

Writing Anxiety in Academic Writing Practice: Insights from EFL Learners' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

As an essential part of EFL academic practices, writing is the most required skill in higher-education context. Subsequently, the requirement of having a high command of English writing skill emerges as one of the most important criteria for qualified EFL graduates. In reality, many students are still struggling to write academically in proper way, especially in undergraduate level since they are novices to academic writing practices. As a result, writing anxiety hinders the process of academic writing that affects the quality as well as perception of writing among students. Thus, the present study aims to investigate five EFL undergraduate students' perspectives on their academic writing practices in relation to the challenges of writing anxiety. The study was conducted through the lens of qualitative case study. Two primary data sources were collected and triangulated, i.e., semi-structured interview, and document analysis. Participants' experiences in dealing with anxiety during the learning and writing process were inquired through a semi-structured individual interview, which subsequent responses are clarified through an analysis of learners' academic essays to cross-check the whole data. The findings showed that the least anxious learner showed better writing performance than those who showed higher levels of anxiety. While the most prominent aspects that learners felt anxious about were lack of English writing practices, poor understanding of grammar rules, insufficient vocabulary, and fear of negative evaluation.

Keywords: Academic writing, EFL learners, undergraduate level, writing anxiety

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a pivotal competence to master in higher-education practices across disciplines. As a matter of fact, writing has been reckoned as the most challenging skill for EFL students at university level (Ariyanti, 2017; Pimsarn, 2013; Shukri, 2014; Zoghipour & Nikou, 2016). The challenge is not only in ideation process, but also managing these scattered ideas into readable and qualified academic texts (Alameddine & Mirza, 2016). As Shang (2013) points out that a high command of English writing skill is critical to enhance students' writing performances, consequently, the requirement of having a good English writing ability emerges as one of the important criteria for qualified EFL graduates (Azizah & Budiman, 2017). The initial and most defining step for accomplishing the academic success is capable of producing a high-quality academic writing.

Writing academic papers is already demanding for native speakers, and it may be even more daunting for EFL learners. Students at different educational levels

are proven to feel apprehensive about writing to varying degrees (Cheng, 2002; Chiang, 2012; Huwari & Aziz, 2011), especially in undergraduate degree since they are novices to academic writing practice compared to those who are currently pursuing master's or even doctoral degrees who have adequate experiences in writing research papers. The challenges are due to its nature that writing is the main productive skill that students should master (Erkan & Saban, 2011). From this perspective, it is very likely that learners are expected to encounter a variety of challenges along the way. One of which lies in psychological attribute called writing anxiety.

Anxiety is essentially a common emotion that people feel in their lives during difficult times, and it is feasible to occur to students in educational setting. Anxiety is an inevitable feeling that affects learners in their learning process (Miri & Joia, 2018). However, due to the challenges that have to be encountered in writing, majority of the learners may feel strained or discouraged. This will eventually cause them to discharge themselves from even trying to write due to

this anxiety. Thus, students who suffer high levels of anxiety may suffer in their language learning process (Al-Sawalha & Chow, 2012). This is supported by Khelalfa's (2018) statement that many studies in the area of English writing instruction have highlighted that writing anxiety is an important factor that affects the quality as well as perception of writing among students.

A number of research reports found that learners with negative experiences of writing tended to be highly apprehensive (Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017). For instance, when they receive negative comments from their teachers or peers, students might feel demotivated which in turn will be negatively affecting the composition process (Boice, 1993; Rankin-Brown, 2006). In addition, this kind of student tends to write from memory as they find it difficult to compose written products on their own. While writing, they become anxious, if they cannot retrieve information from the memory (Ireland, 2015) and this in turn, distracts them from effective composing process. This will make students more anxious and as a result, they avoid participating in writing activities.

Only few of the studies were conducted by looking into the area of writing anxiety at undergraduate level. Hence, so much work is required to achieve a better understanding of the issue. Also, an abundance of works of research on writing anxiety were quantitatively conducted, which may focus more on the group responses rather than comprehend a deep understanding of the individual perceptions and experiences. By contrast, this current study was qualitatively conducted in order to provide a fuller picture of writing anxiety in the context of the academic writing practice. Since the evidence of related research reports that would possibly link between levels of anxiety and writing competence has been scarce, this study will look into the association between undergraduate learners' writing anxiety and their writing performances.

2. METHOD

A qualitative case study was employed in this study. It aims to discover the subjective meanings from the EFL undergraduate learners' perspectives on their writing performances in Indonesian context. A distinctive feature of qualitative is in line with what this study is seeking to identify; the issues from the perspectives of participants regarding writing anxiety and understanding the meanings and interpretations that they give in future data collecting process. This study is aimed for holistic descriptions hence triangulation of various viewpoints from the participants is required.

Research participants were five students who were currently in the eighth semester and enrolled in a bachelor's degree program of English Education at one private university in Kuningan, West Java. The

participants were selected by considering their writing experiences and varying grades in Academic Writing course that they have completed. To protect the confidentiality for ethical consideration, code numbers were being addressed as Respondent followed by the respective number; #R1, #R2, #R3, #R4, and #R5.

Two data collection techniques were undertaken involving various viewpoints of five participants from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The particular topics specifying on EFL learners' writing anxiety have already been worked out in advance and the questions regarding the matter were raised in a focused person-to-person encounter type of interview to better enrich and contextualize of the participants' responses. The interviews were conducted individually in attempt to gain profound data of the participants' distinctive perceptions and experiences. The instrument used for the interview was adapted from Cheng's (2004) Chinese version of Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). Twenty-two item scale of SLWAI was modified into twelve questions on exploring students' academic writing anxiety to obtain a deep insight on EFL learners' academic writing anxiety.

Document analysis on the academic essays written by participants was aimed to look into the reflections of their writing anxiety in their writings. Students' responses from semi-structured interviews served as main references for the document analysis as well as to clarify their claims, whether their responses and perspectives were in accordance with their real works, or some discrepancies would be arisen instead. Through triangulating data, I attempted to provide "confluence of evidence that breeds credibility (Eisner, 1991, p. 110)". By delving into evidence collected through the essays, findings across data sets were corroborated, thus the richness and data validity would be improved as well.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

EFL learners' writing anxiety comprises several aspects to investigate; students' perceptions on their English writing practices and skills, emergence of anxiety when being encountered with academic writing task which results in growing fear of getting negative evaluations. Students also recall their feelings when there is no academic writing task coming on their ways, their perceptions on academic writing composition, retrospect on writing under pressure including how students deal with time constraint and writer's block, as well as document analysis on learners' academic essays.

3.1. Learners' Perceptions on EFL Writing Practices

The major theme of students' perception on writing practices is further divided into four sub-themes; perceptions on their English writing habit, emergence of

anxiety in facing academic writing task, fear of negative evaluation from the writing instructor, feelings when there is no academic writing task, and their perceptions on academic writing composition in general.

According to Rezaei and Jafari (2014) and also Zhang (2011), one of major causes of anxiety is indeed the insufficient writing practices inside or outside the classroom. Students' negative judgment of their own writing to be poorly executed thus it will be poorly understood is related to Al-Shboul and Huwari (2015)'s findings that writing anxiety came from negative attitude towards writing activity itself. This theme implies that students are afraid of writing because of various reasons such as lack of interest and motivation to write.

In my study, #R5 admitted being unfamiliar with English writing. Same goes to #R4. Both of them are lack of writing practice before becoming undergraduate students. They explained that the lack of writing practice is due to her disliking writing activity in general. It results in her negative judgment upon her own writing skill.

Meanwhile, #R3 and #R1 admitted that they had been familiar with casual writing in some media. #R1 wrote on her diary and #R3 wrote English captions on her social media accounts. Both of them were ignorant of abiding by grammar aspects, meaning that they just practically avoided practicing a correct grammar in their writings. The avoidance behaviour is in fact one of three primary types of ESL writing anxiety developed by Cheng (2004) after somatic anxiety and cognitive anxiety. It refers to avoidant attitude when someone feels anxious. Another instance is when students tend to use their first language when they have options related to what language they use for writing. Feeling anxious to write compositions using English as a second/foreign language might be the excuse because they suffer avoidance behaviour (Salikin, 2019). #R1 was found out to have such behaviour to avoid writing in English. She practically wrote in her first language, Bahasa Indonesia when she did not know the words in English.

Moreover, English writing anxiety is stemmed from linguistic difficulties, such as inadequate mastery of vocabulary, simple sentence structures, and grammatical errors (Zhang, 2011). Nevertheless, #R3 thought that, despite poor understanding of grammar, she was still able to convey what she wanted to convey in her writing. #R2, on the other hand, was the only one who has been fond of writing in English since her old Junior High School days in different media. Her habit of ESL writing practice has brought her to the level of higher enjoyment of writing in L2 than in L1. She also paid attention to grammar rules, making her the most confident participant with their English practices.

An unwavering regular practice of writing has in fact turned an ESL learner into a less anxious writer. When #R2 was assigned her first-ever academic writing task, she felt less anxious about fundamental issue such as grammar. However, the lack of practicing academic writing put her concern on learning it along the way, but with such an ease feeling, as she put it in her own words, to 'just let it flow.'

Writing anxiety can influence learners' attitude towards doing writing tasks (Rahim, Jaganathan & Sepora, 2016). Therefore, on #R2's case, a regular writing practice made her feel less anxious about doing an academic writing task, even for the first time. Her confidence with writing was backed up by her rooted background writing experience and careful attention to the grammar aspect.

This is on the contrary to the other students who reflected on their first academic writing task encounter as a 'shocking' and 'confusing' experience such as for #R5 and #R4. Such feelings were due to their inadequate knowledge in academic writing, which in results generating apprehension (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015). Further, poor understanding of grammar rules and limited vocabulary of the language has discouraged them from writing in the target language (Kirmizi, 2015). #R5 explained her insecurity by saying that poor grammar skill was the most prominent aspect that she felt anxious about. #R5 felt anxious about other people's judgement as well. The fear also applies to #R4 as she admitted being burdened twice as hard as she had to worry about having a negative evaluation from her lecturer and felt insecure comparing her paper to her peers' works.

Being anxious about comparing to the other peers are due to learners' competitive attitude affecting their anxiety level. This is supported by Rahim et al (2016)'s argument that when students start comparing their writings with their peers' works, they are likely to grow more anxiety as they keep comparing and detecting what is lacking in their own writings, hence the apprehension level is getting higher. One of #R1's insecurities were also being compared with other peers works who are arguably smarter than her.

Other major factors that led to writing anxiety was lack of the ability to organize and express their ideas (Badrasawi, Zubairi, & Idrus, 2016). As a result, anxiety undermines the ability to think cohesively (Onwuegbuzie, 1997). #R3 shared her anxiety-provoking experience when she encountered with her first academic writing task. She was anxious due to the higher level of difficulties it demands, such as expressing her ideas into the series of sentences then cohesive and coherent paragraphs.

When it comes to their writings being evaluated by the lecturers, students have something in common; they

get anxious of getting a bad score. Fear of negative evaluation is a symptom of cognitive anxiety. This type of anxiety refers to mental aspects when experiencing anxiety, including negative expectations, a performance that influences the mind, and worries about the other's perceptions (Cheng, 2004; Craft, Magyar, Becker, & Feltz, 2003; Salikin, 2019). Furthermore, insufficient vocabulary knowledge is also one of the common causes of writing anxiety, corresponding to Choi (2013)'s findings that students' concerns were arising when they did not have enough vocabulary to produce English writing so that they have issues with limited word choices.

Then, students have retrospect moments of remembering their rushed and anxious feelings when they have to deal with time pressure in accomplishing a writing task, then how they feel when they encounter a 'writer's block' when the deadline comes close, and how they manage to start writing from zero under the time constraint.

Time pressure, both in final deadline form (a defined time limit marking an end to some writing effort) and time costs (the fact that writing task that done currently is time that could be spent doing something else), frequently deters solitary performance (Ariely & Zakay, 2001; Moore & Tenney, 2012). On one hand, taking more time on doing the task is not ideal either because students focus not only on their writing performances but also the productivity factor, i.e., getting the most done in such bounded time. The implications for time pressure on productivity can positively impact students to write more optimally. #R1 admitted that deadline made her more motivated to finish the writing task.

#R3 gives the same insight. She recognized to be more inspired by the time pressure and less anxious about it. She also admitted to always get her writing done in the right time, even under the time constraint. #R4 did not feel as confident as #R3 in this case. She usually had no issue with writing under such tight time pressure. However, if the time availability is too restricted, her anxiety would gradually sneak in her mind and oftentimes make her stuck in the state of being unable to proceed with her writing, or in another word, she was experiencing a 'writer's block'. To overcome the dead-end situation, she would take a break from writing activity.

When writing English compositions under time constraint, learners usually had no idea about the topic and what to write (Zhang, 2011). As a result, it would destructively affect students' composing ability. #R5 reflected her unpleasant feeling of tension for being unable to write well in a rushed situation. The binding time constraint bears another anxiety that is fear of failure in tests is indeed very pervasive and constitutes the most common cause of ESL writing anxiety because

writing is a productive activity influenced strongly by a demanding time pressure.

Even the brightest and well-prepared students often make more errors in time-constraining situations (Zhang, 2011), such as #R2. She tacitly agreed with this detrimental effect of time pressure on her cognitive ability to write. She explained the time constraint to be overwhelming and making her unable to 'do her best' on her writing as she could not think clearly in a such restricted situation.

The inability to think and find some ideas to write is known by the term 'writer's block'. Jun (2008) reported that writer's block may affect some inclusive and complex psychological variables, which one of them is anxiety. Dela-Rosa and Genuino (2018) added that writing anxiety is indeed the most prevalent factor. When being asked how to deal with writer's block, students have a common ground of handling by not avoiding it. Except for #R1, even though she tried not to be panicked when she stumbled upon the 'blocking', she would leave the work and spare some minutes get some rest. #R4 did the similar avoidance by taking a break for a while to feel better and get to write again. The other students handled the writer's block by finding the solutions directly in their own ways. #R2 made an outline of essay writing and stick to it, so she would not get lost down the road. #R3 and #R5 would read journals to find the ideas they were initially losing.

3.2. Learners' Academic Writing Performances

Proceeding into document analysis through the academic essays written by participants, the main issues found in their writings, especially for #R1, #R3, and #R5, were lying on how students manifest their ideas into an accurate and grammatically correct set of paragraphs. At this point, rampant mistakes in their writing have become a rooted issue as most of them need to improve almost all of their skills in writing conventions, including spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, English grammar, sentence and paragraph structure. In content-wise, the most common problems were the lack of supporting details and theories following the main ideas and writer's arguments.

However, #R2 and #R4 showed a better writing production than their peers in their essays. #R2 was able to put the ideas into the writing well. She always started the paragraph by stating her voice then providing supporting research reports or theories from the reliable experts. While in conventions or writing mechanism, her writing displayed minor grammatical mistakes, such in sentence structure, few sentences being either grammatically incorrect or oddly structured, or both of them, even though none of these fallacies were major.

In terms of writing conventions, by scanning through her work, #R4 was one of the neatest writers

among all participants. The spelling was even immaculate. However, her writing was not the most perfect piece of work after all. After showing such decent work in with tiny grammatical mistakes and decently structured paragraphs in the beginning, #R4 seems to lose her sense of accuracy in classifying, summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing sentences and put her arguments with supporting theories together in subsequent paragraphs. The issues, after all, were dominated by her quandary in forming a consistent work throughout her writing.

3.3. Discussions on Learners' Writing Anxiety

Based on the findings and discussion, #R2 was the most confident and less anxious learner when it comes to writing academically. Her perception towards writing was positive as she perceived writing activity to be her hobby she enjoyed doing. This finding conforms to some previous research reports that learners with more writing experiences have less writing apprehension (Parina & Leon, 2013). The more positive experiences students have with writing, the more they are encouraged to participate in such activities (Hamman, 2005). #R1, R2, and #R3's regular writing habits also helped build their confidence in writing.

It is stated from the previous research that students who have regular writing habits are highly comfortable in different writing situations (Karakaya, 2011; Zorbaz, 2015). However, both #R2 and #R3 admitted being feeling insecure with their own skills even though they were used to writing in English. This is due to their ignorance of abiding by grammatical rules during their casual writing practices. Conversely, students with negative experiences of writing tended to be highly apprehensive (Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017) and it occurs to the cases of #R4 and #R5 who have lack of writing practice and seen it as a burdening task.

When it comes to the types of writing anxiety by Cheng (2004), the findings showed that cognitive anxiety is the most common type experienced by participants as they were mostly anxious about external factors, such as fear of negative judgment from their peers or getting poor assessment from the lecturer. This finding is in line with some research reports from Kurniasih, (2017), Kusumaningputri, Ningsih, and Wisasongko (2018), Rezaei and Jafari (2014), Wahyuni and Umam (2017) as well as Zhang (2011) who put cognitive anxiety as the most dominant type of anxiety endured by EFL learners.

The other triggering factors causing anxiety, which proven through analysis on learners' academic essays, are challenges in vocabulary, grammar rules, sentence structures, and ideation impeding writing performance (Kusumaningputri et al, 2018) which all of them were experienced by the participants. Linguistic difficulties,

insufficient writing practice, fear of negative evaluation from writing instructors, lack of topical knowledge and low self-confidence in writing achievement were also other causes of their anxiety, which just conform to the main sources of ESL writing anxiety reported by Zhang (2011)'s study.

4. CONCLUSION

Findings indicated that the anxiety experienced by EFL learners were caused by various factors. Anxiety was mostly affected by their negative perceptions towards academic writing as a difficult task. The perceptions were rooted from their lack of English writing practices and ignorant of abiding by and applying grammar rules onto their works. Thus, anxiety emerges when they encounter academic writing tasks which results in growing fear of getting negative evaluations. As a result, students with higher levels of anxiety performed poorly, and their anxiety tended to be debilitating which interrupted their composing process.

Linguistic difficulties, such as poor understanding of grammar rules and insufficient vocabulary knowledge were the most prominent aspect that learners felt anxious about. While writing conventions including mistakes in spelling and punctuation, grammar, sentence structure was common to find in their essays. However, the least anxious learner of all showed better writing performance than those who showed higher levels of anxiety. Cognitive anxiety which includes external factors was also reported to be frequently experienced by the learners, such as fear of negative evaluation from their peers or the lecturer. Whereas, writing under pressure or time constraint did not trigger learners' anxiety greatly as they were still able to finish the task and some of them even considered time pressure to be their motivation of flowing ideas to finish academic writing task.

As a general evaluation on learners' anxiety and lack of grammar awareness in their writings, understanding grammar to the fullest is an absolute skill to achieve for EFL students. The impact of not fully understanding grammar rules is substantial to the possibility of hampered sustainability of the current and upcoming academic projects for undergraduate students. As for the external factor in alleviating anxiety, pleasant learning environment, teachers' critical supervision and encouraging feedback are advisable to cultivate so that learners will be supported and motivated to acquire qualified EFL writing skills and to nurture positive self-efficacy beliefs.

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