

# Survey on EFL Students' Writing Anxiety: Level, Types, and Causes

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**Abstract.** This study attempts to investigate the EFL learners' writing anxiety. Being more specific, the researcher was interested to measure the EFL learners' writing anxiety levels, to find out types of writing anxieties (i.e., Somatic Anxiety, Cognitive Anxiety, Avoidance Behavior), and elaborate the triggering factors of writing anxiety. The research subjects were 28 students who registered for Essay Writing in English Study Program; Two different questionnaires were administered to gather the data; SLWAI questionnaire designed by Cheng (2004) and another questionnaire developed by Zhang (2011). To investigate the level of writing anxiety and its types, the data from the SLWAI questionnaire were analyzed and calculated to find the mean. Moreover, to find out the causes of writing anxiety, the data from the second questionnaire were ranked from 1-7 based on the most chosen items. The findings showed that students experience high level of anxiety ( $M=65.86$ ,  $>65$ ). Then the most common type of anxiety was Cognitive Anxiety, and the mean score is 23.9 in which it was the highest of all the types. Furthermore, linguistics difficulties (82%), lack of topical knowledge (68%), and insufficient writing technique (60%) were the dominant sources of students' writing anxiety

**Keywords:** *EFL students, writing anxiety (level, types, and cause)*

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## INTRODUCTION

Some researches regarding the writing ability have been done in some different settings. First, a research entitled *Students' Difficulties in Writing English (A Study at The Third Semester Students of English Education Program at University of Bengkulu Academic Year 2011-2012)* by Pratiwi (2011), stated that students faced many difficulties in writing including linguistics difficulty (language use and vocabulary aspects) as the most difficult one, followed by Physiology Difficulty (content aspect) and Cognitive Difficulty (organization and mechanics aspects). Second, very close findings were also found by Fareed, et. Al (2016) that mentioned many Pakistani undergraduate ESL students failed in writing class because they experience writing anxiety, they were lack of linguistic proficiency (including command over grammar, syntax and vocabulary), reliance on L1, weak structure organization, and lack of ideas. Third, Toba et. Al. (2019) who wrote a research article entitled "the current issues of Indonesian e students' writing skills: ability, problem, and reason in writing comparison and contrast essay" explained that some of 52 EFL students of IAIN Samarinda who enrolled the academic essay writing course encountered problems in writing aspects including organization, content, vocabulary, mechanics, and grammar. Their reasons in experiencing these problems are not only limited knowledge of writing aspects and comparison and contrast essay itself, but also they had own personal reasons such as: writing dislike, lack of writing practice, negative writing perception, writing anxiety, low writing motivation, inadequate teaching writing process taught by their lecturers, and also insufficient time given in writing test. Considering those researches, it is understood that writing is considered a demanding task to do especially for EFL learners.

Writing has always been regarded plays an essential role in a language learning. English students will have to do various writing-related activities during their study. They are often assigned to answer open-ended questions, write papers, write a research report/thesis, and so forth. Students will get ease in completing those tasks if they have good writing ability. In fact, students commonly faced some difficulties in expressing their ideas in English because of limited vocabulary, inappropriate diction, inability to organize paragraph, grammatical problems, and psychological problem like anxiety (Rahmatunisa, 2014; Ariyati & Fitriana, 2017; Hasan & Marzuki, 2017; Mojica, 2010; & Chen, 2002).

Those problems lead to another serious problem, as so called, writing anxiety. Writing anxiety is generally understood to have negative meaning, such nervousness, fear, worry. Writing anxiety has been a research subject for many years since anxiety has been an important research subject in ESL/EFL studies. Krashen (1982:31) proposed that some affective variables; such as self-confidence, motivation, and anxiety play a prominent role in the Second Language acquisition (SLA).

Many researchers have found that students' writing anxiety depicted negative correlation with the students' writing performance. This situation has been depicted by some researches such in Rahmatunisa (2014) research which states that students anxiety reduce students performance in writing. Fitriana et. Al (2018) mentioned that anxiety showed negative correlation with writing achievement. In

other words, students who experience high level of writing anxiety tend to have low writing performance (Daudet.al (2005); & Zhang (2011) because they often find difficulties in generating ideas and tend to produce grammatical errors, moreover when they are situated in a timed writing activity.

This study is conducted to answer the researcher's curiosity about the students' writing anxiety when students are assigned to write English written text. In her class, the researcher has applied some teaching writing techniques, such as writing conference, peer-editing, writing conference, writing workshop, and error analysis. In addition, the researcher always gives detail feedback on her students' work with the hope that it can enhance students' writing skills, for during their study they will have to do many related-writing activities. However, most students still repeat identical errors in their composition (Sarfaz, 2011). Wahyuni et. Al. (2013) also mentioned that students tend to repeat the errors since it had been focalized. Seeing those facts, this researcher is interested to do a research with the present topic. This study has three objectives: (1) to measure the students' anxiety level, (2) to reveal the types of anxiety that they experience, and (3) to find out the cause of students' writing anxiety.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Writing anxiety**

Students should have great writing ability to communicate ideas to the readers. As writing is a demanding task, students often experience writing anxiety when they write English composition. Writing anxiety may prevent students to produce a good piece of writing. Petzel & Wenzel (1993, as cited in Armendaris, 2009) defined writing anxiety as negative reaction which appears on someone psychology when writing a text. This situation influenced both psychological and physiological components. The psychological evidences are experiencing fear, anxiety, dread and other. The physiological evidences are seen as having stomachache, trembling, sweating, and headache.

The previous statement is in line with Cheng (2004) subscales in Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) questionnaire. This questionnaire covers three categories, Cognitive Anxiety, Avoidance Behavior, and Somatic Anxiety. Cognitive Anxiety is related with psychological component (anxiety, worry, fear), while Somatic Anxiety is related with physiological changes when one experiences anxiety (heart pounding, trembling, and panic)

### **Types of writing anxiety**

As mentioned earlier, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) falls into some categories, they are Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety, and Avoidance Behavior. Cognitive anxiety is related to mental changes when people experience anxiety. Cheng (2004:316) defined that Cognitive Anxiety "refers to the mental aspect of anxiety experience, including negative expectations, preoccupation with performance, and concern about others' perceptions". Somatic Anxiety is anxiety which shows by the bodily symptoms, such as unpleasant feeling as a result of anxiety experience (Cheng, 2004:316). In other words, it refers to

physical changes in the body that occur when people experience anxiety. It is commonly contrasted with Cognitive Anxiety due to their different symptoms (e.g. fear, worry). The last type of anxiety is Avoidance Behavior. It refers to behavioral aspect of anxiety experience, such as avoidance of writing (Cheng, 2004:317).

### **Sources of writing anxiety**

English as Foreign Language writing requires students to have good adequate knowledge of the writing and the language as well. Having sufficient knowledge will lead them to have perfect writing skill. Writing is a skill; therefore it is necessarily for students to get enough practice in and outside the class. So, their writing skill will develop gradually. However, students still meet it is hard to express thought in English because of some factors. Some studies have tried to investigate the causes of writing anxiety. Aljafen (2013: 54) pointed out some sources of writing anxiety are poor confidence in learning English, teacher's evaluation, and scientific terminology. These findings support the previous research conducted by Latif (in Aljafen, 2013:15), he defined several sources of writing anxiety, such as low foreign language self-esteem, lack of linguistics knowledge, fear of criticism and other's negative evaluation.

### **Previous studies**

Many studies have been done to investigate EFL writing anxiety by using various approaches. The first study was conducted by Zhang (2011). He conducted a research on writing anxiety in more comprehensive way compare to the current study. He investigated the level, types, and cause of writing anxiety for Chinese English majors (freshmen and sophomores). Furthermore, he wanted to prove whether writing anxiety affect negatively or positively on students' writing performance. More to that, his study exploited what the learning and teaching strategies can be implemented effectively to deal with ESL writing anxiety. The findings of the study explained: (1) Chinese English major students experienced high level of ESL writing anxiety and freshmen experienced lower level of anxiety than sophomores. (2) the most dominant writing anxiety that was experienced by freshmen and sophomores was Cognitive anxiety, and then it was followed by Avoidance Behavior and Somatic Anxiety. (3) The finding indicated that students' writing anxiety showed correlated negatively with students' course achievements. (4) The causes of writing anxiety are insufficient writing practice, linguistic difficulties, fear of test (TEM), a low self-confidence, and lack of topical knowledge.

Another study regarding the writing anxiety was done by Huwari and Aziz (2011). The result of the study stated that (1) Most of the Jordanian postgraduate students in UMM experienced high level of writing anxiety, (2) there was a positive relationship between socio-economic status and age with writing apprehension, and (3) the big percentage of the respondents expressed most apprehensive when they wrote their thesis.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Approach and Design

This research employ quantitative and qualitative data as stated by Cohen et al. (2000:190) that the nature of the data, type, and technique of analysis in case study at one point typically qualitative while at the other typically quantitative data due to characteristic of the data. Based on the objective and the problems of this research, the writer decided to use survey study method. Survey study involves systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, to permit the research to effectively understand how the process and how the conclusion of the research.

### Participants

The participants who joined the research were second semester students of English Education Study Program at State Islamic University, Mataram that joined essay writing class. There were 28 students that consisted of 16 females and 12 males. In the previous semester, they had taken paragraph writing course; therefore they are considered as the most suitable subjects, for they had adequate writing experience. To obtain the research data, the researcher distributed questionnaires to them.

### Research instruments

The researcher used of two different questionnaires to collect data:

#### *Questionnaire I: The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI)*

The Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was introduced by Cheng (2004). It was used to measure the students' writing anxiety and its level. In addition, it is considered valid and reliable to be used in this research, for many writing anxiety studies have used this questionnaire. This questionnaire contained of twenty two items, and it was categorized into three (Cognitive Anxiety, Avoidance Behavior, and Somatic Anxiety). The items distributions are as follows, Cognitive Anxiety (1,3,7,9,14,17,20,21), Avoidance Behavior (4,5,10,12,16,18,22), and Somatic Anxiety (2,6,8,11,13,15,19). The SLWAI is a five-point Likert response scale. The SLWAI contains some response categories that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Out of twenty two items, the five items (1, 4, 17, 18, 22) were worded negatively and needed to be reversed to score before being summed up to yield total score.

#### *Questionnaire II – The Causes of students' writing anxiety*

The second writing anxiety questionnaire was adapted from Zhang (2011). This questionnaire was used to check why students experienced anxiety in writing. The original questionnaire consists of 8 questions (linguistic difficulties, lack of topical knowledge, insufficient writing practice, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, insufficient writing technique, fear of tests, and lack of effective feedback). The researcher excluded question about fear of TEM (Test for college English Major) as numbered 8 since this question did not match with Indonesia context. Therefore, the researcher only included the seven questions in the second questionnaire.

### Data analysis

To measure the level of writing anxiety, the obtained data from the SLWAI questionnaire is analyzed and calculated to find the mean. According to Cheng (2004) in Wahyuni and Umam (2017), the mean score above 65 points indicates a high level of writing anxiety, the mean below 50 points indicate a low level of writing anxiety, and the mean score in-between 50-65 indicated a moderate level of writing anxiety.

- 1) To reveal the types of writing anxiety, the obtained data from SLWAI questionnaire is analyzed and calculated to find the mean score for each category. As mentioned earlier in the research instrument that the SLWAI questionnaire is divided into three categories; Cognitive Anxiety (1,3,7,9,14,17,20,21), Avoidance Behavior (4,5,10,12,16,18,22), and Somatic Anxiety (2,6,8,11,13,15,19).
- 2) To investigate some causes of students' writing anxiety, the seven causes of anxiety were ranked from one to seven which were based on the number of students chose the items and turn into a percentage.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Level of writing anxiety

In order to find out the level of writing anxiety, the researcher analyzed and calculated the obtained data from SLWAI questionnaire which consists of 22 items. As mentioned earlier in the research methodology, the questionnaire is a five-point Likert response scale. Table 1 show that the mean score of level of writing anxiety is 65.86. Due to the mean score is above 65 points ( $M=65.86$ ,  $>65$ ), it can be concluded that students experience high level of writing anxiety.

**Table 1.** Level of Writing Anxiety

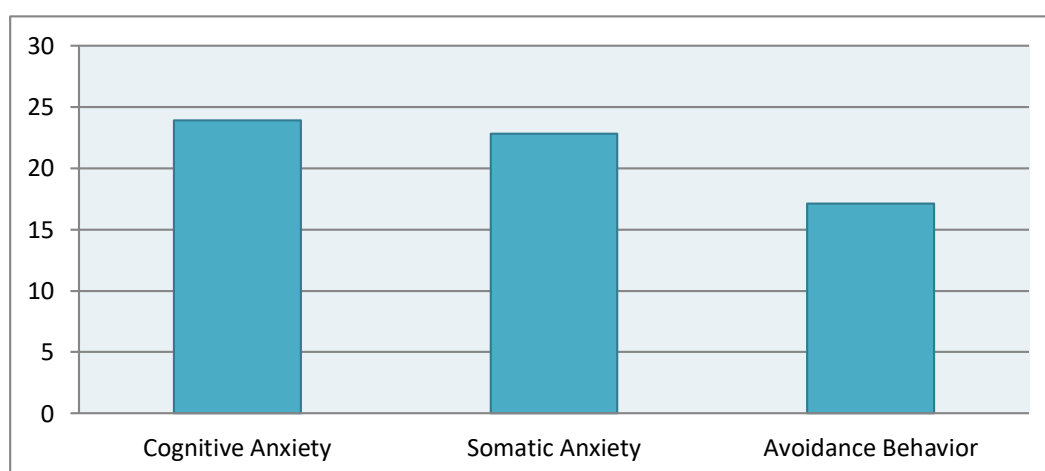
Number of students	Total Score	Mean
28	1844	65.86

The result of the current study is in line other researchers' findings in ESL/EFL context. Even though Zhang's study concerned of comparing the writing anxiety between freshmen and sophomore, in general it is found that there is high level of ESL writing anxiety among Chinese English major. It is proved by the mean score for the overall participant is higher than 65 ( $M=66.49$ ,  $>65$ ). In addition, sophomores ( $M=70.57$ ) experience higher level of anxiety than freshmen ( $M=62.57$ ). Other study conducted by Huwari and Aziz (2011) revealed that the majority of Jordanian postgraduate students (71.8%) at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) experience high level of writing anxiety. The similar condition was also found in a research that was conducted by Sriwahyuni and Umam (2017) that mentioned 54% among fifty English students at the fourth semester in Islamic State College in East Java, Indonesia experienced high level of writing anxiety and 44% of them experienced moderate level of writing anxiety.

It is obvious that teaching writing not only a demanding task to do but also requires teachers to be creative. Seeing this fact, teachers need to be aware of their students' high level of writing anxiety. The result of questionnaire shows that students faced high level of writing anxiety when they are asked to write English composition. They tend to feel panic, stuck, and their heart pounding when they have to write English composition under time constraints. Furthermore, they feel worry about getting poor grade when their English composition to be evaluated. As an alternative way to lower students' high writing anxiety, it is better for teachers not to ask their students to produce a piece of writing under time constraint. Since writing needs very long process, students should be given adequate time to complete their writing assignment by following the writing steps before it is finally scored. Regarding the students' fear of getting poor grade, teachers should vary their teaching techniques. They can implement ungraded writing activities. Sharp (1997, as cited in Rima, 2013) proposed five classroom teaching techniques to exploit ungraded writing activities, such as free writing, analysis/response papers, sample paper revision with comparison to a model, draft with individual conference, and journals. Ungraded writing activities are believed to be able to help students to encounter panic when they are assigned to write English composition.

### Types of writing anxiety

Figure 1 represents the research findings for the types of writing anxiety. It is clearly shown that most students experienced Cognitive Anxiety when they write English composition. It is proved by the mean score (23.9) in which it is the highest of all types. Somatic Anxiety is the second common type of writing anxiety that experienced by the students, and the mean score is 22.8. The least type of writing anxiety experienced by students is Avoidance Behavior (Mean=17.1).



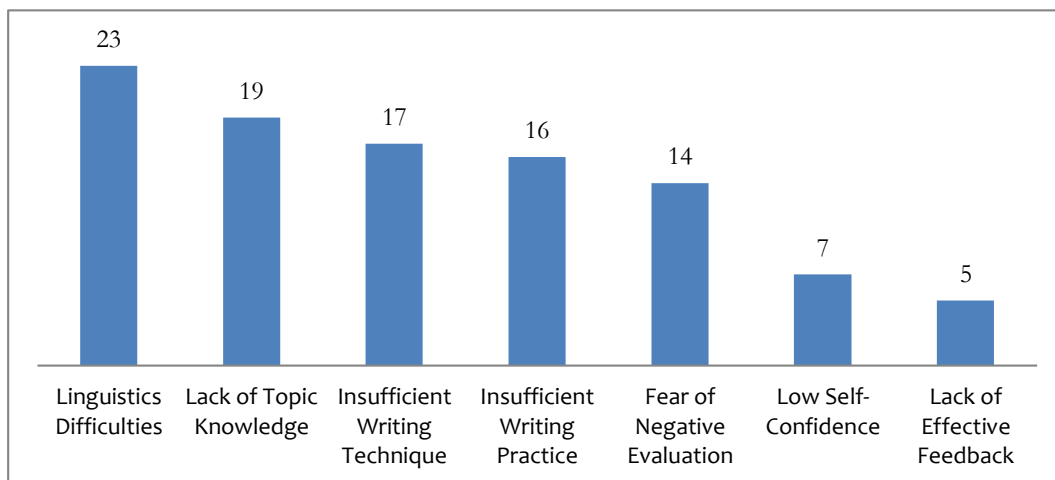
**Figure 1.** Types of Writing Anxiety

Compare to the findings of a study conducted by Zhang (2011), the most common types of writing anxiety are identical. Both studies found that most of the participants experienced Cognitive Anxiety when they write English composition. They often feel nervous when they are asked to write English composition, feel

worry of negative evaluation for the composition either from the teachers or classmates, and are afraid of getting poor grade. It is obvious that when students have high writing anxiety, it is difficult for them to produce a good piece of writing. Furthermore, they also found that the higher the anxiety the lower the essay writing performance is. In contrast, the lower the anxiety the higher the performance in language-related activity is (Daudet.al, 2005).

### Causes of Writing Anxiety

Figure 2 presents the finding from the questionnaire II adapted from Zhang (2011). 23 students (82%) faced some linguistics difficulties when they have to write English composition, such as lack of vocabulary and grammatical errors. 19 students (68%) reported that they sometimes have no idea about the topic and what to write, particularly when they have to write English composition under time constraint. 17 students (60%) thought that they do not have sufficient writing techniques. 16 students (57%) admitted that they are lack of writing practice inside and outside classroom. 14 students (50%) feel afraid of negative evaluation of their English composition from their teacher and classmates. 7 students (25%) believed that their writing skill does not improve which makes them feel upset. 5 students (18%) thought that the teacher's feedback on their English composition is insufficient and ineffective.



**Figure 2.** Causes of Writing Anxiety

Since English is a foreign language in Indonesia, it is unsurprising that the majority of the participants (82%) reported that the source of their writing anxiety is their linguistics-related problems, such as inadequacy mastery of vocabulary and sentence structure. Vocabulary and grammar are essential components in writing. In order to produce comprehensive piece of writing, students should have wide range of vocabulary, and they should be able to use appropriate diction for a particular context. Furthermore, grammar is also important for writing. Baleghizadeh and Gordani (2012:160) argued that “the application of accurate grammar is an important aspect of any good piece of writing”. 68% of the participants usually have no idea about the topic and what to write, in particular



when I write English compositions under time constraint. Writing in class under time pressure was anxiety-producing for students. A statement from ESL learners in Armendaris's research (2009:90), Then said that "I look at the clock every two minutes. Then I forgot what I have to write." For him, writing under time pressure is stressful. Insufficient writing technique is the third most chosen source of anxiety by 60% of the participants. Writing is a skill that can only be developed by having frequent practices in and outside the classroom. Therefore, many instructors often serve their students with numerous writing assignments in order to enhance their students' writing skill. However, teacher should realize that students often feel uneasy to produce smooth flow of ideas when they know that their writing to be evaluated because they are worry of getting poor grade. So, the instructors may implement some ungraded writing activities to lower students' writing anxiety and at the same time increasing students' writing skill.

## CONCLUSION

The result of the present study showed that most of the EFL students in English Study Program, State Islamic University of Mataram students experienced high level of writing anxiety which it was clear to insist teacher to be creative in helping them to cope it. The present study also reveals that the most dominant type writing anxiety was cognitive anxiety. The second most dominant type of anxiety was somatic anxiety and avoidance behavior was the third most. The last was the discovery on the main causes of students' writing anxiety. The most dominant one was linguistics difficulties as it appeared from the questionnaire result. The second most influential causes of anxiety in writing was lack of topic knowledge and was followed by insufficient writing technique. The least cause of anxiety toward students writing was the lack of effective feedback. This research is far for perfectness, it is expected that further researchers will do in-depth research on writing anxiety in EFL context (especially Indonesian context), such as comparing the high and low students' level and type of anxiety and its effect on students' writing performance, investigating the EFL learners 'writing anxiety when they write thesis, and developing instructional material for teaching writing that can lower students' high anxiety

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