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Investigating EFL pre-service teacher writing anxiety

Siti Mumun Munawaroh[1], Nunung Nurhayati[2], Arief Styo Nugroho[3]
[1]Setia Budhi Rangkasbitung University
[2]Setia Budhi Rangkasbitung University
[3]Setia Budhi Rangkasbitung University

Article Info

Corresponding Author:

Siti Mumun Munawaroh

Universitas Setia Budhi
Rangkasbitung

Email:
sitimumunmunawaroh08@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the level of writing anxiety of EFL pre-service teachers and the types of their writing anxiety. A case study is used in this study. There were ten students who participated in this research. To obtain data, questionnaires and interviews were used. The results showed that most of the participants were at a low level of writing anxiety, namely 59.625%, most were at a moderate level, namely 26.5%, and a few were at a high level, namely 13.5%. Based on the results of the interviews, it was found that majority of the participants encountered cognitive anxiety. Thus, the teacher should encourage them to be confidents with their writing ability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing anxiety is defined as the fear of the writing process that surpasses the anticipated benefits of being able to write (Thompson, 2018). In addition, anxiety when writing is considered to be an emotional response brought on by the process of learning a foreign language (Sivaci, 2020). The writing anxiety clearly negatively affects writing performance (Pajares & Johnson, 2018). Additionally, Sabti, et al (2019) reported that writing anxiety is negatively correlated with self efficacy. It means that when students' writing anxiety was high the students' self efficacy is low. It is also showed that a low level of writing achievement motivation may elicit high writing anxiety and may undermine learners' performance.

The sources of writing anxiety have been detected as stemming from an individual's writing ability, the degree of preparation to complete the writing task, the fear of being assessed and judged on the basis of writing tasks, and the mixed messages students receive from their teachers (Öztürk & Çeçen, 2020). Rezaei & Jafari (2018) categorize writing anxiety into three forms. They are cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior. Cognitive anxiety deals with the appearance of negative thoughts or self-belief towards writing skill and one's capability to write (Loppies, 2020). For somatic anxiety, it refers to some symptoms that emerge along with anxiety feeling of a student such as nervousness, tension, blushing, rapid heart and other discomfort feelings (Loppies, 2020). Whereas, avoidance behavior is the behavior of students to escape or avoid from certain process in writing, for instances, avoid attending the writing classes, delaying to work, and procrastination (Cheng, 2004b). The presence of writing anxiety not only hinders students' performance but also reduces their motivation and willingness to engage in writing activities. Identifying the level of writing anxiety and the types experienced by students is essential for educators to design effective interventions that reduce anxiety and promote a more positive writing experience. Therefore, this study aims to answer two main questions: (1) What is the level of students' writing anxiety? and (2) What types of writing anxiety are encountered?

2. METHOD

This study employed a a case study design with questionnaire and semi-structured interview to determine the studens' writing axiety level and the types of writing anxiety that were encountered by students. There were ten English department students who were involved in this study. To determine validity, member checking was employed. The data were analyzed based on Miles and Hubberman idea (1994).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Writing anxiety level

The data revealed that most participants were at a low level of writing anxiety (59.625%), followed by a moderate level (26.5%), and a smaller proportion at a high level (13.5%). This indicates that the majority of the students experienced minimal anxiety when completing writing tasks. The findings indicate that the majority of participants experienced low levels of writing anxiety. This relatively low anxiety appears to be linked to their adequate preparation before writing assignments, such as reading relevant articles and familiarizing themselves with the topic. This finding aligns with Hassan (2001), who reported that students with low anxiety tend to produce better quality compositions than their more anxious peers. Additionally, participants in this study displayed high motivation to complete writing tasks, which supports Sabti, Rashid, Nimehchisalem, and Darmi's (2019) conclusion that higher writing achievement motivation correlates with better writing performance.

Regarding the causes of writing anxiety, most students indicated that they were worried about grammatical accuracy. Others reported difficulties in planning their writing, a lack of confidence in their writing ability, and, to a lesser extent, concerns about others' opinions. In addition, the participants addressed strategies to cope with their anxiety, such as practicing writing more frequently, seeking guidance, planning before writing, and getting writing assistance. The results showed that most students reported practicing writing more often as their primary strategy. Additionally, a majority of students sought guidance in writing, some managed their anxiety independently, and only a few did not consider seeking guidance at all.

Types of writing anxiety

The data from interview showed that participants experienced three main types of writing anxiety: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior. Among these, cognitive anxiety emerged as the most dominant type. For cognitive anxiety, all participants (10 out of 10) indicated experiencing cognitive anxiety, as shown by their responses to 15 related questions. Cognitive anxiety refers to the tendency to think negatively about one's writing ability. For example:

"I feel doubtful about my writing because I realize that I have low writing ability." (P1, P2, P3)

"I feel doubtful about my writing because of my lack of vocabulary." (P4)

"Occasionally, I feel anxious about writing, but not always." (P5, P6)

Cognitive anxiety was the most prevalent, with all participants reporting self-doubt about their writing quality, difficulty developing ideas, and limited vocabulary. However, inability to express ideas in accurate English is a key factor contributing to writing anxiety.

Dealing with somatic anxiety, nine out of ten participants reported somatic anxiety. Somatic anxiety involves emotional and physiological symptoms such as nervousness, flushed face, palpitations, and trembling. Examples include:

"Anxiety affects the quality of my writing due to my lack of writing skills." (P1, P2)

"It really affects the quality of writing because I cannot focus, so it becomes messy." (P3)

"It affects the quality of writing because I cannot think rationally." (P4)

Somatic anxiety was also common, with most participants reporting discomfort during the writing process, leading to symptoms such as nervousness, embarrassment, and tension. This finding aligns with Cheng (2004b) and Zhang (2011), who linked such physiological symptoms to negative emotional responses toward writing tasks.

For avoidance behavior, eight out of ten participants also reported avoidance behavior, which involves avoiding writing-related situations. This included skipping writing classes, procrastinating on assignments, or physically removing themselves from the writing environment. For example:

"Avoidance behavior can provide a healthy outlet because I can find solutions when I feel anxious." (P1)

"I have overcome writing anxiety by abandoning writing activities." (P7)

"I once engaged in avoidance behavior by going out of class and changing my sitting position." (P8)
Avoidance behavior emerged as the least prevalent but still significant type of anxiety. Eight participants admitted avoiding writing-related situations due to self-doubt about their writing skills. This supports Cheng's (2004) assertion that avoidance behavior is a common coping mechanism among students with writing anxiety.

Overall, the results suggest that writing anxiety—though natural—is manageable with proper support. Lecturers can play a crucial role in reducing anxiety by creating a supportive and non-threatening learning environment, offering constructive feedback, and providing ample opportunities for practice. As Lopper (2020) emphasizes, fostering a friendly atmosphere and delivering clear, consistent feedback can help students confront their anxiety with a positive mindset. Continuous improvement can be achieved through regular practice, reflection on feedback, and encouragement to take risks in writing without fear of judgment.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it is concluded that the majority of participants experienced low levels of writing anxiety. This relatively low anxiety level was associated with adequate preparation, such as reading related materials and planning before writing, as well as high motivation to complete writing tasks. These factors contributed to better writing performance, consistent with previous research indicating that low anxiety supports higher writing quality. Regarding the types of writing anxiety, cognitive anxiety emerged as the most dominant type, reported by all participants, and was mainly linked to self-doubt, limited vocabulary, and difficulty developing ideas. These findings highlight that while writing anxiety is a natural reaction to challenging tasks, it can be managed through appropriate strategies and support.

Referring to the findings, it is suggested that English writing instruction should integrate strategies aimed at reducing students' writing anxiety. Teachers are encouraged to provide regular and supportive feedback to help students overcome their fear of making grammatical errors, as this was identified as the most common source of anxiety. Incorporating more guided writing practice, peer review activities, and step-by-step writing instruction can also help students build confidence and improve their ability to plan and organize their writing. Additionally, creating a positive classroom environment that emphasizes progress over perfection may help reduce students' fear of negative evaluation. Future research could explore the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions in lowering different types of writing anxiety and examine the relationship between writing anxiety, writing performance, and other affective factors such as motivation and self-efficacy.

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