I also consult grammar resources online and sometimes magtatanong din sa [ask] colleagues to review the letter before finalizing it, especially if the sentence is long or complex.” – IQ1, PQ2, FGD1</p> <p>“I do ask for several help, mainly having Artificial Intelligence (AI), such as Chat GPT and Gemini and other online sites that could help me construct the right phrases and paragraph.” – IQ1, PQ2, FGD2</p> <p>“I also use artificial intelligence tools like grammar checkers and ChatGPT to check my sentences and understand my mistakes.” – IQ1, PQ2, FGD7</p>
<p>Strong Support for Professional Development to Improve Competence</p>	<p>“Yes, I believe professional development such as writing workshops or grammar refresher trainings would be very helpful in overcoming writing anxiety.” – IQ2, FGD1</p> <p>“I have decided to pursue graduate studies by enrolling in a master’s degree program. I believe that through formal academic training, I will be able to further enhance my writing proficiency, develop greater</p>

	<p>confidence, and acquire advanced skills necessary for effective written communication in both academic and professional contexts.” – IQ2, FGD5</p> <p>“Yes. I think professional development can be the best help for anyone to overcome writing anxiety by improving our skills and confidence, making writing easier and less stressful.” – IQ2, FGD4</p>
<p>Writing-Related Training is Perceived as Highly Beneficial and Desired</p>	<p>“I would appreciate it if our institution could organize writing workshops for free, specifically designed for secretaries, focusing on areas such as grammar refreshers, effective email writing, and formal document formatting.” – IQ2, PQ5, FGD1</p> <p>“Yes, writing trainings would really help improve our grammar and confidence in writing. They can also reduce writing anxiety by giving us tips and practice.” – IQ2, PQ5, FGD3</p> <p>“Yes, I think trainings or seminars related to writing are very helpful for my tasks because they can improve my skills in preparing reports, letters, and documents for work. They also help improve my grammatical competence by teaching me correct grammar usage, sentence construction, and proper formats.” – IQ2, PQ5, FGD7</p>

Thematic analysis revealed five key findings linking secretaries’ grammatical proficiency, writing anxiety, and professional development. The first theme, Grammatical Weaknesses Fuel Writing Anxiety, showed that difficulties in verb tenses, prepositions, punctuation, and sentence structure were primary sources of stress, particularly in formal writing tasks. This aligns with Rasool et al. (2023), Aloairdhi (2019), and Sa’adah and Ali (2022), who found that grammatical challenges increase anxiety by triggering fear of judgment, reduced confidence, and task avoidance. The second theme, Writing Anxiety Impacts Work Confidence and Output, highlighted how uncertainty in grammar leads to hesitation, over-editing, and reduced productivity—especially under tight deadlines. Similar results were reported by Wahid et al. (2023), Badrasawi et al. (2016), and Biri (2022), who noted that anxiety can slow performance, impair organization of ideas, and diminish writing quality in professional and academic contexts.

The third theme, Self-Help Strategies are Common but Inadequate, showed that secretaries often rely on grammar checkers, AI tools like ChatGPT, and colleagues for assistance. While these tools offer short-term support, they fail to replace formal instruction, leaving underlying anxiety unresolved. Faridah et al. (2021), Marzuki et al. (2023), and Lipalam et al. (2023) similarly observed that technology-assisted

writing aids improve immediate output but do not build long-term competence, often fostering dependence without addressing conceptual grammar gaps. The fourth theme, Strong Support for Professional Development to Improve Competence, reflected a shared belief in the value of targeted training, grammar refreshers, and workshops to address writing challenges. Studies by Kurniasih et al. (2020), Smyth (2024), and English Path (2025) confirm that structured professional development not only enhances technical skills but also boosts confidence and career prospects.

The final theme, Writing-Related Training is Perceived as Highly Beneficial and Desired, emphasized secretaries' interest in institutional programs on business writing, grammar, and documentation. Such training was seen as vital for improving output and reducing anxiety. Calub (2023), Lee and Schmidgall (2020), and Azad et al. (2022) similarly concluded that communication-focused professional development strengthens job performance, workplace professionalism, and emotional well-being. Collectively, these themes highlight that grammar proficiency, anxiety management, and professional growth are interconnected, with professional development serving as a critical intervention for more confident, effective, and polished workplace communication.

Conclusion

This study affirms the interconnectedness of grammatical competence, writing anxiety, and professional development in the workplace. Quantitative results showed that grammatical competence—especially in prepositions, verb tenses, and modals—significantly predicted lower writing anxiety among university secretaries. Although secretaries actively participated in professional development, most training activities were broad and did not directly address their linguistic gaps, leaving weaknesses in both grammar proficiency and writing confidence. The mediating effect of professional development was statistically insignificant, highlighting that general training programs have limited influence on the grammar–anxiety link. Qualitative insights further emphasized the need for grammar-centered, workplace-focused training that supports the drafting of reports, correspondence, and other administrative documents.

These findings carry important institutional implications, as effective administrative communication is essential for organizational productivity and credibility. Writing anxiety and grammatical uncertainty among secretaries can hinder workflow and reduce efficiency, underscoring the necessity for targeted professional development that combines grammar instruction with strategies to manage writing apprehension. Designing programs that strengthen both technical accuracy and confidence will not only support the professional identity of administrative staff but also enhance the overall communication quality of the institution.

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