

EFL LEARNERS WRITING ANXIETY : AN INTERVIEW STUDY

Oppi Ridia Putri

English Education Department, Universitas Islam Jember, Indonesia

E-mail: oppiridia93@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Writing anxiety is one of the most significant affective variables influencing the writing performance of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This study investigates the types, causes, and coping strategies related to writing anxiety among undergraduate EFL students at the Islamic University of Jember. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four participants. Thematic analysis revealed that the participants experienced anxiety in content development, organization, and language use. The main causes were linguistic limitations, time pressure, and fear of negative evaluation. Students managed their anxiety by practicing writing, using translation tools, consulting peers, and seeking feedback. The study concludes that writing anxiety affects learners' confidence and performance, and suggests pedagogical strategies to reduce anxiety in EFL writing classes.

Keywords

Writing Anxiety, EFL Learners, Qualitative Research, Writing Skills, Student Perception

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is widely recognized as one of the most demanding skills for language learners, requiring mastery of vocabulary, grammar, rhetorical organization, and sustained cognitive control. Numerous studies have shown that writing-related difficulties such as limited lexical resources, unfamiliarity with academic vocabulary, and challenges in structuring ideas easily trigger writing anxiety, which subsequently inhibits performance and motivation (Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013; Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015). Writing anxiety has been linked to a range of negative emotional and behavioral responses, including worry, avoidance, reduced confidence, and difficulty maintaining ideas while composing (Al-Sawalha & Chow, 2012; Yaman, 2010). Given that EFL students are expected to perform a wide range of academic writing tasks, identifying the mechanisms that generate writing anxiety has become an urgent issue in language education.

Despite increasing scholarly attention, research continues to indicate that writing anxiety remains prevalent across EFL learning contexts, including higher education. Students frequently struggle with cognitive overload and negative self-evaluation, especially when their written work is subject to assessment or comparison with peers (Genc & Yayli, 2019; Miri & Joia, 2018). Yet, although many studies focus on measuring the level or type of anxiety, fewer investigate the specific situational factors and subjective experiences that shape students' anxiety during actual writing processes—such as difficulties related to content development, organizing ideas, or linguistic formulation. This

gap underscores the need for qualitative studies that capture students' own perspectives rather than relying solely on standardized questionnaires.

The present study therefore addresses two key research questions: (1) What factors cause writing anxiety among EFL learners? and (2) What strategies do learners employ to manage or overcome their writing-related anxiety? These questions aim to reveal not only the sources of anxiety but also students' self-generated coping mechanisms, which remain understudied. By examining the experiences of university students who have completed several advanced writing courses, this study highlights the internal and external pressures that shape writing performance, including linguistic limitations, fear of negative evaluation, time pressure, and the perceived demand for perfect accuracy.

The objective of this research is to provide a detailed account of the affective, cognitive, and linguistic factors influencing writing anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners, while identifying practical strategies that students use to regulate these challenges. The findings are expected to contribute to the scientific understanding of writing anxiety in at least two ways. First, they deepen the empirical description of anxiety as it manifests during real writing tasks, complementing previous quantitative studies. Second, the insights gained may assist educators in designing more supportive writing instruction by recognizing the psychological, organizational, and linguistic barriers that hinder learners' performance. This study seeks to fill the research gap concerning qualitative, student-centered perspectives on EFL writing anxiety and provide pedagogical implications for reducing anxiety in writing classrooms.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using a semi-structured interview method to explore EFL learners' writing anxiety. The qualitative design was selected to capture students' personal experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies in depth, which cannot be sufficiently represented through numerical data. The research followed an interview-based inquiry design, allowing participants to openly describe the affective, cognitive, and linguistic challenges they encounter during writing tasks.

The research participants consisted of four undergraduate students (2 males and 2 females) from the fourth semester of the English Language Education Study Program at a private university in Jember, Indonesia. These students were deliberately selected because they had completed multiple writing courses from semester 1 to 4, making them familiar with academic writing demands and potential sources of writing anxiety. Selection criteria included: (1) active enrollment in the fourth-semester writing course, (2) prior completion of introductory, advanced, critical, and academic writing subjects, and (3) willingness to participate, confirmed through informed consent.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews, conducted in English, both online and offline, with audio recordings taken for accuracy. Each participant was interviewed two to three times for approximately 15–30 minutes per session. Interview questions focused on three thematic areas: writing content, writing organization, and language use. After transcription, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, consisting of grouping responses, identifying recurring patterns, interpreting emerging themes, and drawing conclusions based on the categorized data.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Finding

The findings of this study are presented in five main themes: writing content, writing organization, language use, causes of writing anxiety, and coping strategies. Each theme reflects the key areas where students experience challenges and how they attempt to overcome them.

a. Writing Content Anxiety

All participants reported difficulty generating ideas and developing content when writing essays. Participant 1 stated, "Sometimes I don't know what to write because I have limited vocabulary and ideas." This difficulty in idea generation aligns with Yaman (2010), who noted that lack of exposure and limited reading habits contribute to writing anxiety. Participant 2 added, "When I start writing, I feel afraid that my topic is not interesting or that my explanation is not clear." These statements indicate that uncertainty about topic relevance and quality can heighten anxiety.

b. Writing Organization Anxiety

Another major source of anxiety was organizing sentences and paragraphs coherently. Participant 3 explained, "It is hard for me to connect one idea to another because I don't know the right conjunctions or structure." This challenge reflects what Arici and Kaldirim (2015) described as structural apprehension—students' fear of producing poorly organized writing. Students also reported difficulties in writing introductions and conclusions, as they felt unsure how to summarize their ideas logically.

c. Language Use Anxiety

Participants frequently mentioned feeling anxious about grammar accuracy and vocabulary choice. Participant 2 shared, "I feel nervous when I have to write essays because I'm afraid of grammar mistakes." Similarly, Participant 4 admitted, "I often translate from Indonesian first, but sometimes it makes my sentences sound strange." This supports the findings of Hashemi and Abbasi (2013), who noted that grammatical uncertainty and overreliance on translation tools often increase anxiety among EFL writers.

d. Causes of Writing Anxiety

Thematic analysis revealed four dominant factors contributing to writing anxiety: linguistic limitations, time pressure, perfectionism, and fear of negative evaluation. Participant 1 described, "When the deadline is near, I feel panic and can't think properly." Perfectionism also played a role, as Participant 3 explained, "I want my writing to be perfect, but I keep deleting and rewriting, and that makes me more stressed." Fear of criticism was another common issue; students worried about teachers' feedback or peer comparison.

e. Coping Strategies

Despite these challenges, participants developed strategies to manage their writing anxiety. They practiced writing regularly, used bilingual dictionaries, and consulted peers for advice. Participant 4 mentioned, "I read my friends' essays to learn how they organize their ideas." Participant 2 added, "My teacher's feedback helps me a lot because I know what mistakes I made." This suggests that constructive feedback and peer learning play crucial roles in reducing writing anxiety.

Overall, the findings confirm that writing anxiety is a multifaceted issue involving cognitive, emotional, and social factors. Consistent with Onwuegbuzie (1997) and Quvanch

and Na (2022), the study highlights that self-efficacy and learning environment significantly influence how students experience anxiety. Therefore, teachers must create supportive, low-pressure classroom atmospheres where learners can express ideas freely without fear of judgment.

3.2 Discussion

The research of this study highlight that writing anxiety among EFL learners is shaped by interconnected cognitive, linguistic, and organizational challenges. Across all interviews, students reported difficulties in understanding academic vocabulary, generating ideas, structuring their writing, and forming grammatically accurate sentences. These struggles triggered feelings of nervousness, confusion, and fear of making mistakes indicating that writing anxiety is not solely an emotional problem but is deeply rooted in learners' linguistic limitations and cognitive processing demands.

First, difficulties in writing content were strongly associated with limited vocabulary knowledge and low familiarity with academic language. Students struggled to interpret key sentences, identify main ideas, and select appropriate academic words, which echoes previous research stating that insufficient lexical resources increase cognitive load and hinder idea development (Yaman, 2010; Rahimi & Fathi, 2021). The reliance on dictionaries and translation tools observed in this study demonstrates that learners lack confidence in constructing meaning independently. This condition aligns with the notion of cognitive anxiety, where students experience self-doubt regarding their ability to produce meaningful written content.

Second, challenges in writing organization were linked to insufficient knowledge of rhetorical structures and difficulty connecting ideas cohesively. Many learners reported confusion when arranging ideas, selecting appropriate conjunctions, and forming structured paragraphs. These findings support earlier studies suggesting that poor organizational skills intensify writing apprehension, as students are forced to manage unfamiliar structural expectations while also generating content (Boice, 1985). This study also shows that organizational difficulties are intensified by environmental distractions and emotional fluctuations, which indicates that writing anxiety is influenced not only by knowledge gaps but also by affective and situational factors.

Third, linguistic barriers particularly grammar, sentence structure, and academic collocations emerged as a dominant source of anxiety. Students expressed concern that their writing might contain errors, leading to fear of negative evaluation by instructors. This corresponds with research identifying teacher feedback and accuracy demands as major contributors to writing anxiety in EFL contexts (Daly & Miller, 1978; Quvanch & Na, 2022). Learners' anxiety decreased when they became more familiar with vocabulary and sentence patterns, suggesting that linguistic mastery plays a critical role in reducing writing-related fear and improving self-efficacy.

Collectively, the data indicate that writing anxiety operates as a multidimensional phenomenon in which linguistic competence, cognitive processing, and emotional responses interact. The findings strengthen the theoretical perspective that writing anxiety among EFL learners is a product of both skill-based deficiencies and psychological predispositions. This study contributes to the academic understanding of writing anxiety by demonstrating that even learners who have taken multiple writing courses continue to face substantial barriers. It emphasizes the need for writing instruction that incorporates explicit teaching of vocabulary, structured organization strategies, affective support, and

writing practice in low-pressure environments. These pedagogical implications point to the important role of educators in mitigating anxiety and fostering more confident, autonomous writers in EFL settings.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of interviews with students and teachers, there are several conclusions that can be drawn:

- a. This study found that EFL learners' writing anxiety primarily stems from three interconnected sources:
Difficulties in generating and understanding writing content, challenges in organizing ideas into coherent structures, and linguistic limitations involving grammar, sentence structure, and academic vocabulary.
- b. These findings answer the research questions by showing that writing anxiety is triggered by cognitive overload, linguistic insecurity, time pressure, and fear of negative evaluation.
- c. The study also meets its objectives by identifying the strategies learners use to cope with anxiety, including repeated practice, translation, vocabulary review, and the use of digital tools although these strategies tend to function as short-term coping methods rather than long-term skill development.
- d. Theoretically, the results strengthen the view that writing anxiety is multidimensional, shaped by affective, cognitive, and linguistic factors. Practically, the findings highlight the need for supportive writing instruction that includes explicit training in academic vocabulary, writing organization, and reduced evaluative pressure in the classroom.
- e. This research is limited by its small number of participants and its focus on a single institutional context, which restricts the broader generalizability of the findings.
- f. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, examine classroom-based interventions to reduce writing anxiety, and explore the role of digital or collaborative writing environments in helping learners manage anxiety more effectively.

5. REFERENCES

- Ali Fuat Arici & Abdullah Kaldirim (2015) *The Effect of the Process-based Writing Approach on Writing Success and Anxiety of Pre-service Teachers*, *The Anthropologist*, 22:2, 318-327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09720073.2015.11891883>
- Ary, D, et al. (8th eds). 2010. *Introduction to Research in Education*. New York : Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Asmari, (2013). *Investigation of Writing Strategies, Writing Apprehension, and Writing Achievement among Saudi EFL-Major Students*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v6n11p130>
- Akcamete, G., & Gokbulut, D. (2017). Opinions of classroom teachers on reading comprehension difficulties, inclusion education and co-teaching. *Quality & Quantity*, 52, 791–806. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0664-7>
- Barbara Tomlinson (1981). *Reducing Student Writing Anxiety, Proceedings of the*

- Annual Conference of the Western College Reading Association*, 14:1, 24-32.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/24699365.1981.11669757>
- Bayat N, 2014. *The effect of the process writing approach on writing success and anxiety*. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, 14(3): 1133-1141.
- Bloom, L. (1985). *Anxious writers in context: Graduate school and beyond*. In M. Boice, R. (1985). *Cognitive components of blocking*. *Written Communication*, 2, 91-104.
- Braun, V. (2006). *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology*. 1-41.
- Boice, R. (1985). *Cognitive components of blocking*. *Written Communication*, 2, 91-104.
- Clark, D. C. (2005). *Explorations into writing anxiety: Helping students overcome their fears and focus on learning* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (UMI No. 3194899)
- Craig Wynne, Yuh-Jen Guo & Shu-Ching Wang (2014) *Writing Anxiety Groups: A Creative Approach for Graduate Students*, *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 9:3, 366-379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2014.902343>
- Daly, J. A., & Hailey, J. L. (1984). *Putting the situation into writing research: Situational parameters of writing apprehension as disposition and state*. In L.S. Flower, R. Beach, & L. S. Bridwell (Eds.), *New directions in composition research* (pp. 259-273). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Daly, J. A. (1978). *Writing apprehension and writing competency*. *Journal of Educational Research*, 72, 10-14.
- Elizabeth Masterman , Jill Jameson & Simon Walker (2009) *Capturing teachers' experience of learning design through case studies*, *Distance Education*, 30:2, 223-238, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910903023207>
- Gillham, B. (2005). *Research Interviewing: The Range of Techniques*, Open University Press.
- Herbert, K. J., Baize-ward, A., & Latz, A. O. (2018). *Transformative Pedagogy with Innovative Methodology : Using Photovoice to Understand Community College Students ' Needs*. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 42(7-8), 536-549.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1431572>
- Hjortshoj, K. (2001). *Understanding writing blocks*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Khatereh Saghafi, Seyyed Mohammad Reza Adel & Gholamreza Zareian (2017): *An Ecological Study of Foreign Language Writing Anxiety in English as a Foreign Language Classroom*, *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2017.1367954>
- Lantolf, J. P. (2000). *Second language learning as a mediated process*. *Language Teaching*, 33(2), 79-96.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800015329>
- Li C, Chu SKW, Ki WW 2015. *The effects of a wikibased collaborative process writing pedagogy on writing ability and attitudes among upper primary school students in Mainland China*. *Computers and Education*, 77: 151-169
- Masoud Rahimi & Jalil Fathi (2021). *Exploring the impact of wiki-mediated*

- collaborative writing on EFL students' writing performance, writing self-regulation, and writing self-efficacy: a mixed methods study*, Computer Assisted Language Learning. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1888753>
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (1999). *Writing apprehension among graduate students: Its relationship to self-perception*. Psychological Reports, 84, 1034–1039.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (1997). *The relationship between writing anxiety and learning styles among graduate students*. Journal of College Student Development, 39, 589–598.
- Pennebaker, J. W., & Beall, S. K. (1986). *Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding of inhibition and disease*. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 95(3), 274–281.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.95.3.274>
- Rose, M. (1980). *Rigid rules, inflexible plans, and the stifling of language: A cognitivist analysis of writer's block*. College Composition and Communication, 31, 389–401.
- Rose, M. (1984). *Writer's block: The cognitive dimension*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Reed, W. M., Burton, J. K., & Vandett, N. M. (1988). *Daly and Miller's writing apprehension test and Hunt's T-Unit analyses: Two measurement precautions in writing research*. Journal of Research and Development in Education, 21(2), 1–8.
- Ross (Ed.), *When a writer can't write* (pp. 119–133). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Rochelle Holland (2013). *Writing Experiences of Community College Students Islamic University of Jember with Self-Reported Writing Anxieties and Linguistic Insecurity: A Perspective for College Counselors*, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 37:4, 278-295.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10668920903527084>
- Reem I Rabadi & Alexander D Rabadi (2020) *Do Medical Students Experience Writing Anxiety While Learning English as a Foreign Language?* 883-893
<https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S276448>
- Slavin R. 2013. *Educational Psychology*. Ankara: Nobel Akademik Yayincilik.
- Topuzkanamis E 2015. *The effect of teaching writing strategies on Turkish language teaching department freshman students' writing apprehension*. Journal of Language and Literature Education, 13: 97-110.
- Widodo, Handoyo Puji & Rozak, R. R. (2016). *Engaging Student Teachers in Collaborative and Reflective Online Video-Assisted Extensive Listening in an Indonesian Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Context*. Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 13(2), 229–244.
- Yaman H 2010. *Writing anxiety of Turkish students: Scale development and the working procedures in terms of various variables*. International Online Journal of Educational Sciences, 2 (1): 267-289
- Ziauddin Quvanch & Kew Si Na (2022) *Evaluating Afghanistan University students' writing anxiety in English class: An empirical research*, 9:1
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2040697>