

From Anxiety to Adaptation: How EFL Students Cope with Writing Challenges

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate writing anxiety among English Education students at UIN Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven third-semester students and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students experience significant writing anxiety manifested in cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges, including difficulties in generating ideas, organizing content, and fear of making errors. These challenges negatively affect students' writing performance. Despite these difficulties, students employ various coping strategies, such as extensive reading and regular writing practice, to reduce anxiety and improve their writing skills. The study highlights the importance of addressing both cognitive and affective factors in supporting students' writing development in EFL contexts.

Keywords: *Narrative research, student difficulties, writing strategies, writing anxiety, and English education.*

Introduction

Writing is one of the most important language skills. Writing skill, according to Yu & Zhou (2022) is the ability to express your ideas, knowledge, and thoughts in an understandable way in a piece of writing. It includes proficiency in the use of correct grammar, having an extensive vocabulary, composing coherent sentences, organizing thoughts clearly, and being able to communicate opinions clearly and concisely (Cocuk et al., 2016).

According to Rezaei & Jafari (2014) second language learning anxiety is a feeling of tension and fear that arises when interacting with scenarios involving a second language, such as speaking, listening, and writing. Writing in a language other than one's mother tongue can be much more difficult and unpleasant. This is due to the emotionally taxing nature of writing in a second language.

According to O'Rourke et al. (2018) challenges with students' cognitive writing skills usually involve difficulties in spelling, grammar, handwriting difficulties, and lack of clarity in written language. Students often struggle with grammatical issues such as subject-predicate congruence, verb tenses and forms, and conjunction usage (Hans & Hans, 2017). In addition, the use of unclear sentences, imprecise sentences, and fragmented phrases also indicate problems in sentence structure. Another challenge is choosing the right words, as

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students often find it difficult to use varied and contextually appropriate vocabulary. Students also often struggle with cognitive challenges such as punctuation, capitalization, spelling, content, and organization.

Although previous studies have examined writing anxiety in EFL contexts, limited attention has been given to students' lived experiences, particularly in the Indonesian higher education context. In addition, there has been insufficient focus on helping students develop their writing skills before entering university. Writing instruction often emphasizes grammatical accuracy and avoidance of errors, which leads students to rely on memorizing examples rather than expressing their own ideas and creativity (Kassem, 2017). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the experiences of English Education students at UIN Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan who struggle with writing and to explore the challenges they face as well as the strategies they use to overcome writing anxiety.

In order to help teachers support their students and encourage them to address their writing difficulties more successfully, this study attempts to shed light on the difficulties students encounter and the methods they employ to enhance their writing in their language learning environment.

Literature Review

Writing is a difficult skill that is important for language development and communication. According to Yu and Zhou (2022) good writing requires the ability to convey thoughts, ideas, and facts coherently on paper. This includes a variety of competences such as grammatical precision, vocabulary understanding, sentence structure, and concept organization (Cocuk et al., 2016).

However, writing can cause a great deal of worry for many students, especially those learning a second language. Second language learning anxiety is defined by Rezaei & Jafari (2014) as the stress and apprehension felt in contexts involving a second language, which can be more noticeable when writing assignments are involved. In addition, to causing mental anguish and bodily symptoms like cramps and anxiousness, this worry can impair students' capacity for clear and effective self-expression (Bayat, 2014).

Writing's cognitive demands frequently make this anxiousness worse. According to O'Rourke et al. (2018) students frequently struggle with spelling, grammar, and expressing themselves well. Grammar problems, like verb tense agreement and sentence structure, are common among students and can lead to writing that is disjointed or unintelligible (Hans & Hans, 2017). Furthermore, students may find it difficult to successfully develop their thoughts if they are unfamiliar with complicated subjects and vocabulary (Jia & Zhang, 2023). Students with poor functional literacy levels frequently struggle to understand texts and communicate verbally, which makes writing even more difficult for them (Vágvölgyi et al., 2016).

Students often face emotional barriers that interfere with their writing ability in addition to cognitive difficulties. According to Grünke and Leonard-Zabel (2015) many students say that they feel weighed down by expectations to produce perfect work, leading to a vicious cycle of worry that hinders their ability to start and complete writing projects. This is especially true for students learning English as a second language (ESL), who may find writing in the language difficult even though they are generally proficient in the language (Baresh, 2022). According to Hyland (2014) students may experience additional stress as a result of their inability to find relevant references and citations for academic writing.

Students have come up with various strategies to overcome writing anxiety despite these barriers. To start, reading a lot and writing frequently are two powerful techniques that can help students become more confident and less anxious (Afrin, 2016). By trying out various writing formats and styles, students can improve their skills and gain a better understanding of the writing process. Additionally, understanding that writing is a continuous process that does not require perfection right away can help students feel less pressured (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). Based on the literature, to help students overcome fear and improve their writing ability, it is crucial to address both the cognitive and emotional components of writing.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore students' experiences of writing anxiety. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perspectives, feelings, and challenges in writing. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were considered relevant to the research objectives. The participants consisted of seven third-semester English Education students at UIN Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan who experienced difficulties in writing.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility in exploring participants' responses while maintaining focus on key topics. The interviews encouraged participants to share their personal experiences, feelings, and strategies related to writing anxiety. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was conducted with participants' consent.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following several steps: data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns and gain a deeper understanding of students' writing anxiety and the strategies they used to cope with it.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their right to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw at any time. All participants provided informed consent prior to their participation, ensuring that the study was conducted in an ethical and responsible manner.

Results

A. Student's Anxiety Finding and Analysis

This study involved interviews with some 3rd semester English Education students at UIN Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan who experienced difficulties in facing challenges in writing skills. Many of the participants reported experiencing significant anxiety when given writing assignments. One of the participants, Fanny, shared her experience that she was quite surprised by the assignments and presentations given by the lecturer. In semester 1, she felt that the assignments given were not as heavy as semester 2. On the other hand, in semester 2, she experienced difficulties in writing courses, especially writing essays.

“When I am asked to write, I often feel anxious and worried. Sometimes, the anxiety even makes me feel sad or angry. Physically, I also feel various kinds of cramps, such as in my stomach or in my hands” (Fanny, interview, 2024).

According to Bayat (2014) when someone feels anxious about writing, it can manifest itself in the form of emotions such as sadness, anger, and fear, or in physical forms such as cramps. Some other participants also had similar feelings, stating that their anxiety often comes from being afraid of making mistakes in their writing assignments. Another student, Layla, commented:

“I feel nervous and worried every time I have to write an assignment. My mind is stuck, palms sweaty, and heart pounding. I feel like I am carrying a huge burden that makes me unable to express my ideas” (Layla, interview, 2024).

Cequeña & Gustilo (2014) says that students feel anxious or worried because of the cognitive demands of writing. Excessive feelings of worry or trepidation known as anxiety can present as tension, perspiration, and increased heart rate. Students' capacity to complete their writing tasks can be affected by these symptoms.

B. Students' Challenges

One of the main challenges that students complain about when given writing assignments is the difficulty in understanding complex themes, lack of familiarity with the terms used, and difficulty in developing ideas that fit the theme presented by the lecturer. Alma stated:

“I often don't understand the meaning of texts written by lecturers. The thing is, my lecturers often give writing assignments with themes that are really difficult to understand. I don't seem to be familiar with the terms used, and it's hard to develop ideas that fit the theme given” (Alma, interview, 2024).

According to Jia & Zhang (2023) in primary education, teachers usually teach students more about reading, spelling and arithmetic. But, they rarely take the time to help children write stories, essays or other writings. So they find it difficult to develop ideas that match the theme given by the teacher.

Other students like Nora also experienced the same thing as Alma. Nora commented:

“I often get confused about developing ideas for writing because I'm more used to writing in a simpler style. The themes given by the lecturer seem more complicated and difficult to understand” (Nora, interview, 2024).

Vágvölgyi et al. (2016) says that it is common for people with functional literacy levels to experience difficulties in various aspects of language, including text comprehension and oral communication skills, so writers often struggle to develop their ideas as they are not used to complex writing styles and may struggle with more complicated themes.

Students with learning disabilities often struggle to get started on writing tasks and focus more on spelling mistakes, instead of outlining important ideas to improve the quality of their writing, one of which is the problem of ideas (Roitsch et al., 2021). The absence of strong ideas is a major barrier in writing. The development of basic ideas becomes the main focus in improving the quality of writing, because strong ideas will produce better writing.

In addition to difficulties in understanding themes and terms, students also face other challenges in writing, namely difficulties in starting writing and organising the flow of

writing. They often feel stuck at the beginning when starting to write, rushing to complete the task, resulting in writing that is incoherent, unstructured, and seems unprofessional. Nawa added:

“Every time I want to write, I always feel ‘stuck’ at the beginning. I’m always in a hurry to finish, but in the end, my writing becomes perfunctory. The sentences are not coherent, the ideas are not structured, and the impression is not professional. I really want to be able to write clearly and easily, but I still have trouble organizing the flow” (Nawa, interview, 2024).

Grünke & Leonard-Zabel (2015) says that students who struggle with writing often have problems with spelling, capitalization, punctuation and grammar. They are so focused on basic writing tasks, such as spelling correctly, that they can't think about the content they want to convey or who will read their writing.

In another interview, Yurika said:

“I am not very good at developing words when writing, especially in English” (Yurika, interview, 2024).

Writing is often considered the most difficult language skill to master, especially in a second or foreign language. For many students learning English as a second language (ESL), writing in English becomes a very difficult task. Although English has become a global language, mastering the skill of writing in English remains essential for learners (Baresh, 2022). According to Fernandez et al. (2017) challenges faced by students in expressing their ideas in writing, even though they may have higher educational qualifications.

Even in tight situations when working on writing assignments, Fanny complains that it is sometimes difficult to find appropriate references.

“Sometimes when looking for references for writing materials, it is more difficult than stringing words together” (Alex, interview, 2024).

According to Hyland (2014) citation (or quoting) plays a very important role in academic writing. However, the use of citations can also pose obvious difficulties for students. Therefore, it has attracted much attention to understand how citations are conveyed in writing, which is often the basis for creating teaching materials.

C. Strategies To Overcome Writing Skills Anxiety

Despite facing various challenges in writing, the students found some strategies to overcome their anxiety. Reading other people's written work and writing regularly proved to help them build confidence and reduce the fear of getting started. Fanny says:

“I like to read books and short stories to overcome writing anxiety. Reading helps me understand how other writers build stories and use language. Over time, I feel more confident in my own writing” (Fanny, interview, 2024).

According to Afrin (2016) to overcome the problems in writing, students need proper guidance, and at the same time students should also find their own writing problems to become good writers.

Another strategy outlined by students is to practice writing regularly every day in order to get used to the writing process. Layla noted:

“I make an effort to write every day, even if it's only a few sentences. This helped me get used to the writing process and reduce the fear of starting. I also learned to accept that writing is a continuous process, and doesn't have to be perfect from the start” (Layla, interview, 2024).

There are many methods of basic writing practices that can be used to help students improve their writing skills (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). Basic writing practice is very important to build students' writing skills. If the basics are strong, developing any kind of writing won't be a problem anymore. Maskor & Baharudin (2016) also says that writing is a complex process of conveying meaning and requires the coordination of various metacognitive skills. This means that writing is a continuous process and requires practice and mastery of various skills, which can help reduce the fear of starting.

It should also be noted that the present study, both in its literature review and in its analysis of coping strategies, remains focused on traditional classroom practices, without addressing the use of AI-based writing tools. This reflects the chosen research focus and the scope of the interview guide, but also points to a dimension that could be considered in future research.

Conclusion

This study explores the experiences of English Education students at UIN Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan who face writing anxiety in their classes. The findings indicate that students encounter significant challenges, including difficulties in understanding complex topics, organizing ideas, and managing emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety. These challenges negatively affect their writing performance and confidence in expressing ideas.

Despite these difficulties, students develop several strategies to cope with writing anxiety. Regular reading and writing practice play an important role in increasing confidence and reducing fear. In addition, understanding that writing is a gradual process helps students reduce the pressure to produce perfect work from the beginning.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing insights into students' lived experiences of writing anxiety in the Indonesian EFL context, particularly in higher education. It highlights the importance of addressing both cognitive and emotional aspects of writing in order to support students more effectively.

However, this study is limited by the small number of participants and its focus on a single institution. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger and more diverse sample, as well as to explore intervention-based approaches that can effectively reduce writing anxiety. Overall, this study emphasizes the need for teachers to create a supportive and non-threatening learning environment that encourages students to express their ideas freely without fear of judgment. By implementing appropriate strategies, students can improve their writing skills and develop greater confidence in their academic writing.

Future research could also consider the role of AI-based writing tools, such as ChatGPT, which were beyond the scope of the present study but increasingly shape the way EFL students engage with writing tasks (Khan et al., 2024; Marzuki et al., 2023).

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