

Expressive Writing to Relieve Academic Stress at University Level

Escritura expresiva para aliviar el estrés académico a nivel universitario

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This paper reports on a descriptive mixed-method study that aimed to identify the impact of expressive writing on relieving the academic stress of 157 undergraduate students at an Ecuadorian university. Data were gathered through two questionnaires and from focus groups. Results showed enduring relief of academic stress. Furthermore, they help to shed light on the need to study the impact of academic stress on university students and to look for different strategies that can alleviate it. These findings could help to understand students' needs, as they have essential implications in teachers' practices and, consequently, in students' performance. In conclusion, expressive writing has a positive effect on helping to ease academic stress and overcome some difficulties caused by this issue.

Keywords: academic stress, expressive writing, students' perceptions

Este artículo informa sobre un estudio descriptivo de métodos mixtos que tuvo como objetivo identificar el impacto de la escritura expresiva para aliviar el estrés académico en 157 estudiantes de pregrado de una universidad ecuatoriana. Los datos se obtuvieron por medio de dos cuestionarios y de grupos de estudio. Los resultados mostraron un alivio permanente del estrés académico. Además, se evidencia la necesidad de estudiar el impacto del estrés académico en los estudiantes universitarios y buscar diferentes estrategias para aliviarlo. Estos hallazgos podrían ayudar a comprender las necesidades de los estudiantes, las mismas que tienen implicaciones esenciales en las prácticas de los docentes y, en consecuencia, en el desempeño de los estudiantes. En conclusión, la escritura expresiva tiene un efecto positivo ya que ayuda a aliviar el estrés académico y a superar algunas dificultades que este genera.

Palabras clave: estrés académico, escritura expresiva, percepción de los estudiantes

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Introduction

Studying at the university level can be a very stressful and anxiety-inducing experience which can affect many aspects of students' lives. Evidence indicates that English as a foreign language (EFL) students face this problem in the language learning process, due to knowledge deficits and linguistic difficulties in the use of the target language (Hashemi, 2011). One of the requirements to earn a university degree in Ecuador is achieving a B1 level in English of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (SEMPLEDES, personal communication, September 2011). Research shows that EFL students focus intently on this university requirement because they know that English proficiency can help them in their professional lives after graduation. However, the possibility of failure in this subject can change feelings about English study from excitement to pain and anxiety (Hashemi, 2011). Academic outcomes arising from being unable to understand and use the target language or from not having enough resources to meet university language requirements are concerns that need to be addressed. Considering the difficulties this situation causes for students, it is necessary to find and employ stress management strategies and alleviate these negative feelings in EFL students because, as stated by Pennebaker (2018), "concealing or holding back powerful emotions, thoughts, and behaviors is itself stressful" (p. 226). In this regard, expressive writing has emerged in recent years as an interesting and effective alternative for stress reduction (Bockarov, 2015; Pennebaker, 2018). This expressive writing strategy to release academic stress calls for more research to gain additional insight in this realm.

The aim of this study is to describe the impact expressive writing has on EFL university students' and preservice EFL teachers' perceptions of how it helps to relieve stress. This paper is organized as follows: First, an account is given of some aspects of teaching English in the Ecuadorian context and of different issues that have affected this process at the university level in recent

years. Next, this paper considers English as a graduation requirement in the Ecuadorian context in order to examine some important student characteristics and needs regarding this subject. Finally, a discussion is held of evidence regarding the impact of using expressive writing to relieve academic stress.

English as a Graduation Requirement in Ecuadorian Universities

The Ecuadorian Constitution declares that all Ecuadorians have a right to education, making it a priority in public policy (MINEDUC, 2011). At the same time, the Constitution states that learning English is indispensable not only to communicate but also to be able to find and use technological and scientific information (MINEDUC, 2011). Because of this constitutional mandate, university education in Ecuador took action to address this concern. Consequently, the Academic Regime Regulation approved by the Council of Higher Education established proficiency in a foreign language at a B1 level, according to the Common European Reference Framework, as a graduation requirement for all students at university level (Resolution 111, 2019). At present, each university can decide whether or not to include the subject of English language learning in the university curriculum. Consequently, students can take English language classes within or outside the university. It is mandatory that students take a proficiency test in this language at the end of their studies. If they do not pass the test, they will not be eligible for graduation in any major (Resolution 111, 2019).

Teaching English at University Level

In relation to teaching English, the current debate has focused on whether English as a lingua franca (ELF) should replace EFL programs, since it has become an instrumental language. In other words, it fulfills specific purposes. Therefore, English is learned and used with

particular communication purposes (Rojas-Caruci, 2012). “EFL is defined as a means of communication between speakers who do not share the same mother tongue and who use English for certain purposes” (Ur, 2010, p. 85). Although ELF is also used for communicative purposes, the level of intelligibility is the key here: as long as the message is understood, everything is acceptable, based on the “let it pass” principle (Nagy, 2016).

Notwithstanding, teaching English in a formal context does not allow for variation and is based on the principle that to learn a language, it must be learned correctly, since, in most cases, those who learn it will not only use it in ELF contexts, but also to communicate with English speakers who handle not only the language’s phonetic properties but also correct morpho-syntax. Therefore, it is essential for college students to learn and use English appropriately, which means that until a practical model that integrates these two uses of English is found, ELF cannot replace EFL (Nagy, 2016). In this regard, according to Lightbown and Spada (2016), proficiency in a language helps to develop mental flexibility, as well as some cognitive functions such as attention and communication. These two approaches to English use are important to consider since Ecuadorian universities teach EFL; then, learning English in this context might cause more stress than learning it in an ELF one; as mentioned by Hashemi (2011), students may experience linguistic difficulties in learning and using the target language in a formal context.

In addition to the aforementioned situation, Ecuadorian universities are working to ensure that their students achieve the desired proficiency level in a foreign language. However, university students are under a great deal of pressure and stress because they know that years of effort and study can be erased by the results of an English exam. These exams generate several negative emotional reactions since the results students obtain determines their future (Álvarez-Hernández et al., 2013). When this fear is accompanied by high levels of anxiety, it might interfere not only with their

academic performance but also with their personal life. In this way, it can be said that while it is important and necessary for university students to acquire proficiency in a foreign language, it is also necessary to consider how the stress of taking an exam of this nature affects their physical and emotional health.

Thus, it is imperative to look for strategies to manage and counteract this type of stress, because by acquiring proficiency in a foreign language, students are acquiring an indispensable tool for their professional and personal future.

Expressive Writing

The use of personal and emotional writing skills as an alternative strategy to relieve stress is known as *expressive writing* (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). This strategy has shown positive results in different fields, affecting people in several areas (Pennebaker, 2004). According to Pennebaker and Evans (2014), expressive writing is a strategy that uses words in a healing way. The author indicates that writing can often be useful, especially when it comes to negative experiences. In expressive writing the emotional content of the written text becomes a factor in its appeal, which ends up being a relief strategy (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014).

According to Pennebaker and Graybeal (2001), it is possible to identify and evaluate people’s behavior and mood in relation to several characteristics of their writing, since the choice of words can also reveal a lot about an individual. Through writing, people express not only their thoughts and desires, but also who they are; consequently, through writing, a better understanding of related language, emotions, and thoughts is possible.

Academic Stress and Expressive Writing

Students usually experience moments that make them vulnerable to stress. They must face the pressure to succeed in both their personal and academic lives; they are also affected by various social, emotional, family,

or physical problems that might impact their academic performance as well as their regular learning process (Jeronimus et al., 2014). Several studies show positive results when using the expressive writing strategy with stressed students. Pennebaker and Beall (1986) carried out a study with undergraduate students with the aim of verifying whether writing about traumatic moments in the past would help them improve their physical health in the long term and improve their mood in the short term. These authors found that writing about disturbing experiences and mentioning their emotions and feelings reduced health problems and helped students to feel emotionally better.

Regarding the effects of expressive writing on students, there is evidence that this strategy helps increase the availability of working memory. Klein and Boals (2001) worked with university students who, after using expressive writing, felt less stressed when undergoing a formal evaluation. Ramírez and Beilock (2011) concluded that after practicing the expressive writing strategy before a test, students show a calmer attitude during an exam and perform better. In this same vein, studies have shown that anxiety about mathematics can negatively affect students' problem-solving abilities in this area; though after using expressive writing, students experienced improved test performance (Park et al., 2014).

Also, there is evidence of similar results in Japan, the Netherlands, Mexico, and France with monolingual and bilingual students showing significant positive results (Domínguez et al., 1995; Rimé, 1995; Schoutrop et al., 2002; Yogo & Fujihara, 2008).

Expressive Writing in the Participants' Mother Tongue

Educational EFL and English as a second language (ESL) research has shown that, when gleaned information from participants, they express themselves in a free and more expressive way when using their mother tongue (Ganuza & Hedman, 2019). In this respect, Bockarov (2015) has studied the effects of expressive

writing on ESL students, combining their mother tongue and the target language. She concluded that writing in the mother tongue can be a stronger stimulant of emotional responses; however, it helps students improve their performance whether using their mother tongue or the target language for the writing exercises.

There is also evidence that expressive writing in the participants' mother tongue helped tertiary second language (L2) students not only to feel engaged in writing tasks but also to develop and analyze ideas (Pfeiffer & van der Walt, 2017). Similarly, Gains and Graham (2011) reported positive results in three workshops with teachers when using expressive writing in the participants' mother tongue to improve their writing pedagogy competence which also resulted in better learners' writing. It is to be mentioned that not many studies were found with EFL students using expressive writing in their mother tongue to relieve academic stress.

Therefore, this study will examine how expressive writing in the mother tongue favors two specific groups of students (EFL undergraduate students, and preservice EFL program teachers) at the Universidad de Cuenca to reduce academic stress. In this way, the intention is to explore and describe various participants' perceptions of how the act of expressive writing affects their academic behavior. For the purpose of this research, expressive writing is defined as a personal and emotional hand-written piece of writing about stressful academic experiences, in the participants' mother tongue without taking into account punctuation, grammar accuracy, or any other mechanical feature of writing.

In an effort to investigate university students' academic stress and their perceptions of the effects of using expressive writing in the mother tongue as a strategy to reduce it, the following research question has arisen: What perceptions have been forged by EFL undergraduate students and EFL preservice teachers at the Universidad de Cuenca (Ecuador) on the impact of the expressive writing strategy in the mother tongue to reduce their academic stress?

Method

This is a mixed method descriptive study (Mertens, 2015). Data were collected for both quantitative and qualitative analyses as indicated by Dörnyei (2007). This approach, as suggested by some authors (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015), allows the researcher to select, analyze, and integrate the most specific techniques from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective in order to obtain a more precise triangulation. The results and conclusions can then be rounded out, clarified, and expanded with greater precision, while increasing the credibility range (Mertens, 2015).

The objective of this research was to describe the effects the expressive writing strategy in the mother tongue has on students who are taking EFL classes or studying in the preservice EFL program at Universidad de Cuenca to relieve academic stress.

Participants and Context

This study took place at the Universidad de Cuenca, a public university in the southern part of Ecuador. It has around 16,000 students. Teachers and their intact classes in the preservice EFL program and in the Language Department of the University were invited to participate; two classes from the preservice EFL program and four from the Language Department accepted this invitation. It is necessary to mention the proposal to work with these two groups because even though they study English, they do it with a different purpose and in a different way. The EFL learners from this research study belong to different academic majors and they attend English classes as a graduation requirement. They take their English classes without regard to their progress or current status in their majors. However, preservice EFL program students take English classes in the early years of their program, including subjects such as reading and writing, grammar, conversation, and so on, to get prepared in the language domain. In their advanced courses, preservice EFL students also take classes in content areas that are taught in English

(Argudo et al., 2018). As mentioned before, though these two groups study English, they do it differently and for different reasons. This is an important factor to be analyzed, as results in the use of the expressive writing strategy to heal academic stress in these two groups might have some important similarities and differences.

For the quantitative phase of the study, intact classes, as suggested by Mackey and Gass (2005), were studied since these classes were previously established and research in the area of teaching does not always allow selecting samples at random. A non-probabilistic and intentional-type selection was made, since the classes were selected arbitrarily (Creswell, 2014). One hundred and fifty-seven students participated in this phase of the study, 63 from the preservice EFL program, and 94 from the University Language Department. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years. They completed two questionnaires: a profile one (Appendix A) and a survey (Appendix B) to inquire about their perceptions on the use of expressive writing.

For the qualitative phase of the study, all the students wrote in journals (Appendix C) and some of them also participated in focus groups. To select focus group participants, students were classified by course into three groups: (a) Those who reported that expressive writing had positively influenced them to relieve their academic stress before the formal assessments took place, (b) those who reported that expressive writing had not always helped them with their academic stress, and (c) those who reported that this strategy had not helped them. Random sampling was then carried out and six participants per course were chosen, two from each group. Then, the focus groups were conducted to allow an in-depth investigation of students' perceptions of the influence of expressive writing on their academic stress, and to determine whether they would choose to use this strategy in the future. Self-reported data were gathered from both the expressive writing acts and the focus groups. In this sense, Pennebaker's (2018) operational definition of *perceptions* was considered, since he defined

it as the meaning attached to the expressive writing experience expressed by the participants and the way these experiences make sense on their lives.

To maintain the confidentiality and anonymity rights of the participants as suggested by Mackey and Gass (2005), real names were not used; instead, a pseudonym was given to every person.

Data Collection Instruments

A profile questionnaire (see Appendix A) was used to gather student information such as age, gender, academic major, and marital status, as well as questions such as how many times they had visited health centers or private physicians because of academic stress since the beginning of the semester; also, whether they felt ill, or if these had made them stop their academic activities. Pennebaker and Beall (1986) suggested asking these questions before starting the expressive writing sessions.

Before every formal evaluation took place, students from the two groups (EFL and preservice EFL program students) wrote about a situation in the past when they experienced academic stress (see Appendix C). Right after they finish this expressive writing act, they were formally evaluated. Then, a survey of people's perceptions of using the expressive writing strategy developed by Pennebaker and Beall (1986) was used (Appendix B). It is important to include in this survey data related to students' perceptions and feelings regarding the use of expressive writing. Importantly, this instrument is a self-report that accounts for the emotional state of individuals (Watson et al., 1987); consequently, students' perceptions and evaluation are highly subjective. The consistency of this instrument was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, obtaining 0.913. Finally, the focus groups were also organized. All the instruments (profile questionnaire, survey about perceptions, and the focus groups) were in Spanish, the students' native language, as recommended by Filep (2009). Whenever students are invited to reflect on different types of information and to assertively comprehend and express their feel-

ings and perceptions, it is better to use their native language. In the case of the information gathered from the focus groups, it is important to mention that it was transcribed and translated into English; however, to ensure internal validity, the member checking strategy was used as suggested by Creswell (2014).

For the quantitative analysis the IBM SPSS 22 software was used to evaluate data and uncover important information that could help to elucidate the effects of expressive writing on students' stress management. Analogies to measure stress reduction in each expressive writing session were used with the Wilcoxon nonparametric statistics test. Regarding the qualitative analysis, the ATLAS.ti 8v software was used to create codes and categories.

Findings

Quantitative Results

Data were collected in two stages. In the first stage, information about students' profiles and their academic stress experience was collected. In the second stage, students were asked about their perceptions of the use of the expressive writing strategy. It is necessary to mention that this strategy was used in four different instances with every group of students during one semester.

For this study, in the preservice EFL program, the second and fourth of ninth class levels participated in the study, these courses had 31 and 32 students respectively ($n = 63$). On the other hand, 94 students from the Language Department program participated: two first-level groups, with 26 and 28 students respectively, one second-level group with 21 students, and one third-level group with 19 students (see Table 1).

The group of students in the Language Department comprised various majors at the University. In this group, 17.8% of the students were studying Business Administration, 12.8% were studying Architecture, 10.1% were studying Psychology. The rest of the students were students of Law, Engineering, Educational Sciences, and Journalism (see Table 2).

Table 1. Academic Profiles of the Participating Groups

Group	Semester/Level	n	%
Preservice EFL program	2 nd semester of the preservice EFL program	31	19.6
	4 th semester of the preservice EFL program	32	20.3
Language Department	1 st Level A	26	17.1
	1 st Level B	28	17.6
	2 nd Level	21	13.3
	3 rd Level	19	12.1
	Total	157	100.0

Table 2. Students' Majors

Group	Major	n	%
Preservice EFL program	Preservice EFL program	63	40.3
Language Department	Business Administration	28	17.8
	Architecture	20	12.8
	Psychology	16	10.1
	Law	12	7.7
	Engineering	10	6.3
	Educational Science	5	3.1
	Journalism	3	1.9
Total		157	100.0

Table 3. Students Who Have Visited a Health Specialist Because of Stress in the Previous Six Months

Visited the doctor because of stress	Group	Preservice EFL program		Language Department		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes		30	47.8	32	34.0	62	39.5
No		33	52.2	62	66.0	95	60.5
Total		63	100.0	94	100.0	157	100.0

Table 4. Students Who Felt Sick Because of Stress in the Previous Six Months

Felt ill because of stress	Group	Preservice EFL program		Language Department		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes		46	73.0	67	71.3	113	72.2
No		17	27.0	27	28.7	44	27.8
Total		63	100.0	94	100.0	157	100.0

During the last semester a higher number of students in the preservice EFL program (47.8%) mentioned visiting the doctor because of stress than did the Language Department students (34%). On average, 39.5% of students reported having visited the doctor due to stress in the previous six months (see Table 3).

There is no great difference between one group and the other; 73% of the students in the preservice EFL program felt ill because of stress, and 71.3% in the Language Department also felt ill for the same reason. On average, the majority (72.2%) stated that they had felt ill because of stress in the previous six months, an alarming situation since it means that a high percentage of English language students at the Universidad de Cuenca feel stressed, but have not necessarily visited the doctor (see Table 4).

There is no major statistical difference separating students who stopped their academic activities because of stress in one group or the other. The percentage of preservice EFL program students who stopped their activities is 39.1% and in the Language Department 37.2%. Thus, on average, nearly four out of ten (38.3%) students from both groups said they had stopped their academic activities (skipping classes or not doing homework) because of stress in the previous six months (see Table 5).

Table 5. Students Who Stopped Their Academic Activities Because of Stress

Stopped academic activities because of stress	Group	Preservice EFL program		Language Department		Total	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes		25	39.1	35	37.2	60	38.3
No		38	60.9	59	62.8	97	61.7
Total		63	100.0	94	100.0	157	100.0

Table 6. Perceptions on Stress Reduction Comparing the Four Expressive Writing Instances

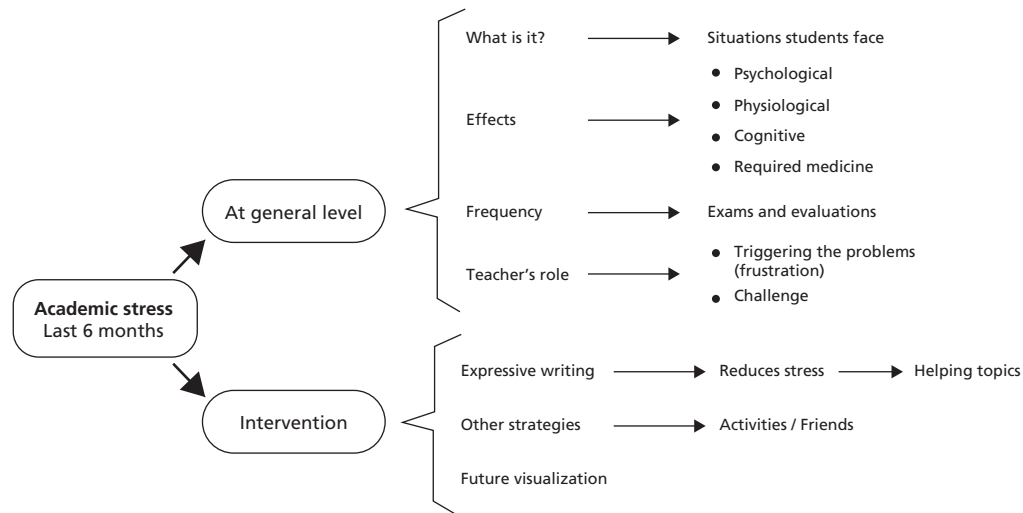
<i>N</i> = 157		Median	Standard deviation	Sig.
Session 1 Median = 0.54 Deviation = 0.50	Session 2	0.62	0.49	0.080
	Session 3	0.61	0.49	0.159
	Session 4	0.64	0.48	0.039*
Session 2 Median = 0.62 Deviation = 0.49	Session 1	0.54	0.50	0.080
	Session 3	0.61	0.49	0.768
	Session 4	0.64	0.48	0.662
Session 3 Median = 0.61 Deviation = 0.49	Session 1	0.54	0.50	0.159
	Session 2	0.62	0.49	0.768
	Session 4	0.64	0.48	0.500
Session 4 Median = 0.64 Deviation = 0.48	Session 1	0.54	0.50	0.039*
	Session 2	0.62	0.49	0.662
	Session 3	0.61	0.49	0.500

The students' perceptions, in both groups, were measured in four instances right after they used the expressive writing strategy and were evaluated (Session 1, Session 2, Session 3, and Session 4). These do not show great variation in the three first instances of using expressive writing, since positive effects are in evidence in more than half of the students in a similar way ($p > 0.05$). However, in the fourth session, some significant differences with respect to the first measurement are noted ($p < 0.05$). This implies that the level of stress reduction is maintained in a similar way in each evaluation experience until the third intervention, and in the fourth intervention, a significant increase in the favorable effects of expressive writing is noted (see Table 6), a situation that needs to be highlighted.

Qualitative Analysis

It is important to mention that for the qualitative analysis, as the results in the quantitative phase of the study did not show a significant difference between the two studied groups, it was unnecessary to have separated results for each group. In this respect, academic stress was conceptualized from two fundamental angles: The first looks at students' general conceptions of academic stress, that is, looking at its effects, its frequency, and the teacher's role. The second angle corresponds to the ideas expressed about the practice of expressive writing over the most recent six months. Figure 1 shows the code and code-family interweaving.

Figure 1. Code and Code-Family Interweaving



About the specific events that occurred during the six months of this expressive writing process, students in the preservice EFL program and in the Language Department offered various testimonies that are addressed in this study. Regarding their conceptions of what academic stress is and how they feel about it, students reported that it is a situation they face in their academic life; when planning evaluations teachers should consider some of these aspects, as these situations can significantly influence not only students' performances but also their daily life. Concerning academic stress effects, multiple symptomatic manifestations were observed:

Maria: My voice breaks and sometimes words don't come out.

Susana: My hands sweat, and they start to get cold, I feel so bad that I can't even write, even knowing the answers.

Joaquin: The tension of that moment caused my blood pressure to drop excessively and I fainted.

Students mentioned that in some occasions they cannot cope with the academic stress they feel; consequently, when experiencing these situations, natural medicine, pills, or even substances as energizers or tranquilizers are needed; in this way, they seek to improve their

academic performances and feel better. However, the effect may be contrary to expectations, as well as being an unhealthy practice.

Fernanda: In that moment I used energizers to stay awake to study.

Jaime: During exams, to feel calm, sometimes I need to go to the doctor and take some pills.

Susana: During exams week I usually drink some herbal teas to keep calm and concentrated.

With regard to the situations in which academic stress occurs, most students recognized that it happens at the time of evaluations such as tests, exams, or assignments that usually occur at the same time during the semester, a situation that must be considered. Therefore, teachers should organize the semester in order to give students enough time for assignments and presentations and time for exams without overloading them with tasks that could be done during the whole semester and not during exams week, which is already stressful for them.

Jaime: The week of the exams is the worst one, we are always overloaded with tests, and assignments, teachers should organize them better and spread them during the whole semester and not just all in one week.

Carmen: I feel a lot of pressure when I have to take exams.

Juan: I experience academic stress, particularly during the week of exams.

Pedro: That in certain academic events such as exams and assignments there is always a lot of stress.

Students also mentioned that, sometimes, teachers cause the problem; being this a challenge students need to overcome in order to succeed. In this sense, it is to be mentioned that teachers need to be facilitators in the learning process, that is, they need to help students to acquire the necessary knowledge and to overcome leaning difficulties and not to be the reason for students to feel stressed and anxious, which will make this process more complicated.

Rebeca: I did not understand the teacher's methodology, and because of this, I had bad grades and felt stressed.

Jose: The teacher, with all those pop quizzes and oral presentation assignments, caused a lot of stress for me.

Enrique: I feel that with some teachers . . . I have to prepare for tests and exams more than with other teachers, they try to make our life difficult.

Pedro: Sometimes teachers come to class without planning, and they want us to do more than they do. That stresses me a lot.

Regarding the second angle of analysis, several participants in this study agreed that writing about past stressful academic situations helped them to release this bad feeling. Furthermore, they felt more confident to express themselves by writing rather than talking, and it helped to release stress. This could happen because, when giving words to our emotions and feelings, the parts of the brain that deal with language and meaning activate (Lindquist et al., 2015). This is a way to become less reactive and more mindfully aware.

Maria: I think it can be a bit similar to a narrative, because it is about the fact of having an experience, but at the same time being sincere when I write about it. I felt . . . that it is an event I experienced, something very personal.

Fernando: I think expressive writing helps me to explore some deep feelings or situations that happened and that are somehow in our minds, . . . and being able to get them out only is possible by the use of the expressive writing strategy.

Ana: It helped me because it relieves stress. It is a very personal piece of writing, a situation I don't like to talk about very often. I feel somewhat relieved because I was able to write about how I feel.

Pedro: I think it worked as a relief to describe my experiences, it was a personal experience, I really needed to write about that experience.

Other alternative activities to reduce academic stress were also mentioned such as doing what they like, especially sharing time with friends, reading, and practicing exercises, among others. As the participants of the study mentioned, changing activities and doing things to clear their mind and recharge energy to keep studying are good ways to release stress.

Martin: Practicing exercises can also help to release stress.

Juan: To lower stress I usually go out with my friends.

Maria: Reading books or listening to music usually help me to feel relaxed.

Finally, when asked about the different strategies they will use in the future to relieve academic stress, several students responded they will use expressive writing, since it is a good alternative that helps to deal with stress and to know themselves better to face difficult circumstances of the learning process.

Cristian: I would use it, but it would be in certain circumstances, on certain occasions, because sometimes I am focused on something and I cannot do any other thing.

Daniela: It should be applied in subjects that are taught by strict teachers (laughs) . . . I mean, some of us already fear the teacher.

Lorena: I think that I will use it, because it helps us to internalize ourselves and to face the situation.

Roberto: I would use it, but, as I said before, before studying, to relax and study feeling a bit more relaxed, and yes it can also be before a test so I won't feel nervous the moment I take it.

Discussion

As Salend (2011) observed, sometimes a great deal of stress is reflected not only in the affective side of a person, but also in the behavioral and physical side. Students can experience sweating, headaches, stomach aches, nausea, tachycardia, insomnia, and so on. Among the behavioral symptoms, forgetfulness of the studied contents can be observed, which can even cause a mental block that does not allow people to remember what was studied, to feel overwhelmed, along with a lack of concentration, attention, and memory. All these symptoms cause difficulties for students both when studying and preparing for the assessment, and during the exam, when they may not feel able to read or understand the questions. Students of both groups in this study mentioned they experience some of these problems, and it should be noted that significant differences were not found in the results of the two groups. Therefore, it is evident that today's students are burdened with a great load of stress produced by academic life.

Smith et al. (2000) demonstrated that in higher education students must complete their assignments before certain deadlines, and it pressures them to perform well on tests or exams; additionally, as mentioned by Hashemi (2011), EFL learning increases the stress load. Findings of this research show a similar situation at the Universidad de Cuenca where stress is perceived among the preservice EFL program and the Language Department students in a similar way, since they mentioned that, especially when taking exams, they have assignments, tests, and expositions in the different subjects they are taking for the same deadlines. As demonstrated in this study, writing about past feel-

ings and emotions before formal evaluations might be a means of relieving stress; as Pennebaker (2018) has declared, keeping back these feeling and emotions is stressful. This might be the reason why some students mentioned that the expressive writing act is a way to externalize feelings and emotions.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of studies that claim to have found positive results when using expressive writing to relieve stress (Bockarov, 2015; Mattina, 2011; Pennebaker, 2018). In this study, the use of expressive writing in the mother tongue as a strategy led to a significant improvement after the fourth session. These students mentioned that the level of academic stress was reduced after having experienced an expressive writing process. It was observed that the expressive writing act works progressively; moreover, they reported that they felt comfortable and would continue using this strategy to feel relieved. These data are similar to other studies (Bockarov, 2015; Mattina, 2011) in which the participants reported improvements not only in their physical health, but also in their ability to regulate and accept their emotions. Along these same lines, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) stated that the act of writing about traumatic events directly affects topics related to catharsis, self-disclosure, and the psychosomatic theory related to behavioral inhibition (Park et al., 2014).

In this regard, negative stress tendencies relate to tension felt at different, seemingly unrelated times, and to occasional lack of control (Álvarez-Hernández et al., 2013). It has been proven that people who report a large number of physical symptoms tend to visit doctors more times; this suggests that their health is being compromised. However, many people with a considerable number of these signs are objectively as healthy as the people who suffer from them to a lesser degree. Several studies (Pennebaker, 2004; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001) have found "that having people write about traumas can result in healthy improvements in social, psychological,

behavioral, and biological measures” (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Physical symptoms reflect people’s psychology almost as much as their biology (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014).

For the students who participated in this study, expressive writing was also associated with personal and subjective writing, with writing that reveals their inner feelings, experiences, thoughts, and memories. According to Pennebaker (2004), writing about stressful and distressing situations can give rise to positive physical and emotional sensations. This was apparent in the present study, since students experienced significant improvement, especially in the fourth and final session. Expressive writing can be a way to transform emotions and feelings and can lead to positive effects for people who, as the participants in this study expressed, become more able to vent and self-analyze, as Pennebaker and Beall (1986) and Park et al. (2014) found in their studies. Being emotionally disinhibited can be compared to a form of relief or catharsis, as indicated by Pennebaker and Beall (1986). Certainly, the students from both groups expressed having felt free, relieved of pressure, having gained a clear mind by facing their fears, and externalizing personal experiences.

By feeling better and more able to self-regulate their stress, it could be said that motivation in students increases, as Mattina (2011) mentions. In the present study, students externalized their emotions about a situation that caused them to feel stressed through expressive writing.

Conclusions

After analyzing the different findings in this study, it might be concluded that expressive writing in the mother tongue before a formal evaluation helped the participants to lower their academic stress level caused by undergoing formal evaluations. In addition, this research helps demonstrate that college students experience anxiety and stress to significant degrees before undergoing an assessment. The reasons for that anxiety are the same whether students are taking English as a

graduation requirement or are preparing to be future EFL teachers. Therefore, the results suggest that using an alternative strategy such as expressive writing, aimed at alleviating specific causes of anxiety and stress, could lead to a significant decrease in academic stress.

Likewise, it might be concluded that students perceived expressive writing as a positive strategy that eased their stress. It can be said that this strategy acts gradually, since significant results are noted after using this strategy over a period of time. Furthermore, it can be asserted that using expressive writing is an effective strategy that can be applied at university level. Finally, it is important to mention that students and the overload of tasks that they must fulfill cannot be ignored, especially because they mentioned that teachers trigger the problem and cause feelings of stress and frustration, a situation which undoubtedly influences their performance. Thus, stressed students and teachers who cause it might not be able to develop an adequate or ideal teaching and learning process.

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Appendix A: Students' Profile Interview

Name: _____ Age: _____
Gender: _____ Marital Status: _____
Major: _____ Subject: _____
EFL level or semester: _____

Since the beginning of the semester:

Have you visited a health center or a specialist because of stress?

Have you felt sick because of stress?

Have you stopped your regular activities due to stress?

Appendix B: Survey on Students' Perceptions

After writing about an experience caused by academic stress, and having taken a formal evaluation, do you consider this strategy helped you relieve stress?

Yes: _____ No: _____

Explain:

How personal was the essay you wrote?

How often do you talk to other people about what you wrote today?

How much do you reveal your emotions in what you wrote today?

Briefly describe how you feel about what you wrote today:

Appendix C: Topics for the Expressive Writing Act

Text 1

Write a short text, **IN SPANISH**, of one of your past experiences caused by academic stress.

Text 2

Write a short text, **IN SPANISH**, of an experience in which you prepared very well to take a test or exam and at the time of it you were memory-blocked and did not remember what you had studied. Detail some of your feelings and emotions at the time.

Text 3

Most people are afraid before an exam; however, this feeling is irrational and does not help during the exam. Sometimes it is expressed as fear or phobia in phrases such as “if I don’t pass this test, my life won’t be worth it.” Write a short text **IN SPANISH**, indicating if you ever had these kinds of feelings before an exam.

Text 4

Most people are scared of tests to some degree. Write a short text, **IN SPANISH**, in which you express your emotions and feelings regarding the exam or test you are about to take.
