



## **Alleviating EFL Students' Writing Anxiety: Focusing on Indonesian University Teachers' Strategies**

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### **Introduction**

Teaching writing in an EFL university context may be a daunting task for teachers. It is because many complexities align in the writing process during the class. One of the major issues discussed in the teaching of EFL writing is students' writing anxiety. Previous research has shown that writing anxiety among university students includes as a psychological barrier. Therefore, teachers play a significant role in alleviating students' writing anxiety. The present study looked at how three Indonesian university teachers employ strategies in diminishing their students' writing anxiety. With this aim in mind, the teachers were invited for semi-structured interviews of about 45 to 60 minutes. Thematic analysis was employed for analyzing the interview data. Our findings, which are explained through linguistic difficulties, topical knowledge, feedback, and writing tests, suggest that the participants employed multiple strategies in response to the students' knowledge and learning characteristics. They also considered students' informed learning conditions to enact appropriate strategies. This empirical evidence can be a catalyst for writing teachers to deal with students' writing anxiety in the class.

### **Literature Review**

Writing anxiety has been defined as a condition where students have negative emotions and avoid writing activities. Several decades ago, Daly termed writing anxiety as writing apprehension (Daly, 1979). Since then, there has been a great interest among scholars to research this topic. Looking back to what Cheng et al. (1999) contended, language anxiety (LA) is associated with general anxiety issues in language learning, instead of skill specific anxiety. Several factors that contribute to the development of EFL students' writing anxiety are self-confidence, language proficiency, and gender (Cheng, 2002; 2004a). Since these factors are associated with a psychological lens, Cheng (2004b) developed a scale of measurement known as the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) to explore the types



and levels of writing anxiety. Recently, the SLWAI has been used by scholars to investigate how students experience anxiety in terms of its level and type (see Jawas, 2019; Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Zhang, 2011)

Theoretically, writing anxiety emerges due to lack of linguistic competence, background knowledge, low self-confidence, feeling worried of peers' and teachers' negative evaluation, as well as time allotment and test practice constraints (Cheng, 2002; Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017; Zhang, 2011). Interestingly, recent investigation portrayed that the most dominant factor influencing students' writing anxiety is an in-class assignment, and that, most of the students experienced cognitive-based anxiety which deals with their mental changes, such as fear of negative evaluation and perception resulting in high anxiety when asked to write compositions (Cheng, 2002; Jawas, 2019; Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017). Furthermore, other previous studies have suggested that writing anxiety is significantly correlated with students' writing performance. In other words, learners with higher levels of anxiety have low performance compared to students with lower anxiety (Erkan & Saban, 2011; Gibriel, 2019; Latif, 2015). In this regard, teachers are responsible for understanding students' anxiety in language learning (Zhang, 2011). Teachers are also encouraged to alleviate students' anxiety by designing non-threatening and supportive classroom activities such as identifying the students' types of anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

In a recent study, teachers reduced foreign language anxiety by giving more practice time, providing scaffolding and giving individual instruction (Chuang, 2019). In the context of EFL writing courses, other scholars have done empirical studies to reduce students' writing anxiety such as using the writing process approach (Bayat, 2014), pre-writing (Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000), peer-feedback (Yastibas & Yastibas, 2015), and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and online resources (Zhang, 2019). Albeit many scholars have discussed both theoretical and practical findings in writing anxiety research, sparse attention is directed to exploring teachers' strategies in alleviating students' writing anxiety in higher education contexts.

Documenting university teachers' strategies in reducing students' writing anxiety is crucial. Their adherence to specific strategies based on students' learning conditions is expected to be a catalyst for EFL teachers to enact effective teaching in their writing classes. To address such an issue, the following research question was posited: How do Indonesian university teachers alleviate their students' writing anxiety?

## **Method**

### **Design**

This study draws on the qualitative data collected using semi-structured interviews and written communication through WhatsApp. Our aim was to portray how teachers alleviate students' writing anxiety since self-perceived strategies reported by the participating teachers in this project can be explored through interviews (Mackey & Gass, 2005), while informal communication through WhatsApp was used to clarify and emphasize responses given by the participants during the interview process.

### **Participants**

Three teachers (two females and one male) aged between 34-37 years old participated in this study. They were recruited because they have 3-9 years of experience in teaching writing. It is believed that the teachers have ample experiences and can select the appropriate teaching strategies for the students. One of the criteria to select the teachers in this study is that they have taught at least two writing courses at the time of the study commencement. To ensure anonymity, the participants' names were kept confidential with T1, T2, and T3.

## Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data collection in the present study was anchored from November to December 2019. Prior to conducting the interview, the objectives of the current study were explained to the teachers. In the interview, they were guided using some prompts, such as beliefs about sit-in writing exams, feedback, and teachers' awareness about writing anxiety and effective strategies to deal with students' writing anxiety. The interview was conducted several times to reach data saturation. The time allotment of the interview was between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in English and Indonesian language. The interview was done face-to-face and recorded. Furthermore, written communication through WhatsApp was also carried out to clarify unclear responses during the interview sessions. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thus, the data were organized under four themes: linguistic difficulties, topical knowledge, feedback, and writing tests.

## Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are explained into four emerging themes: 1) linguistic difficulties, 2) topical knowledge, 3) effective feedback, and 4) writing tests.

### Linguistic Difficulties

#### Integrating technology in writing class

T1 and T3 believed that in technological advancement, writing activities could not be separated from technological appliances, especially to help students cope with linguistic problems in terms of grammar and vocabulary during the writing process. It is depicted in the following excerpt:

*T1: This semester I ask my students to download Grammarly application because the main problem ... is to write grammatical sentences as they said to me, they're worried if they write many grammar errors.*

Suggesting the students use the online automated feedback of the *Grammarly* application in their writing classes could be a catalyst for sustained writing instruction. It is supported by O'Neill and Russell's (2019) study, revealing that students who explored the *Grammarly* program showed more positive responses for 60% of the survey items. It implies that they felt more satisfied with the feedback they received from *Grammarly* than those who did not use *Grammarly*. In another interview, T3 shared that:

*T3: I think it's quite easier for them to use gadgets (online dictionary) instead of using a paper-based dictionary. That is how I assist them in solving their anxiety inside the classroom due to limited vocabulary proficiency.*

T3's idea to use online dictionaries echoes Chon's (2008) argument, suggesting that electronic dictionaries can be used to solve students' linguistics problems during the writing process. Kuo (2008) previously added some useful online learning resources for writing, such as online translators, online dictionaries, phraseology, and word lists. Among those resources, online dictionaries are the most frequently used in writing activity (Jin, 2013; Sevik 2014). In a recent study, Nguyen (2020) reported that 60% of the students used ICT to study daily vocabulary, and 33% of them used ICT to help them write better. Furthermore, Yazdi (2014) reported a strong correlation between the frequency of using the online

dictionary and the proficiency of vocabulary learning. In favor with the recent findings, T3's idea of using ICT is considered a powerful tool in assisting students with a limited vocabulary list.

### **Setting the 'best' time for vocabulary and grammar focus**

Teachers in the present study set different time for giving a special focus on grammar and vocabulary. As in the interview, T1 conveyed that:

*T1: I provide them with a brief explanation of the patterns and an example of the use of present tense for an exploratory essay. And then I provide them vocabulary list related to the topic given.*

In contrast, T2 perceived that students should focus on content first, and then grammar check can be done in the editing phase after receiving and discussing the general errors made by students. In this regard, T2 shared that:

*T2: I do not think too much about grammar and vocabulary. I mean I ask the students to focus on the content first, and then they can revise grammar later based on my feedback. They can learn vocabulary through frequent reading activities.*

The differences among teachers of setting their 'best' time for grammar and vocabulary focus indicated that teachers bring their perception to the classroom practice. For instance, T2 and T3 decided not to give full attention on grammar because they believed that grammar can be revised outside the class; however, it contradicts with the findings that students prefer to be given feedback on their grammar and vocabulary instead of the content and organization (Nanni & Black, 2017).

## **Topical Knowledge**

### **Giving contextual topics**

The participating teachers in this research study shared familiar topics for students' tasks. If they are not familiar with the topics, teachers use video and social media to introduce the topics. In this case, students are allowed to select their preferred topics to write from videos and social media introduced by the teachers in the class. It is depicted in the interview with T1 and T3:

*T1: So, based on the video, they will get ideas about what to write just like in previous essay writing about a forest fire in Borneo in the surrounding.*

*T3: I read local issues on Twitter, watched trending topics on YouTube and Instagram, and then asked them to pick one topic.*

T3 believed that self-selected topics provide enjoyable learning experiences among students. In light of this finding, Bonyadi (2014) found that there is a significant difference between students who wrote an essay based on self-selected and teacher-assigned topics. Further, students perceived their writing activity positively when they are assigned to select their topic compared to teacher-assigned topics. The students become more motivated and encouraged to write (Bonyadi & Zeinalpur, 2014).

### **Generating ideas through discussion**

Empirical data from the interview portray that the teachers carried out classroom discussion in order that students exchanged their ideas one another and could decide the best topics to write. T2 explained that:

T2: *If the topic is unfamiliar, I invite them to use their imagination as if they were in that position, what happens if this issue happens to our area or our country. So, I think that it is pretty much helping the students' activity in gaining ideas of a particular topic.*

In the pre-writing stage, discussing the topic with their peers helps students create background knowledge and emphasize the importance of planning before writing. Central to this issue, Koga (2010) found that working with peers enhances students' sense of cooperativeness which can reduce anxiety.

### **Making use of online videos and academic articles as learning platforms**

The teachers in this study provided students with references and videos to understand their topics. The provision of such references and videos in writing instruction could lead students to have adequate knowledge of the topics. For instance, T1 and T2 conveyed that:

T1: *I give them video related to the topic. Based on the video, they will get ideas about what to write, just like in the previous essay, provide them with three videos, and ask them to give their opinion about the forest fire in Borneo.*

T2: *I usually provide them the links of online articles, while for a higher level of writing course, I introduced some academic journals.*

T1 and T2 shared similar ideas that online sources in any forms can facilitate the writing activities for the very first step, such as generating ideas. Online resources also provide a rich-language support that can lower anxiety. A recent study carried out by Zhang (2019) revealed that the integration of the Systemic Functional Linguistics technique and online resources reduce students' anxiety and offer knowledge they need during the writing process.

### **Practicing different types of pre-writing activities**

T1 and T3 emphasized the importance of the pre-writing stage before writing the full essay to help students organize their ideas. It is observed from the following excerpts of T1 and T3:

T1: *I discuss with the whole class about quality a great teacher must have and then ask them to write down the criteria on the whiteboard. Then I help them to classify each characteristic into a certain classification.*

T3: *I introduce them to several pre-writing activities such as free writing, clustering, listing technique, and so on.*

The pre-writing stage implemented in writing classes is beneficial to improve students' understanding of content, organization, and vocabulary choice. Furthermore, it can also enhance students' motivation and creativity in writing (O'Mealia, 2011).

## **Feedback**

### **Giving direct feedback**

The minimum use of effective feedback may also heighten students' writing anxiety. The participants of this study shared that feedback in writing can be given directly, in the forms of written, peer, individual, small group, and whole class feedback, as can be observed from the excerpts of T1 and T2:

T1: *I also have a kind of writing workshop activity. And I ask volunteers sometime in one meeting there will be two or three students to present their drafts.*

T2: *I do one by one consultation, although it is very time-consuming. It is not enough for one meeting to give all the students feedback in the face-to-face consultation but I have tried.*

T2 admitted that giving individual feedback is exhausting and time-consuming, but she has no choice. She keeps doing it as part of her responsibilities as a writing teacher. Writing teachers devote most of their time giving feedback in writing (Lee, 2019). In fact, teachers have practiced various kinds of feedback to help increase students' writing skill. For instance, written corrective feedback has been deemed appropriate for commenting on students' writing assignments (Yu et al, 2020).

### **Setting appropriate time for giving feedback**

T1 considered her emotion when giving feedback on students' writing tasks. She shared that:

T1: *Actually, teacher's expression always influences the students' affective side, therefore I will have a consultation with students if I'm in a good mood.*

Teachers' behavior affects students' emotions. Teachers who show positive behavior can influence students' perceptions toward language learning. This finding echoes Djafri and Wimbari's (2018) study which found that teachers' behavior significantly affects students' anxiety.

### **Using peer support**

Writing is considered as an individual activity. The interviews revealed that T1 and T2 implemented peer feedback to provide opportunities for students to learn from others. They conveyed that:

T1: *Usually, I ask my students to have a kind of proofreading activity with their peers or with their senior or anyone else. They can learn from each other.*

T2: *I ask them to do some peer correction for the students under the same topics, so they will not feel under pressure.*

The findings uncovered that the teachers implemented peer feedback in their writing classes. In response to this issue, there have been many studies suggesting that peer feedback could improve students' writing performance. Kusumaningrum et al. (2019), for example, confirmed that students' writing performance is improved after conducting peer feedback activity in the writing class. In their research, Tai et al. (2015) also found that peer feedback positively affects students' writing performance. In relation to this, students who could critically comment on their peer writing artifacts tend to achieve high scores in the writing assignments (Yalch et al., 2019).

### **Writing Tests**

In response to the students' writing achievement, the teachers agreed that they performed better in a non-sit-in exam since they were not under pressure. As all the teachers become more experienced in teaching writing, they gradually altered the way how they measure the students' writing performance. T1 is aware of anxiety symptoms during a timed-test and T3 believed that writing is a process. It is depicted in the interview with T1 and T3:

T1: *A few years ago, I provide them with on-the-spot essay test. So, I used to give them a certain topic directly in the timed-test. But I think it is not good for them because I used to see their worries and confusion. It can be said that they are quite stressed.*

T3: *So far, I never give a timed-test anymore. Because writing is about the process, so I think it is not correct for me to give them writing score if only one timed-test.*

The teachers' responses indicated that they are aware of students' anxiety. Thereby, to minimize such feelings, they created a non-provoking anxiety environment by giving a take-home exam for the students. It is done to reduce the writing anxiety of the students. The approach used in this context indicates that writing activity involves cognitive and emotional aspects as discussed by Erkan and Saban (2011).

## Conclusion

This study documents strategies employed by Indonesian university teachers in reducing their students' writing anxiety. Findings suggest that teachers used multiple strategies in alleviating their students' writing anxiety. Teachers allow the students to use an online dictionary and 'Grammarly' application to deal with their linguistic problems. Since writing unfamiliar topics may cause tension, teachers, therefore, selected contextual topics, the teachers then scaffold students' background knowledge through discussion, videos, references, and pre-writing activities. The teachers also tried to provide affective feedback in their writing classes. Students are also encouraged to engage in peer feedback activities. Teachers in this study gave oral and written feedback and focused more on the content than on grammatical features. Lastly, the writing test was given in the form of a take-home format to minimize negative feeling among students. In general, teachers deployed variant strategies in their writing classrooms. In particular, efforts to diminish students' writing anxiety are solely based on the students' situated learning conditions. Teachers learned from their past experiences that writing exams cause unstable emotions. They decided to give a take-home exam with different concepts. Although the strategies found in this study are not uncommon, the results encourage EFL writing teachers to consider students' learning conditions for better writing activities. Further research could examine teachers' strategies to alleviate other possible causes of anxiety which have not been covered in this study, such as coping students' writing anxiety due to low self-confidence and limited writing practices. Also, the use of multiple case study design would enrich the data collection.

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