English Writing Anxiety and the Writing Problems of Indonesia EFL Learners

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Abstract—This descriptive research investigated the level of English writing anxiety experienced by Indonesian EFL students. The respondents were 38 undergraduate students of English Literature program of a university in Semarang Central Java, Indonesia taking Essay Writing course which adopted portfolios as the assessment method. Data were collected by two closed questionnaires; the one was for collecting data of English writing anxiety and the second was for collecting data of writing problems faced by students which may trigger the anxiety arousal. The results show that the students experienced a high level of English writing anxiety and cognitive anxiety was the students suffered most. Gender doesn't affect the level of anxiety experienced by the students; neither does the perception of writing difficulties. Grammar problem becomes the most mentioned-cause of anxiety followed by vocabulary problem and insufficient writing practice. To reduce the anxiety, therefore, it is recommended that writing teachers sufficiently address the issue of grammar and vocabulary as well as provides students with a lot of more writing practices.

Keywords: anxiety, writing anxiety, writing problems, EFL

I. INTRODUCTION

Language anxiety, defined as a kind of subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worries which very often arouses automatically from the nervous system [1], has become one of the major problems faced by Indonesian learners in the effort to master English. The study of Ariyanti for example found that many learners were suffering from a high level of writing anxiety [2]. Another study as written by Wahyuni and Umam also found out that more than half of their research respondents suffered from a high writing anxiety [3]. This condition is very unfavourable because anxiety has been proven to negatively correlate with learning achievement [4,5]. Students with high language anxiety have a higher possibility to perform poorer and fail in language learning, while students with low writing anxiety have a bigger chance to be successful. Intuitively and logically, anxiety influences the result of language learning [6], and therefore, it gains a lot attentions from psychologists, language educators and researchers.

According to psychologists, anxiety can be categorized into three types, namely trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. The first type, trait anxiety is a stable personality characteristic, the anxiety which arouses when somebody comes to a stressful situation, he/she perceives as threatening or hazardous. While, the second one, state anxiety is the anxiety which may arouse because of a certain provoking-stimulus. Somebody may suddenly feel anxious, nervous and worried as he is experiencing a triggering situation. The third, situation-specific anxiety is the one which is aroused as somebody is in a certain situation [7].

Second language writing anxiety (SLWA), which is defined as a general avoidance of writing and of situation perceived by the individual to require some amount of writing together with a certain type of evaluation concerning the writing [8], derived from the concept of writing apprehension introduced by Daly and Miller, belongs to situation-specific anxiety since an assignment or task of writing in a foreign or second language may trigger the arousal of the anxiety [9]. It is a kind of psychological predisposition resulting in a fear of writing in a second or foreign language.

To measure second language writing anxiety, an instrument called Second Language Writing Inventory was proposed by Cheng [10]. This is a multidimensional L2 writing scale covering three dimensions of anxiety concepts namely somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behaviour. Somatic anxiety is someone's perception about the psychological effect of an anxiety experience. The increasing feeling of tension and nervousness is the symptom of this anxiety. A student may be easily nervous and worried when suddenly without any preparation he is requested to make a piece of writing which will be evaluated in a certain level or way. The second dimension, cognitive anxiety, is the cognitive aspect of the anxiety experience as someone is preoccupied with negative expectation and concerns about others' perceptions. In a writing classroom for example, a high expectation from a teacher will very often increase the students' tension and worries which may be detrimental to the writing activity itself. The last dimension, that is avoidance behaviour, refers to the behavioural aspect of anxiety experience as someone intentionally searches ways to avoid writing activities or assignments. A student may not come to a classroom because he understands that a writing task is going to be assigned to him.

Writing anxiety negatively affects writing performance and motivation, but it positively correlates with academic procrastination [11]. The study of Cheng which involved 165

English majors at one university in Northern Taiwan suggests that language learners with a high level of writing anxiety are easily discouraged in writing, have negative attitude towards writing tasks, and produce low quality of papers [12]. While, learners with low writing anxiety could compose better and longer writing [8]. Writing process and writing behaviour are also affected by writing anxiety [10]. Using a timed English writing task as an index of participants' writing performance, Cheng concluded that there is a significant negative correlation between anxiety and learners' performance.

Previous studies have identified the causes of writing anxiety as linguistic difficulties, low self-confidence, lack of writing practice, fear of negative comments, time pressure, high frequency of writing assignment, pressure for perfect work, insufficient writing practice, lack of topical knowledge etc. [13–15]. These causes of the anxiety basically can be grouped into the one stemming from the students themselves and the one from the environment. Linguistic difficulties, low self-confidence, lack of writing practice are examples of the causes which are from the learners. These problems must be overcomed by the learners themselves. The causes which are from the environment for examples are time pressure, negative evaluation, high frequency of writing tasks, and expectation for perfect work. These causes are beyond control of the students; therefore, learners can only adapt.

In Indonesian context, besides the studies by Ariyanti and Wahyuni and Umam already mentioned, there have been a few studies exploring foreign language writing anxiety of EFL learners at tertiary level of education in Indonesia. Among others are the studies by Kusumaningputri et al, Masriani et al, Sundari and Febriyanti. The study by Kusumaningputri et al. which involved 44 volunteered Indonesian student writers from the first and second year of college found that cognitive anxiety was the most experienced type of writing anxiety, and language difficulties, time pressure, and insufficient writing practice were the major factors triggering the anxiety [16]. The study by Masriani et al. which involved 41 students of English Department found that the students mostly experienced moderate level of writing anxiety in which cognitive anxiety was the most dominant type [17]. Slightly different from the two studies mentioned, the study by Sundari and Febriyanti investigated the correlation between writing apprehension and writing skill by involving 66 students. It found that writing apprehension and writing skill were not significantly correlated [18].

This present research had some similarities with the previous studies as it investigated the level and the most frequently experienced type of writing anxiety of Indonesian EFL learners and the difference between male and female students, there was difference in the context of the data collected. The study was conducted in a writing classroom where students were learning writing and portfolio was adopted as the method of assessment. For the writing problems that may cause anxiety, this study included options of lacks of feedback from both teachers and peers. Therefore, the objectives of the present study were to investigate 1) the level of the learners writing anxiety, 2) the most frequently experienced type of writing anxiety, 3) the effect of perception of difficulties on the level of anxiety, and 4) the writing problems that trigger the arousal of anxiety.

II. METHOD

This study is descriptive in nature as it tried to describe the data and characteristics of the foreign language writing anxiety of the EFL learners. It was conducted at an English Literature Department of a university involving 38 participants who were taking *Essay Writing* course. The researcher was the lecturer of the course, and the main learning objective was to improve students' skill in writing especially in English essay writing. The materials taught cover paragraph development, descriptive essays, narrative essays, explanatory essays, compare and contrast essays, as well as expository essays. The teaching method adopted during the study was genre-based approach which covered building knowledge of the field, modelling, joint construction, and independent construction [19]. For every topic of the essay, students were required to submit their essay drafts to the lecturer for feedback for improvement. Some feedbacks were provided directly on the papers but others were presented orally usually during the beginning session of classes. The students then were required to polish their writing and submit the revised version.

Before taking the *Essay Writing* course, the respondents had completed 2 writing courses namely *Intensive Writing* course for improving their basic writing skill offered during their first semester term, and *Paragraph Based Writing* for further subject to improve their writing skill especially in developing paragraphs which was offered during their second semester term. The respondents, however, had heterogeneous writing competence. Some showed to be able to write well enough but majority of them were still struggling to acquire the skill. Then it can be said that writing as the most complex and difficult skill to master is a real fact for most of the participants in this study [20].

Data for the study were collected by questionnaires. The first one collected data of anxiety and the second one collected data about writing problems encountered by participants which were believed to be the causes of their writing anxiety. The first instrument adopted the model of Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) proposed by Cheng but the items were presented in Bahasa Indonesia as the L1 of the respondents [10]. It was to assure that the respondents could understand the meaning of the items proposed accurately. It is a Likert-typed questionnaire requiring responses from the respondents in 5 scales of agreement from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Some items were negatively worded, therefore, during the analysis, the scales were reversed. The second type of questionnaire was to collect data on the causes of writing anxiety. Some items were adopted from Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) by proposed by Rezaei and Jafari [13]. Linguistic difficulty was made more specific into 2 items of difficulties, the one was in grammar and the other was in vocabulary. Fear of negative comments were both from peers and teacher. Time pressure, high frequency of writing assignments, pressure for perfect work were excluded from the list.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Results

The means score of the total anxiety score collected using the SLWAI questioner adopted from Cheng with 27 items was used to indicate the level of writing anxiety of the respondents. The descriptive statistics resulted in the mean score of 75.13 as the table below shows. Dividing the total score of anxiety into 3 categories of Low, Moderate, and High using the hypothetical means, respondents having low anxiety are the ones whose scores are 36 or lower, high scores are those whose scores are 72 or higher, while respondents whose mean scores are between 36 and 72 are categorized as having the moderate level of anxiety. Since the mean score of anxiety resulted in the descriptive analysis is 75, therefore, it belongs to high anxiety. It means that the respondents in general experience a high level of writing anxiety. Table 1 shows the minimum, maximum, and mean scores.

TABLE I.   THE MEAN SCORE OF ANXIETY

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Score of anxiety	38	48.00	89.00	75.13	8.83
Valid N (listwise)	38				

Putting respondents into categories of Low, Moderate, and High level of anxiety by the use of the hypothetical means shows that more than half of the respondents (63.2%) were suffering from high writing anxiety. Only 36.8% experienced a moderate anxiety, and no respondent experienced low anxiety as Table 2 shows.

TABLE II.   RESPONDING GROUPING BASED ON THE LEVEL OF ANXIETY

Level	Frequency	Percent
Moderate	14	36.8
High	24	63.2
Total	38	100.0

To address the research question of the type of anxiety most respondents suffered from, the data of questionnaire were grouped into Somatic Anxiety, Cognitive Anxiety, and Avoidance Behaviour which were based on the items of the questionnaire. Somatic anxiety was indicated by items number 2, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 22, and 23 (10 items), cognitive anxiety was indicated by items number 1, 3, 5, 10, 16, 17, 19, 24, 25, and 27 (10 items), and avoidance behaviour was indicated by items 2, 4, 6, 8, 12, 14, 26 (7 items).

The mean score of cognitive anxiety was the highest (31.79) followed by somatic anxiety (28.05), while the lowest type of anxiety experienced by the respondents was avoidance behaviour (15.29) as presented in the Table 3. The finding suggests that cognitive anxiety was the most dominant anxiety experienced by the respondents.

TABLE III.   THE LEVEL OF ANXIETY TYPES

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Somatic	38	17.00	36.00	28.05	4.48
Cognitive	38	20.00	43.00	31.79	5.11
Avoidance	38	9.00	24.00	15.29	3.60
Valid N (listwise)	38				

To see whether gender affects the level of anxiety, respondents were grouped based on gender into male and female. The mean score for male respondents as presented in Table 4, is 71.30 and the one for female is 76.50. Though the means of the two groups were different, however, the t-test analysis did not result in significant difference as the score of the sig (2-tailed) is 0.111 (higher than 0.05).

TABLE IV.   ANXIETY MEAN SCORE OF MALE AND FEMALE RESPONDENTS

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	10	71.30	11.54
Female	28	76.50	7.43

To address the research question whether perception of writing difficulty brings difference on the level of anxiety, the scores of the anxiety were grouped into two. Group 1 is for the respondents who perceived writing as "easy" and group 2 is the one of respondents who perceived writing as "difficult". The means were then compared by using t-test. The result is presented in the Table 5 below.

TABLE V.   MEAN SCORES OF RESPONDENTS WITH DIFFERENT PERCEPTION

English writing	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Easy	7	72.71	9.53	3.60
Difficult	31	75.68	8.74	1.57

The last research question deals with the problems that the respondents believe to be the causes of the writing anxiety arousal. In this questionnaire, the respondents were allowed to choose more than one possible cause considering that the causes of anxiety may be complex and is not aroused only by a single stimulus. The result is presented in the following Table 6. The number in Total column shows the number of respondents believing that the item was among the causes of his/her writing anxiety.

As the Table shows, grammar difficulties have the highest percentage, 95% of the respondents agreed that grammar becomes the biggest source of writing anxiety. Vocabulary difficulties together with insufficient writing practice stand as the second biggest sources followed by topic mastery which stands as the third. Insufficient peers' feedback is the least considered factor that may cause writing anxiety.

TABLE VI.   THE PERCENTAGE OF ANXIETY CAUSES

No	Causes of Anxiety	Total	%
1	Insufficient writing practice.	29	76
2	Grammatical difficulties.	35	92
3	Vocabulary difficulties.	29	76
4	Poor topic mastery.	20	53
5	Insufficient peers' feedbacks.	16	42
6	Insufficient teacher's feedbacks.	18	47
7	Fear of writing technique mastery.	20	79

B. Discussion

The first objective of this study is to find out the level of English writing anxiety of Indonesian EFL learners. The data show that the Indonesian EFL learners suffered a high level of writing anxiety. While the range of moderate level anxiety was decided to 36 and 72, the mean of anxiety score of this study is 75.13. This finding is in support with the finding of Wahyuni and Umam's study [3], Ariyanti's study which suggest that Indonesian EFL learners mostly suffered from a high level of writing anxiety but is in contrast with the finding of Sundari's and Febriyanti's study which suggests that Indonesian EFL learners do not feel very anxious when writing English. However, this kind of phenomenon, that many students suffer from a high level of writing anxiety is not only the typical of Indonesian learners since the study of Jennifer and Ponniah in India [15], Rezaei and Jafari in Iran [13] also suggest the similar things. EFL learners both in India and Iran also suffer from a high level of writing anxiety.

Concerning the type of anxiety mostly experienced by respondents, the finding of this study supports the previous research that cognitive anxiety was the one with the highest score which means that it was the most dominant anxiety the respondents were experiencing, followed by somatic anxiety and avoidance behaviour, but is different from the study of Rudiyanto which found that somatic anxiety was the most dominant type [21]. However, it is worth noting that the respondents' of Rudiyanto's study were the students of senior high school. Cognitive anxiety refers to the cognitive aspect of cognitive experience as the negative expectation. This means that when they were writing, they were focusing more on what people may say or think about their writing rather than working on the writing itself. Their attention was directed more on the external factor [10]. They were more worried about people's evaluation, fear of having poor grade, anxious about the grammatical or vocabulary accuracy which together interrupted their writing process and made the writing became more stressful and less comfortable.

This study found that gender did not affect the level of anxiety the students were experiencing. Though the mean score of the female respondents was much higher than the one of the males; this difference is not significant so it can be concluded that there is no difference. The perception of writing difficulty also gave no effect on writing anxiety. Although the mean score of the respondents who perceived that writing was difficult is higher than the mean score of the respondents who perceive writing as easy but the difference is not significant.

The last research question is about the language problems that may cause anxiety. This study found that linguistic problems in this case grammatical problems and vocabulary are the major source of anxiety. Ninety two percent of the respondents agreed that grammar difficulties have made them worried and anxious. This further explains the cognitive anxiety. It could be the reason why the majority of the respondents thought that grammar was the most important aspect in writing which must get full attention. This finding confirms the previous study by Wahyuni and Umam which suggests that linguistic difficulties is the major source of writing anxiety [3]. Other major factors are insufficient writing practice, poor topic mastery, and fear of writing technique. While insufficient peers' feedback is the least-mentioned cause of anxiety.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with the objectives to give an account on writing anxiety of the EFL students in Indonesia. The study is important since anxiety plays an important role in the success of language learning. The result confirms the previous studies that most of Indonesian learners suffer from a high level of writing anxiety, and cognitive anxiety is the most dominant type. Though this kind of phenomenon also occurs in other countries, attention and effort to overcome the psychological state need to be taken seriously since anxiety affects negatively the result of learning. Language teachers, especially writing teachers, need to develop their teaching method so that students can fully exercise their writing potential comfortable without being too much burdened by the external factors as the expectation and evaluation of others on their writing products.

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