

# EXPLORING CAUSES AND ALLEVIATING STRATEGIES OF ENGLISH STUDENT-TEACHERS' WRITING ANXIETY AT PATTIMURA UNIVERSITY

*Hellien J. Loppies*

[loppieshellien@gmail.com](mailto:loppieshellien@gmail.com)

English Study Program, FKIP, Pattimura University, Ambon-Indonesia

**Abstract.** There have been couples of studies reporting on English students-teachers' writing anxiety. However, there has been little information on what factors contribute to Indonesian EFL Pre-service teachers' writing anxiety and how they overcome it. This study aimed at figuring out the facts of related causes of anxiety and alleviating strategies that English student-teachers in English teachers at Pattimura University Ambon employ when they write in English language. The research design is both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data were collected from questionnaires and in-depth interview. The results reveal some contributing factors to participants' writing anxiety including linguistic difficulties, time pressure, lack of writing practices, instructors' evaluation and pressure for a perfect work. Furthermore, to overcome their problems, the participants utilize the rethorical, cognitive and socio-affective strategies. The study, then, concludes that by recognizing the causes of writing anxiety, the participants may work better on applying strategies that can reduce their level of writing anxiety.

**Key Words:** *English Student-Teachers, Writing Anxiety Causes, Alleviating Strategies*

## Introduction

Writing anxiety is a psychological condition which describes the feeling of worry, stress, and frustration of students during the process of writing. This anxiety is closely related to the writing attitude of a student. Graham, et.al. (2007) states that writing attitude reflects affective aspect since the act of writing that might affect to a writer's feeling and behaviour. For this reason, anxiety in writing leads to some negative impacts towards students' attitudes during the writing process. The term writing anxiety has long been discussed in some previous studies including Ahmed (2010) who contends that one of the primary problems in EFL learners comes from their personality factors including writing anxiety. The participants of this study felt anxiety when practicing writing skills. This anxiety is the effect of time pressure in writing, negative oral feedbacks and unfamiliar topics. However, this study focuses generally in exploring the perception towards the psychological factor that cause students' writing problems regardless how the way students cope with such anxiety factor.

A mixed method research was also conducted by Alluhaybi (2015) regarding the issue of Psychology and EFL writing among the final year English

undergraduate students. By conducting a survey and two-essay writing tests, the findings of the study describe the sense of moderate level of writing self-efficacy, moderate level of anxiety along with the positive attitude during the writing process.

The knowledge of how writing anxiety can be solved is urgently needed to make a quite significant implication towards students learning process to be more effective. Since anxiety involves feeling and emotion which influence students' behaviour, it is, then, important to investigate the related learning situation or aspects that cause anxiety along with the ways to solve this problem. Therefore, this paper presents a deeper discussion, specifically, about types of writing anxiety and related factors contributing to it as well as alleviating strategies that the participants employ to deal with their own writing anxiety.

### **Anxiety In English Language Learning**

Learning and acquiring a second or foreign language involves activating cognitive and affective components. Affective deals with students' personality factors include awareness of feeling and emotion not only towards themselves but also others in the process of learning. Brown (2000) finally states the areas of language affective components including self-esteem, anxiety, inhibition, risk-taking, empathy, extroversion, and motivated.

Regarding the aspect of anxiety, Brown (2000) specified the sense of anxiety which is closely related to language learning named *language anxiety*, learners' apprehension of certain language learning process and uneasiness to conduct language performance. Language anxiety can be seen in forms of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Likewise, language anxiety is absolutely occurred in the process of learning English. In line with this, Horwitz (2001) emphasizes that this kind of situational-specific anxiety happens due to learners' negative emotional reactions in practicing English skills in the target language.

Furthermore, Brown (2000) categorized language learning anxiety into two forms namely; the facilitative anxiety and debilitative anxiety. Facilitative anxiety is the condition in which the appearance of little anxiety motivates the learners to study harder and have stronger effort in doing certain tasks. According to Scovel (1978), this kind of anxiety can be good factors of learning when there is an ample extent to push students to learn and to accomplish learning objectives and course requirements. Students sometimes are being motivated when learn under pressure so, the tasks can be finished.

On the contrary, debilitative anxiety refers to a serious level of anxiety which can negatively impact students' learning process. This emphasizes on students uneasiness and nervousness towards certain process of learning English skills. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) add that the feeling of fear and tension typically inhibits students' performance towards particular language learning can happen in all language learning skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing.

### **Writing Anxiety In English Language Learnin**

Writing anxiety is categorized as a more specific condition of students' language anxiety when learning English as a Second or Foreign Language. The term of writing anxiety firstly derived from study by Daly & Miller (1975) who coined a term of writing apprehension as a part of communication besides apprehension in speaking. Further, Hassan (2001) argues that writing apprehension is possible to happen when a learner tends to avoid writing task or being so upset towards the act of writing because of the feeling of fear to be evaluated and perceive writing as a very demanding skill. In line with it, Ho (2015) states that writing anxiety is students' feeling of worry, self-unsure, even being demotivated either when works with their writing or when encounters writing class; for instance, students have bad expectations of their writing, fear of teacher's corrections, and often avoiding writing class. In addition, writing anxiety mostly tends to bring negative impacts on students' writing process resulting on poor writing quality and detrimental writing behaviour (Hassan, 2001; Lee, 2005; Woodrow, 2011). In other words, writing anxiety is a kind of debilitating anxiety which makes students produce poor quality of paper and can disturb the process in developing their writing.

Cheng (2004b), further, explains that second or foreign language writing anxiety has three forms; cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behaviour. Firstly, the appearance of negative thoughts or self-belief towards writing skill and one's capability to write refer to the term cognitive anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defines that this mental component of anxiety relates to students' over concern of failure as well as teacher or friends' opinion to their work that makes them being so pessimistic to get a good achievement. This anxiety includes self-unsure, negative expectations and over concern to others' perceptions. In short, cognitive anxiety is closely related to negative thoughts of one's writing ability and possible consequences towards writing when it is evaluated.

Next, somatic anxiety is the students' physiological indicators that reflect their writing anxiety. According to Craft et. al (2003), somatic anxiety involves emotion and physiological components that directly arise autonomically towards certain writing process. This anxiety relates to some symptoms that emerge along with anxiety feeling of a student. Morris, Davis, & Hutchings (1981) state that, some symptoms that confirm to somatic anxiety are nervousness, tension, blushing, rapid heart and other discomfort feelings. Accordingly, this kind of anxiety associates with students emotional responses to certain writing process that evoke to some distracting symptoms.

The last kind of writing anxiety is Avoidance behavior. This is a tendency to avoid a certain process of writing. Krohne (cited in Morris, et al. 1981) mentions that this kind of anxiety is the motoric component as the consequence of serious degree of mental and emotional components of anxiety (cognitive and somatic). In other words, this is the behavior of students to escape or avoid from certain process in writing. Cheng (2004b) further states that avoidance behavior is indicated by the students act for instance, avoid attending the writing classes, delaying to work, and procrastination. All in all, the types of writing anxiety are

derived from three components, mental (cognitive anxiety), emotional (somatic anxiety) and behavioral (avoidance behavior).

### **Methodology**

This study design is Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method in which the quantitative data was generated from two different surveys delivered to 30 EFL student-teachers. The first questionnaire aimed at measuring the specific category of anxiety which is an adaptation from The Writing Apprehension Scale (Daly & Miller, 1975) and Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (Cheng, 2004a). This questionnaire was classified into 7 items of Cognitive Anxiety (Part A) 9 items of Somatic Anxiety (Part B), and 8 items of Avoidance Behavior (Part C).

The second questionnaire prompts the causal factors of writing anxiety in which their coping strategies were clarified through interviewing 6 participants who were categorized as having high, moderate and low level of writing anxiety.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The result of this study confirms that Somatic Anxiety is the most experienced type of writing anxiety instead of Avoidance Behaviour and Cognitive Anxiety. Somatic anxiety is a discomfort feeling of a student toward the writing process that affects to student's physical signs. The symptoms such as nervousness, trembling, rapid heart, perspiring, tension and headache, are the things that describe students' somatic anxiety (Cheng, 2004b; Zhang, 2011). In addition, this study also confirms what Ekmekci (2018) found that EFL university students commonly experience somatic anxiety as the highest anxiety, then followed by cognitive anxiety and avoidance behavior as the least.

Regarding to the symptoms, this study confirms that the highest form of Somatic anxiety is students' panic when writing under time constraint. Panic is an emotional factor emerged along with the existence of anxiety and becomes serious problem when influenced by task deadline given by a teacher (Cheng 2004a; 2004b). In this study, time constraint means a deadline of students to collect a writing task. As a result, students mostly shows great degree of panic which makes them lose focus or hard to concentrate to finish a text. This result is in accordance of Stawiarska's (2012) finding that panic towards particular situation and nervousness to the teacher are the highest indicators of Somatic anxiety. In this case, students may experience panic because of not completing the task yet when the deadline is closely impending. Moreover, the participants were also too anxious in face to face situation with the teacher. This study result reveals that tension, trembling, rapid heart as well as nervousness are seriously experienced by the students. This confirms what Lin & Ho (2009) have found that, a high level of students' nervousness in writing process typically towards the situation in which their writing is being commented or evaluated by the teacher. In other words, this part of somatic anxiety specifically appear towards the process of revision either to discuss their outline or draft. This is because the students are much worry on teacher's comments to their ideas, inappropriate organization or structure, and being anxious in creating their text that issuitable with the task criteria set by a teacher.

In relation to the findings of major factors contribute to students' writing anxiety, it was found that linguistic problems, time pressure, lack of experience of writing practice, teachers' negative evaluation, and pressure for work perfectly are among many other aspects that the participants were having problems with. Limited numbers of vocabulary mastery, poor diction, grammar errors and bad sentence structures are many factors that contribute. According to Cheng (2004a), EFL students feel troubled with linguistic factor because they highly perceive that good writing merely requires the appropriateness of vocabulary or diction used. Since writing needs several competences not only cognitive competence, but also well psychological and social control, however, this perception tend to mislead students in learning to write. Besides, Cheng also adds that by perceiving writing as the most difficult skill as well as believes that writing process is a very burdensome activity, students might hamper to create a good writing because they often feel frustration and hopelessness. Data from the interviews confirm that the participants mostly believe that writing is the hardest skill to be learned and acquired.

*"Writing is the hardest skill because it is about when you think something and then you write it" (Participant J2)*

*"Writing skill is about how I can transfer the ideas in my mind into good and proper written form" (Participant Y2)*

*"Based on my understanding, writing is divided into writing process and writing product but the most important in here is about the writing process because the emphasis is on the process not the result. For example, through self-conference with the teacher and friends' revision that affect to our writing in a good form" (Participant S2)*

The other cause is the time pressure. The term of time pressure can be understood as the deadline that burdens the student and affect their writing performance (Amabile. et. al, 2002). The problem of deadline is depending on teacher's rules to monitor students' writing either in prewriting, drafting or collecting the final product. From the interview result, students confirm that they felt very troubled with time constraint in prewriting and drafting stage.

*"The most frustrating for me happened on the beginning of the writing process when I had to think harder about the ideas that fit with the criterion or lecturer's standard. I need longer time to complete this section because I was thinking harder about the topic that I was going to write until I developed my knowledge towards the topic into a good outline"*

*(Participant W4)*

*"The process that I felt very anxious and frustration was in Drafting. In this part I had to push myself to well manage the time, searched the best words for my writing, and completed the outline"*

*(Participant S8)*

Furthermore, lack of writing practices is the third dominance cause of writing anxiety for the participants. Many practices on writing make students become familiar on the model of a certain text and be able to know how to construct such particular text. Cheng (2004a) claims that because of students' minimum writing practices, it is difficult to compose their text as they have less creative thinking, and in turn, it is hard for them to produce logical sentences that support their text as a consequence of lack of critical thinking. Thereupon, students who have low level of writing anxiety indicates that he or she has been prepared for a certain model of writing as the result of sufficient writing practices rather than other students who has serious level of anxiety. This supports the finding of this study which confirms that only a student who really feel low anxious because he used to practice writing, as indicated by Participant W4 that *"I believe that I feel less anxious because I like to do some writing practices collaboratively with someone who I think he or she is a master or have better knowledge and ability in writing rather than me, so it brings advantages for me to improve my skill of writing and surely reduce my anxiety when I write "*. This implies that most participants experienced lack of practices to write which surely contributes to their serious level of anxiety.

Next, teachers' evaluation obviously influences students of having so anxious feeling in writing. In this case, factor of anxiety relates to teachers' evaluation which is specified as a kind of social threat that goes through that process of evaluation and students' perception of the evaluation process itself. (Cheng, 2002; Cheng, 2004b). Regarding to the first, Cheng (2004b) states the term of Interpersonal threats in which social threat as a list of sources of writing anxiety. The negative evaluation and judgment from teacher by disapproving students' writing may increase students' level of anxiety.

Secondly, students differently perceive teachers' evaluation to their writing. Non-anxious or low-anxious student views this feedback as corrections to their writing so they can have better improvement, while, others are fear to discuss their writing face to face with the teacher (Qashoa, 2014). The low-anxious students deal more positively with teacher's evaluation as the way to have better improvement.

On the other hand, the other anxious students often think that teacher will give more on undesirable comments or feedback towards their writing because of teacher's superiority or teacher's knowledge that will probably see many errors and mistakes in their writing. According to Cheng (2002), one of basic factors of writing anxiety comes from self-esteem in dealing with the evaluation from teacher either good or bad. Students who have good self-esteem can deal better with whatever threats of others towards their writing rather than those who have poor self-reflection to their writing.

The last factor is a wish to work perfectly. An inclination to do a perfect writing comes from the own set of high standard of a student (Cheng, 2004b). Many students put their target to be success in writing based on their thoughts about writing skill itself. As explained previously, most students believe that writing requires very demanding work which includes the right word usage, good

organization and complicated process. Besides being troubled of such things, on the contrary, some students also tend to force themselves to reach that standard to produce a perfect writing (Bloom, 1981). This situation happens especially for the low anxious students and can be a causal factor by over self-confidence in students. Feng (cited in Cheng, 2004a) states that, a student who thinks himself as a good writer tend to write as good as possible.

Learning strategies emphasize the way a student achieves learning objective and solve learning problems by maximizing their thoughts and preference actions consciously. In this study it is found that rhetorical strategies, cognitive strategies, and socio-affective strategies were employed by the participants to cope with their writing anxiety.

The rhetorical strategies refer to the strategy or technique that is used to cope with the anxiety in constructing a paragraph and in organizing a text. This includes the way students arrange the topic sentence and supporting sentences, comparing the text and searching for examples of particular text as a model to organize the text and so forth (Mu, 2005). This study shows that one of rhetorical strategies of students which is creating the outline in more than one version in order to get the right arrangement, as indicated of this answer that *"What I did to reduce my anxiety are I always thinking about the proper title related to the topic selected by the teacher, like I did brainstorming more than once and try to arrange in many options of my outline. I think and focus on my subject not just when I want to write but I think all day long so it affects for me to have more preparation before I start to write because I believe the ideas can come from everywhere and at any time during the day"* (Participant S2).

Furthermore, students' ways to learn, retrieve and use relevant information or material to support their text is categorized as the cognitive strategies (Pineda, 2010). This strategy is closely related to those who felt anxious with the use of vocabulary, diction or logical sentences to their text. From the interview results, the strategies include highlighting, taking note, paraphrasing, and summarizing what students have read from references. Students may build their understanding of a text from the related words and their conclusion towards the text to be used in their writing as well as they enrich their vocabulary knowledge (Pineda, 2010; Qashoa, 2014). The students' response:

*"I used to read a lot of references related to my writing so it helps me in making the sentences because I am easier to find the point to support my writing with reading a lot. Through reading, I can paraphrase the point that I found in a journal or article so it is also useful for me to avoid plagiarism"* (Participant S8)

Another sample of cognitive strategies is regarding to the impact of students' writing practices outside the classroom. This finding confirms the results of Qashoa (2014) that many writing practices affect positively to reduce writing anxiety because students are aware of the bad effect of such anxiety. By experiencing ample writing practices, student is able to solve some obstacles that might be faced when he or she work with the text. In addition, students already

have adequate knowledge to create logical sentences that links each other to produce a better writing product.

Regarding the socio-affective strategies, the interaction with others and useful actions to set good emotions, attitude and motivation in writing is highly recommended (Mu, 2005). Regarding to social interaction, some students are aware of others help to check their writing and share feeling at once. Particularly, students mostly looked for the role of their friends to discuss about their writing, as mentioned by a student that *"Actually, I have no special strategy. I just try to find my friends who I trust to help me to finish my writing"* (Participant Y2).

Through small conversation with peers, students feel more relaxed to discuss about their writing. Another students response that *"From my friends' comments, because it is more relax to discuss my writing with my friends. Specifically, besides give the correction we also can support each other, so I think that is the best way for me to reduce my anxiety"* (Participant S2).

This result confirms the finding of Hyland (2003) that discuss writing with others is useful to reduce anxiety because students can share feelings and knowledge in a more comfort way. Therefore, it is a good way for students to discuss with peers to help them solving their writing problems that makes them feel so anxious.

## Conclusion

Among the three types of writing anxiety, Somatic anxiety is the most experienced writing anxiety in English Study Program students. Particularly, the 5 major forms of Somatic anxiety respectively which are tension in self-conference with teacher, trembling and rapid heart in self-conference with the teacher, panic when write under time constraint, nervous when teacher check the writing, and headache during writing.

The factors that contribute to writing anxiety of English Study Program students are linguistic problems, time pressure, less experience of writing practices, teachers' negative evaluation, and tendency for a perfect work. There are some strategies that can be used to alleviate students' writing anxiety includes rhetorical strategies, cognitive strategies, and socio-affective strategies. From students' perspective, some strategies such as creating two options of outline, paraphrasing, taking note, summarizing, and discussing with friends.

From the findings, it is suggested that teacher should create friendlier atmosphere during the teaching process in order to facilitate students comfort and less tension in learning. To deal with the sources of writing anxiety that comes from teachers' evaluation, it may be helpful for the students, if the teacher provides more opportunities to tell freely what they want to say about their writing, as well as gives clear feedbacks towards the errors and mistakes that the students produce. In addition, suggesting solution to the problems that the students face can be another option to minimize students' level of anxiety.

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