

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON STUDENTS' ANXIETY IN THE PROCESS OF COMPOSING AN ENGLISH ESSAY

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Abstract: Writing proficiency is a crucial language skill for students to acquire, necessitating the production of compositions such as essays. This research aims to identify the manifestations of anxiety experienced by students during the composition of English essays and to ascertain the underlying factors precipitating such anxiety. Employing qualitative methodology, the study utilized questionnaires and interviews as research instruments to collect the data. Participants consisted of 34 fifth-semester students from the Department of English Education at Universitas Syiah Kuala who completed the questionnaire adopted from the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) proposed by Cheng (2004). Ten of them were interviewed using the instrument adapted from The Cause of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) developed by Rezaei and Jafari (2014). The results revealed that cognitive anxiety was predominant, afflicting 43.5% of the respondents. Additionally, linguistic difficulties, low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and pressure of perfect work emerged as pivotal sources of essay-writing anxiety. These findings underline the multifaceted nature of student anxiety during English essay composition, thereby serving as a valuable resource for educational stakeholders seeking insights to enhance students' writing competencies.

Keywords: *essay writing; factors of anxiety; students' anxiety; types of anxiety.*

INTRODUCTION

Emotion within the educational setting frequently plays a significant role in the process of learning. According to Pekrun (1992) cited in Mulualem et al., (2022), the influence of academic emotions on learning and academic success demonstrated that positive emotions, such as enjoyment, hope, relief, and pride, had positive effects, but negative emotions, including anger, anxiety, hopelessness, disappointment, sadness, and shame, had negative effects on both learning and academic performance. Thus, emotion plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's personality and

significantly influences their actions (Prentice et al., 2020). For instance, individuals frequently act in alignment with their emotional states, which can span from positive to negative manifestations. The nature of these emotions, whether favourable or unfavourable, hinges on an individual's capacity to regulate their emotional responses.

Studies exploring the relationship between emotions and instructed language learning have been conducted since the 1970s (Dewaele et al., 2018; Shao et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019; Wang & Zhan, 2020; Dewaele & Li, 2021). Emotions in the context of classroom second language (L2)

learning refer to the affective experiences directly linked to language learning activities and the subsequent educational achievements. This dynamic process is influenced by assessments of socio-culturally influenced L2 learning tasks (Pekrun et al., 2017; Shao et al., 2019). This study centres its focus on a specific facet of emotion which is anxiety. Silveira (2020) states that ambiguity in language becomes apparent when Horwitz characterizes anxiety in foreign language learning contexts as encompassing psychological indicators, including a personal sense of unease, apprehension, physical trembling, and restlessness resulting from nervous system activation. In addition, anxiety is viewed as a complex factor that not only triggers but also results from difficulties encountered in foreign language learning. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety has been the subject of research alongside other emotions, including Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) (Dewaele, 2019; Botes et al., 2020; Su, 2022), as well as Foreign Language Boredom (FLB) (Li et al., 2021; Li, 2022; Kruk, et al., 2022).

As such, the present research endeavours to scrutinize the consequences of anxiety specifically concerning English essay composition. In the process of writing, students must exhibit creativity in constructing coherent sentences that harmonize into effective paragraphs. Writing can be defined as a cognitive-linguistic attempt that necessitates the utilization of advanced cognitive abilities to structure ideas, thus enhancing the comprehensibility of compositions and ensuring logical coherence in the conveyed thoughts (Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017; Belkhir, 2021). Writers express their ideas using the aspects of language, for instance, vocabulary, spelling, syntax, and grammar. When a writer lacks language knowledge, anxiety can serve as a difficulty to their writing performance. Finn (2018) went so far as to argue that anxiety could serve as a main obstacle to achieving success in writing. The significance of writing-related anxiety has encouraged researchers to create measurement scales, investigate its sources, and search for potential solutions. In the context of writing in English as a foreign language (EFL), learners face the challenge of expressing their ideas while also acquiring proficiency in English. Grammatical mistakes are an inevitable outcome due to the cognitive strain of juggling both tasks simultaneously (Hyland cited in Liao, 2016). Therefore, writing is different from oral activities. This contemplative process empowers students to harness their cognitive resources and, if needed, consult reference materials like

dictionaries or grammar guides to strengthen their writing. Writing accentuates precision in language usage, fostering linguistic development as students surmount challenges encountered during the writing process. Proficiency in writing stands as a fundamental skill for English learners.

Writing anxiety conveys the fear of unfavourable assessment by instructors and peers, coupled with apprehension toward timed writing, which complicates the development of students' English writing capabilities (Wahyuni & Khotibul, 2017). Notably, students' fear of falling short in expression and concerns over negative critiques from readers contribute to an excessive and often debilitating fear of writing.

Several previous studies corroborate and substantiate the present research. Oryza (2021) conducted a study aimed at dissecting anxiety within the domain of writing skills among tenth-grade high school students. Utilizing a questionnaire-based approach, the research not only gauged the extent of students' anxiety during writing but also identified predominant sources of writing-related anxiety and delved into the underlying factors precipitating such anxiety. The study uncovered four primary determinants: linguistic challenges, time constraints, apprehension of negative evaluation, and inadequate experience or insufficient writing practice. Another study done by Jawas (2019) on 80 university students found that among various aspects of essay writing that can trigger anxiety, in-class essay assignments are the primary source of writing anxiety for students. To alleviate this anxiety, students often employ collaborative techniques like working in pairs or small groups to develop ideas and construct their essays.

There are also several previous studies discussing students' anxiety in speaking English. Santriz (2018) investigated anxiety within the context of English education, with a focus on speaking activities. The outcome of this study primarily relates to an analysis of students' anxiety manifested during oral performance. Additionally, another study done by Naibaho (2022) on 98 students at Universitas Kristen Indonesia found that English language learners have a moderate degree of anxiety when it comes to their speaking skills. Furthermore, the overall level of English language anxiety among English language learners at UKI, encompassing both listening and speaking skills, is characterized as moderately high.

Notably, the distinction between the previous research and the present one lies in the subject matter under investigation. Given anxiety's

potentially profound impact on the acquisition of foreign languages, comprehending students' anxiety patterns deserves thorough exploration. This study assumes significance in identifying the distinct forms of anxiety experienced by students during English essay composition and discerning the contributory factors that trigger such anxiety. In doing so, the research seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex issue of anxiety as it pertains to writing English essays, as perceived by students themselves.

Cheng (2004) proposed three distinct categories of writing anxiety encompassing somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance anxiety. Studies related to these types of anxiety have been conducted by many researchers (i.e., Hartono & Maharani, 2019; Ajmal & Irfan, 2020; Mulyono et al., 2020; Wern & Rahmat, 2021). Firstly, somatic anxiety pertains to physiological manifestations or bodily behaviours associated with the writing process. It constitutes an individual's perception of the psychological elements intrinsic to the experience of anxiety, manifested in augmented autonomic arousal and the emergence of undesirable emotional states such as nervousness and tension. Aligned with this, the present study incorporates certain dimensions of somatic anxiety, as outlined by Rezaei and Jafari (2014). These dimensions encompass instances where students experience mental blanks, panic, or perspiration upon initiating English essay composition. Additionally, trembling or sweating might arise when writing under time constraints, while sensations of rigidity, trepidation, and unease can manifest when tasked with essay composition.

Secondly, cognitive anxiety operates within the realm of mental conditions or cognitive processes implicated in information acquisition. As elucidated by Cheng (2004), cognitive anxiety encapsulates the mental facet of anxiety, encompassing negative assumptions, fixation on performance, and concerns regarding external assessments. Kusumaningputri et al. (2018) concluded that cognitive anxiety refers to learners' mental aspects when they experience anxiety, including negative expectations, preoccupation with performance, and concern about others' perceptions. Building upon this framework, this research adapts specific cognitive anxiety facets identified by Rezaei and Jafari (2014). These include scenarios where students experience anxiety and fear in association with English assignments that subsequently undergo evaluation. Moreover, apprehension surfaces when students' work is selected for classroom discussion, and a

sense of worry and nervousness pervades their writing activities, accompanied by doubts regarding their capability to complete assignments.

Lastly, avoidance behaviour is observed predominantly among students encountering foreign languages. Within the context of writing, students deliberately refrain from producing content in a foreign language. This study also integrates components of avoidance behaviour identified by Rezaei and Jafari (2014), such as students actively seeking opportunities for English essay writing beyond the classroom. A proclivity to avoid using English for task-related writing and a tendency to resort to personal English writing instances also characterize this category of anxiety. From these delineated categories, common causal factors underlie writing anxiety, including fear, limited knowledge, and low self-confidence, all contributing to students' experience of apprehension during the writing process.

The Cause of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI), developed by Rezaei and Jafari (2014), serves as a standardized tool for pinpointing factors precipitating writing anxiety. Within this framework, numerous causes of writing anxiety come to the fore. These causes manifest in various ways, as elucidated by Rezaei and Jafari (2014). First is fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Students frequently experience apprehension when their writing undergoes assessment, particularly when assessments are conducted under time constraints. Anxiety arises when students perceive their writing as not meeting their educators' expectations, leading to unfavourable evaluations. Time pressures exacerbate these concerns, detracting from the students' focus on content. Second is a lack of experience or insufficient practice. Inadequate practice in expressing ideas through English writing can culminate in heightened anxiety. Students who infrequently engage in writing activities tend to overly fixate on the structural aspects of writing rather than the content, magnifying their apprehension. Consistent practice emerges as a pivotal strategy for enhancing writing prowess. Third is insufficient writing technique. Proficiency in writing aligns with an understanding of the compositional process and skill development. Anxiety often plagues students who lack a solid grasp of these elements. Fourth is a lack of topical knowledge. Students with limited subject knowledge often experience anxiety when tasked with writing on unfamiliar topics. This lack of familiarity leads to discomfort and unease during the writing process. Fifth is language difficulties. Language challenges

frequently deter foreign language learners from composing essays in English. Struggles with correct grammar usage and vocabulary constraints inhibit confident expression, escalating anxiety levels. Sixth is pressure for perfection. Self-imposed pressure to attain perfection triggers anxiety among learners. The pursuit of exceedingly high standards generates anxiety and reluctance to write. Seventh is time pressure. The impending spectre of time constraints stands as a central contributor to writing anxiety. The sensation of pressure is particularly pronounced when students compose within limited timeframes. Eighth is low self-confidence. Confidence levels substantially shape students' responses to writing tasks. Last is the high frequency of assignments. A profusion of writing tasks contributes to heightened writing anxiety. The consistent demand for writing amplifies stress levels.

In summation, writing anxiety stems from two principal sources: intrinsic factors related to students, such as self-confidence, technical proficiency, language difficulties, topical knowledge, and practice insufficiency; and extrinsic factors tied to the learning environment, including fear of evaluation, time pressure, pursuit of perfection, and high assignment frequency. While external influences can alleviate anxiety to some extent, addressing intrinsic factors holds the key to substantial relief.

METHOD

The foundation of this study is its research design, a structured framework that governs data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting. In this pursuit, a qualitative research design has been adopted. Qualitative research helps us understand why things happen and how people behave in the social world (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Haven and Grootel, 2019). For the current study, the intention is to discern the types of students' essay writing anxiety and illuminate the associated factors through the deployment of questionnaires and interviews as investigative instruments.

The study encompasses fifth-semester students enrolled in the English Education Department who have completed courses in Essay Writing. A sampling strategy used in this study was purposive sampling (Gill, 2020), which means the researchers deliberately chose participants who possess expertise or knowledge regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Accordingly, 34 respondents were completing the questionnaires to answer the first research question: 'What types of anxiety do the students feel when they are writing English

essays?'. Furthermore, 10 students were selected for in-depth interviews to answer the second research question: 'What are the factors that cause students to feel anxious when writing an English essay?'

The questionnaire employed in this research was adopted from the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) proposed by Cheng (2004) to find out the types of students' anxiety in English writing. The questionnaire employs a Likert scale with five response choices: strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), neutral (N), agree (A), and strongly agree (SA). It comprises 18 statements grouped into three subcategories: Cognitive Anxiety (statements 1-8), Somatic Anxiety (statements 9-13), and Behaviour Avoidance (statements 14-18). Meanwhile, the interview guide was adapted from the Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI) constructed by Razei and Jafari (2014). The interview structure consists of open-ended questions, amounting to nine inquiries. The data collection process for questionnaires entailed the use of Google Forms. Interviews were conducted subsequent to the questionnaire phase, involving 10 students who had participated in the questionnaire segment. Due to the research timeline coinciding with the course semester break, telephone interviews were deemed optimal to ensure seamless interaction and engagement with participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are organized and presented in a systematic manner, encompassing the types of anxiety experienced by students during English essay writing, as well as the factors that contribute to this anxiety.

Types of anxiety

The questionnaire provided insights into three distinct types of anxiety experienced by students while writing English essays: cognitive anxiety, behaviour anxiety, and somatic anxiety. Each type is analysed in detail as follows:

Among the three types of writing anxiety assessed in the questionnaire, cognitive anxiety emerged as the dominant type. This was evident from the higher scores garnered by cognitive anxiety in comparison to the other two types. Specifically, 43.5% of students reported experiencing cognitive anxiety in relation to their English essay writing. This type of anxiety is characterized by feelings of apprehension and fear associated with writing assignments, fear of evaluation from teachers and peers, and worry

about producing inadequate work. This is in line with the findings of Rezaei and Jafari (2014), Wahyuni and Khotibul (2017), Kusumaningputri et al. (2018), Hartono and Maharani (2019), and Wern and Rahmat (2021), who stated that students experience a high level of cognitive anxiety. In contrast, Mulyono et al. (2020) found that avoidance behaviour becoming the most common anxiety experienced by students when writing in English.

Cognitive anxiety, as identified in the literature, encompasses concerns about others' perceptions and expectations regarding one's writing. This type of anxiety is characterized by negative expectations and preoccupation with how others perceive one's work (Rezaei and Jafari, 2014). This interpretation is corroborated by the responses to the questionnaire items. For instance, statement three in the questionnaire indicated that students felt worried about the evaluation of their English essays. Out of 34 students, 23 expressed concerns about their essays being graded, reflecting a heightened awareness of others' assessments of their work. Similarly, statement eight highlighted that students were anxious about their essays being selected for class discussion. In this context, 15 students acknowledged feeling apprehensive about how their essays would be perceived by their peers. These findings underscore the influence of cognitive anxiety on students' focus on external judgments, potentially impacting their self-perception and motivation.

The prevalence of cognitive anxiety can also be attributed to the significance that students place on external evaluations. While some students are motivated by others' feedback to improve their work, others become demotivated, leading to procrastination and a longer time to complete their essays. Thus, cognitive anxiety has a dual impact—on one hand, it motivates improvement, and on the other, it hinders progress by fostering self-doubt.

In addition to cognitive anxiety, the questionnaire results indicated that avoidance behaviour and somatic anxiety were also experienced by students, with 33.8% and 33.5% of students reporting these types, respectively. This finding is quite different from the study conducted by Wern and Rahmat (2021) who found that Chinese Independent Middle School students have moderate levels of somatic anxiety and low level of avoidance behaviour. Avoidance behaviour is marked by negative attitudes towards writing tasks, often stemming from anxiety. This avoidance behaviour was evident in students seeking

opportunities to write essays outside of class or avoiding using English for writing tasks.

Similarly, somatic anxiety, characterized by physiological symptoms like increased heart rate and tension, was observed in students who reported experiencing physical symptoms such as a pounding heart when they began to write an English essay. Somatic anxiety was the least experienced type of anxiety among students, with 33.5% of participants reporting its occurrence during English essay writing.

Factors related to writing an english essay anxiety

The interview data provided deeper insights into the factors that contribute to students' writing anxiety. The identified factors are elaborated upon through excerpts from the interviews as follows:

Linguistic difficulties emerged as a prominent factor contributing to anxiety. Many participants admitted their weaknesses in grammar, language structure, and vocabulary, which hindered their writing proficiency. This deficiency in linguistic skills intensified their anxiety, particularly when attempting to initiate essay writing. This finding is similar to the study of Kusumaningputri et al. (2018) who found that language difficulties, time pressure, and insufficient writing practice are the causes of students' anxiety in writing.

Excerpt 1:

"My main anxiety factor in writing is my weakness in linguistics, especially grammar because I still don't understand the structure of the language in English, so this also makes it difficult for me to start writing English essays." - Student 10

Excerpt 2:

"When writing English essays, I often forget about the structure or guidelines for writing an English essay. This also makes me anxious when I intend to write an English essay." – Student 7

Apart from grammar elements, other respondents also expressed anxiety arising from weak English vocabulary mastery.

Excerpt 3:

"One more thing that causes me anxiety in creating English essays is my lack of vocabulary mastery in English." – Student 7

Notably, linguistic difficulties emerged as a central factor. Students reported struggling with English grammar, language structure, and vocabulary, which collectively impeded their

ability to express themselves effectively. This factor resonates with prior research, where linguistic challenges were identified as a common source of writing anxiety (Rezaei and Jafari, 2014). In addition, 'grammar problem becomes the most mentioned cause of anxiety followed by vocabulary problem and insufficient writing practice' (Hartono & Maharani, 2019)

Low self-confidence played a significant role in students' anxiety during English essay writing. Many participants expressed feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and shame in comparison to their peers' work. This lack of confidence impacted their ability to initiate and complete their writing tasks. Such low self-confidence hindered students from focusing on their work and led to avoidance behaviour.

Excerpt 4:

"I lack confidence in what I create because I feel inferior compared to the works of my friends. When I see the written works of other friends, I feel that theirs are very good and mine must be flawed." - Student 8

Excerpt 5:

"I have low self-confidence, especially in terms of feeling embarrassed. I'm embarrassed to write English essays because I'm not very skilled, which makes me anxious and apprehensive to start. This leads me to feel nervous about beginning it, ultimately causing me to have a dislike for writing English essays." – Student 6

Furthermore, fear of negative evaluation emerged as another significant factor causing anxiety among students. Many participants worried about receiving feedback from teachers/ lecturers and peers, particularly negative feedback and low scores on their essays. This fear, coupled with the pressure to produce flawless work, exacerbated students' writing anxiety. These findings align with previous research that highlighted teachers' feedback, self-confidence, and linguistic knowledge as key contributors to writing anxiety (Rezaei and Jafari, 2014).

Excerpt 6:

"I often feel afraid of the lecturer's or friends' assessment of the essays that I make, because I am not ready to receive a response from them, especially if the response is negative". - Student 1

Excerpt 7:

"I feel uncomfortable when I write English essays, and when I find out that my work will be

evaluated by the lecturer, I start experiencing an extraordinary amount of fear, even though I don't yet know whether they will provide a positive or negative assessment." – Student 2

Excerpt 8:

"Waiting for the assessment response from the lecturer makes me very anxious. I don't know why this happens, but that's what I feel." – Student 1

Excerpt 9:

"The feeling of fear that my essay will be evaluated is something I often experience because one of the reasons is that I'm afraid of being wrong in what I've written." – Student 4

Excerpt 10:

"I would feel more comfortable if the essay I write would not be judged or evaluated by my lecturer, and usually, when it's like that, the quality of my writing is better." – Student 3

The pressure to achieve perfection emerged as a notable factor intensifying students' anxiety. The compulsion to produce flawless work, coupled with minimal errors, engendered discomfort and heightened anxiety levels among students. This self-imposed pursuit of perfection proved to be anxiety-inducing.

Excerpt 11:

"The feeling of having to produce perfect writing works very often happens to me, in my mind, I always have to create writing that has minimal errors, things like this make me anxious and tired." - Student 9

In conclusion, the study uncovered cognitive anxiety as the dominant type of writing anxiety among students, driven by concerns about external evaluations and others' perceptions. Linguistic difficulties, low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and pressure for perfection were identified as major factors contributing to students' writing anxiety. These findings underscore the complex interplay of personal and external factors that shape students' experiences of anxiety when writing English essays. Addressing these factors through targeted interventions and support mechanisms could potentially alleviate students' writing anxiety and enhance their writing performance.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate English essay writing anxiety among fifth-semester students in

the English Department at Universitas Syiah Kuala. Writing anxiety is recognized as a significant challenge hindering writing skill enhancement. With this in mind, the researchers set out to explore the types and factors of writing anxiety experienced by students.

The study's two research questions focused on identifying the prevalent types of writing anxiety and uncovering the factors contributing to this anxiety. To answer these questions, the researcher utilized a questionnaire adapted from Cheng (2004) and an interview guideline from Razei and Jafari's (2014) Causes of Writing Anxiety Inventory (CWAI). The questionnaires were distributed to 34 fifth-semester students in the English Department, and the interviews were conducted with 10 of them. All of whom responded comprehensively.

The results indicated that cognitive anxiety was the most prevalent type of writing anxiety among fifth-semester students, with a score of 43.5%. This finding underlined that a considerable portion of students experienced anxiety when writing English essays due to concerns about others' perceptions and expectations. The study also identified four main factors contributing to writing anxiety: linguistic difficulties, low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and pressure for perfection. Students grappled with linguistic challenges, struggled with self-confidence, occasionally feared negative evaluations, and at times felt pressured to achieve perfection in their work.

In summary, the study effectively addressed its research questions, revealing the existence of writing anxiety among fifth-semester students in the English Department at Universitas Syiah Kuala. Cognitive anxiety emerged as the predominant type, linked to concerns about external perceptions. The study also highlighted the primary factors causing writing anxiety. Linguistic difficulties, low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and the desire for perfection all played significant roles.

As a result, several recommendations arise from this research. Firstly, students learning a foreign language are advised to evaluate their own writing anxiety and develop strategies to manage it. Secondly, English teachers should acknowledge the types and factors of students' writing anxiety and adopt strategies to alleviate or minimize this anxiety, thereby enhancing students' writing proficiency. Lastly, future researchers interested in this topic are encouraged to refer to this study as a reference or a source of inspiration for their research endeavours. Moreover, future studies

could explore different aspects of writing anxiety, such as investigating teachers' strategies to mitigate students' writing anxiety.

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