Students' essay writing anxiety: A narrative study of Indonesian tertiary EFL learners

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Recent years, numerous studies across the world have examined EFL learners' writing anxiety through their writing test. Yet, there is limited study on investigating learners' anxiety in essay writing, particularly contextualized in Indonesia. Viewed from the lens of narrative study, this article explores the lived-experience of the university students' essay writing anxiety situated in a private university in the eastern Java, Indonesia. Two students enrolled in "Critical Essay Writing" Course (KBI112) volunteered to be involved in the study. Grounded in the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as an analytic lens, findings indicate that the major factors significantly contribute to learners' essay writing anxiety include: low level writing skill and confidence; learners' self-efficacy; self-esteem; lack of grammatical knowledge; gender; instructor's negative feedback; and writing motivation level. Empirical data also reveals that the students with higher writing anxiety level tend to produce low quality writing products and vice versa. This empirical evidence suggests that both teachers and students are highly required to intensify their efforts to create positive learning environment that can make the students to manage their feelings so that they can produce the better quality of essay writing products. This article also discusses pedagogical implications for classrooms and further research, limitations and recommendations.

Keywords: EFL learners' essay writing anxiety, Narrative inquiry, Tertiary-level education.

INTRODUCTION

Writing anxiety can be termed as manifestation of learners' dispositional attitudes (Riffe & Stacks, 1992), negative feelings, beliefs, or behaviors that disturb learners to complete some parts of their writing process (McLeod, 1987; Wynne et al., 2014). It is not only experienced by those who have poor writing skills but also those who are capable to write (McLeod, 1987). For some scholars, age, gender, learners' writing ability (McLeod, 1987), writing strategies (Salovey, 1990), and linguistic insecurity (Holland, 2014) are the dominant factors contributing to shaping these negative feelings. Similarly, a recent study (Lubis & Rahmawati, 2019) also claimed that such situation can reduce writing productivity and hinder learners' potential to achieve a successful English writing performance. For some scholars, writing anxiety has a negative relationship with learners' writing performance and competency (Daly & Miller, 1975; Faigley et al., 1981). For those who have the greater anxious feeling, they tend to produce lower-quality writing text (Zabihi et al., 2018) which might lead the students to avoid writing practice and feedback as anxiety can prevent them to develop their academic competences (Teichman & Poris, 1989).

In English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) domain, writing anxiety has become an attractive issue for many researchers around the world such as in Egypt (Latif, 2012; Waer, 2021), Iran (Zabihi, 2018), Iraq (Sabti et al., 2019), KSA (Alfarwan, 2022), Taiwan (Y. Cheng, 2002), China (Lew & Y. Tang, 2017), Turkey (Arici & Kaldirim, 2015; Yaman, 2010), and the USA (Harris & Grandgenett, 1992; Huerta et al., 2017; Jones, 2008; Sanders-reio et al., 2014).

They reported empirical data with respect to the key factors, either originated from affective or cognitive domain (Tomlinson, 1981), causing learners' writing anxiety as well as highlighting its negative impact on learners' writing has been well documented as well.

More specifically, those literary works have also reported several major factors causing anxiety among learners during their essay writing processes. Those factors include learners' low level of self-efficacy (Huerta et al., 2017; Sabti, 2019; Sanders-reio et al., 2014; Wilson & Roscoe, 2019; Zabihi, 2018), learners' self-esteem (Arnold, 1999; Hassan, 2001; Stephens et al., 2021; Wynne et al., 2014), self-beliefs (Jones, 2008), learners' negative self-perception (Y. Cheng, 2002), writing motivation (Hidi & Boscolo, 2007; Saghafi et al., 2017; Waer, 2021), lack of a linguistic skill (Latif, 2012), and writing strategic ability (Alfarwan, 2022). Meanwhile, some previous studies claimed that vocabulary mastery (Latif, 2012), low of reading interest (Huang, 2015), afraid of taking risks, introvert identity, negative classroom atmosphere, and passive interaction (Arnold, 1999) have been considered as the contributing factors in causing learners' writing anxiety.

As mentioned earlier, although learners' writing anxiety has been widely researched in various contexts, there is still limited empirical evidence on investigating learners' writing anxiety particularly carried out in essay writing course contextualized in Indonesian EFL tertiary-level education. To fill this void, this study aimed to explore learners' writing anxiety during essay writing process. Hence, this present study will practically contribute to provide valuable information for EFL teachers about their students' feelings regarding their anxiety in essay writing course that can lead them to anticipate and mitigate all possible hindrances the students encountered. This study was addressed to answer this following question, "What kind of negative feelings that students tend to have during their writing process?"

METHOD

Design

Grounded on constructivism/interpretivism (Creswell, 2014; Schwandt, 2007) research paradigm, this qualitative-narrative research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995) aimed to explore the students' anxiety in writing essay contextualized at a private university in the eastern of Java, Indonesia. The consideration of using this research design is that a narrative inquiry characterized and focused on the phenomena of participants' experience and provided a comprehensive understanding (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this study, this method could help us to explore the unique thoughts of the participants' stories about their essay writing anxiety through systematic exploration as well as explicating the meaning of their experiences to the others.

In addition, this method allowed the narrative inquirers to generate new distinctive and unique knowledge from the individuals as the participants (James, 2018) and organize their life stories in sequential order to provide a clear data presentation (Creswell, 2013).

Research Context and Participants

We employed purposive sampling technique (Ivankova et al., 2006; Jupp, 2006) to recruit the participants in the study since we have particular predefined objects we want to seek. In other words, we selected the participants based on the particular criteria suited to the research issues. More specifically, since the aim of the study is to explore undergraduate EFL learners' writing anxiety during essay writing process, the potential participants in this study need to be undergraduate EFL learners which have or are currently undertaking essay writing course. Additionally, to portray the rich opinions of the participants, they need to have many experiences in essay writing by performing exceptionally well in essay writing course.

For the participants' recruitment processes, we adopted the ethical procedures of qualitative research by Hammersley and Traianou (2012). At the initial stage, we convened the meeting with every potential participant. We sent out the invitation via emails and phone calls. Several targeted participants declined the invitation for various reasons. In the meeting, we explained the nature of our research, detailed an informed consent form sheets consisted of the aim of the study and the conditions of the participants' involvement in advance, and, then, distributed those sheets to them. We also asked them to sign off the consent form as the legal document indicating their involvement voluntarily in the study. Further, we explained that we protected the participants' privacy by maintaining the participants' confidentiality for the publication processes as well as explaining that they deserved the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

After gaining the participants' trust, there were two EFL undergraduate students majored in English education department at a private university in the eastern of Java, Indonesia, agreed to sign the consent form sheets. They enrolled in "Critical Essay Writing" Course (KBI112) After signing the forms, we then discussed the schedule to conduct a series interviews. The participants' demographic profiling data showed that this study involved a total one male and one female undergraduate student with the range of age was 20-23 years old. To protect the participants' privacy, this current study adopted the ethical research of confidentiality while gathering, investigating, and presenting the data by assigning pseudonym, as suggested by a recent study (Allen, 2017). Thus, to protect anonymity, we named them Indah and Ahmad.

Data Collection

To find out the answer of the research question, all empirical data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews (Barkhuizen et al., 2014).

The interviews were designed to unravel or elicit more information about the participants' negative feelings during essay writing process so that we could generate insights about such issue. We decided to choose semi-structured interviews in consideration of the different learning experiences the participants have. All the interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, Bahasa Indonesia via WhatsApp call to optimize the data collection timings. Each individual interview lasted 50 – 60 minutes in a relaxed and conversational way. To obtain the validity and credibility of the data, we conducted the interview several times with the participants. The results of the interview were audiotaped with their consents and transcribed verbatim. The interview consisted of 5 items, mostly adopted from Holland (2014) concerning these following questions: (1) have you encountered any special situations related to your writing?; (2) do you remember having any negative writing experiences?; (3) what kind of anxiety feelings that you had during your writing?; (4) have you ever been criticized about essays you wrote?; and (5) how does writing motivation affect your anxiety level during writing process?.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They conceptually defined thematic analysis as the process of "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data". More specifically, the analysis embraced these following procedures: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes among codes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of our study, we performed member checking or participant validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and peer debriefing technique, as proposed by an earlier study (Janesick, 2015). This technique is highly essential to maintain the high quality of qualitative research in terms of validating the argument of the researchers' findings. In doing so, in assessing the trustworthiness of our qualitative data analysis results, we returned the interview transcripts to the all participants so that they could verify the absence details and discussions that possibly emerged in our interview transcripts and data interpretations. Meanwhile, in employing this peer debriefing technique, we chose one colleague specialized in ELT who was uninvolved in the study to review, verify and assess the interview transcripts. We also asked him to check the missing points, criticize and provide feedback regarding the findings of our research project.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The Results of Semi-Structured Interviews

This current study was designed to extract the two Indonesian EFL learners' essay writing anxiety in tertiary-level education. On the basis of our research question, the findings reported in the following section focus several areas of exploring the participants' essay writing anxiety. The analysis of the interviews with Indah and Ahmad revealed that during essay writing, they experienced several negative feelings during the essay writing processes. More specifically, the negative feelings they experienced were in light of the difficulties they encountered when writing essay that could arise their anxiety level during essay writing processes.

Moreover, Indah explicated how she described the situations when composing her essay by mentioning that she frequently felt so pessimistic about her essay or having low self-confident level due to the poor vocabulary mastery skills. This factor was considered as the common negative experiences that frequently tended to prevent her to complete her essay writing tasks. When describing about the particular situations related to her essay writing processes, she said "…I often feel unconfident about my (essay) writing. … so difficult to choose the appropriate vocabularies for my essay writing" Contrary to the interview with Indah, Ahmad pointed out that vocabulary mastery and diction did not become the challenging aspects in his essay writing processes. He then explained that he could confidently write his essay. Ahmad propounded that: "…Vocabulary and word choices are actually not a big deal for me. I am pretty confidence about my (vocabulary mastery) skill" (Interview with Ahmad, via WhatsApp, 23 August 2022).

Yet, interestingly, both Indah and Ahmad frequently encountered difficulties in developing their ideas and wrote irrelevant paragraph in their essay leading them to produce low quality essay writing. They gave their opinions of this issue, saying:

"…For me, (it is) so stressful. …so hard (for me) to write in a coherent way" (Interview with Indah, via WhatsApp, 20 August 2022).

"…I had trouble in connecting ideas among sentences (when composing my essay-writing) like being stuck of my own ideas…. I know what I want (to write), but I do not know how and where I should start. … I always write jumping and irrelevant ideas that make it (essay writing) bad" (Interview with Ahmad, via WhatsApp, 23 August 2022).

When talking about the negative experience they felt, Indah and Ahmad mentioned that they tended to experience a feeling of fear during their essay writing. Those negative feelings include afraid of performing incorrect grammatical structure, lack of self-esteem and self-efficacy, writing skill insecurity, afraid of cannot completing the task, afraid of producing error in writing, and afraid of having negative feedback from the teachers.

It also reported that some of those negative feelings are closely interrelated to each other such as students' poor grammatical knowledge and writing skill negatively decreased their self-esteem and significantly increased their writing skill insecurity during writing process. These findings clearly showcased that learners' cognitive domain has a greater impact in building learners' essay writing anxiety as it can control their affective domain. They expressed,

"… I am worried about my grammar…. I always [feel] insecure of my writing because I feel like my [writing] skill is still poor, making me afraid to submit or even just consult it [to the teacher]" (Interview with Indah, via WhatsApp, 20 August 2022).

"…. (I am) afraid of not completing my writing (on time) … (This situation) rushes me in completing my (essay writing) tasks and making me produce unsatisfied result of my writing performances …. [It is] so hard for me (to complete) all writing tasks if I am not in a good mood. … Sometimes the instruction (from the teacher) is unclear" (Interview with Ahmad, via WhatsApp, 23 August 2022).

Further, the interview with Indah and Ahmad also reflected the facts that during essay writing tasks, they frequently had negative feedback from their instructors rather than the positive inputs. The negative feedback could be in the areas of incorrect grammatical structure, irrelevant and incoherent paragraph, as well as unspecific essay writing topic. These issues clearly led them to experience psychological trauma because of having negative criticism from the teacher. Specifically, Ahmad confessed that the teacher frequently delivered the feedback inconsistently and only criticized students' errors writing without providing a further assistance during revision processes. More, he also described that the instructor tended to deliver the negative feedback in ambiguous and inconsistent ways making him so difficult to understand. They underscored these points:

"….I received it (negative feedback) many times…. like incorrect grammar, jumping and irrelevant ideas. …It scares me more…. makes me overthink of my (performing) mistakes … then have bad criticism (from the teacher) over and over again" (Interview with Indah, via WhatsApp, 20 August 2022).

"…. It (negative feedback) was about my topic is too general and my jumping ideas. They [the instructors] only blame for that (mistakes)… without giving any revision or explanation…. Sometimes, the (negative) feedback is very different (from the previous feedback)… makes me so confused" (Interview with Ahmad, via WhatsApp, 23 August 2022).

Moreover, learners' emotional feelings, interest, and writing motivation, which included in affective domain, also appeared as serious factors in increasing the learners' essay writing anxiety feelings. The thematic analysis revealed that participants' positive mood can naturally boost their writing interest and motivation. On the other hand, they tended to have a greater anxiety feeling during essay writing processes when they experienced negative emotions. In other words, the higher positive level of students' writing motivation, interest, and emotional led to the lower anxiety feelings during essay writing processes.

Indah and Ahmed further stated this point:

"… When I am in a good vibe and my motivation (level) is high, I can easily doing my (essay writing) task without any distraction. All those (negative) feelings suddenly go away" (Interview with Indah, via WhatsApp, 20 August 2022).

"… Bad mood can make me nervous (to write)…. My low [writing] motivation also difficult me to finish my (essay writing) project" (Interview with Ahmad, via WhatsApp, 23 August 2022).

Discussion

The study is set out to explore the two EFL undergraduate students' writing anxiety situated in Critical Essay Writing course at an Indonesian private university in the eastern of Java, Indonesia. In responding to this aim, we employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the verbal data resulted from a series of interviews. According to the aforementioned findings, the current research finds that Indah had difficulty in terms of choosing the right lexical units which could hinder her to complete her writing. This finding was congruent with the earlier studies (Bani Younes & Salamh Albalawi, 2015; Derakhshan & Karimian Shirejini, 2020; Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009) which generally agreed that learners' difficulty in organizing choice of lexicon, as one of the most commonly found difficulty among EFL learners, can become a daunting challenge during the writing process.

Additionally, both Indah and Ahmad frequently experienced stressful times during their essay writing processes due to the difficulties in presenting their own ideas in a coherent way. The sentences they wrote did not offer signals that did not show connectedness or relationship between sentences. This finding is congruent with an earlier finding (Hidi & Boscolo, 2007) claiming that the students tended to experience many obstacles during their writing, particularly in connecting two paragraphs in a coherent way, outlining the aspects of the topic clearly, and avoiding inconsistencies. This condition unquestionably leads them to have an assumption that writing is a "dangerous and unattractive" task. Such situation can significantly affect to their writing products possibly containing serious errors in light of mechanics, incoherent ideas, and choosing appropriate dictions. In this vein, an earlier study by Rennie and Brewer (1987) argued that the students who experienced those kinds of obstacles can be called as a "the blockers". They also emphasized that those blocked writers connected their writing difficulties with their poor controlling skill and time management.

Furthermore, some scholars contended that those difficulties concerning arranging coherent ideas, outlining various aspects of problems, and avoiding inconsistencies are theoretically categorized as the obstacles in cognitive domain (Saghafi et al., 2017). For them, they emphasized that those difficulties are basically originated from the lack of their reasoning ability and background knowledge that can hugely influence on increasing their anxiety level.

In short, high-anxiety writers significantly perform low level of grammatical knowledge, language ability, vocabulary mastery, and linguistic skills (Jebreil et al., 2015) that lead them to produce lower quality writing compositions.

In addition, the results of this study found that the impact of Indah's and Ahmad's fears toward teacher's negative feedback on their writing motivation, self-esteem, and writing anxiety was in line with the findings of previous study (Sabti et al., 2019; Saghafi et al., 2017). Specifically, Saghafi et al., (2017) reported that due to the constant worry about their instructors' judgment on their writing essay performance, learners' tend to experience a degression of self-esteem and writing motivation level which lead them to belief that writing is an unattractive task. In the same vein, Sabti et al., (2019) found that learners' fear toward negative evaluation can significantly depress their self-esteem and heighten their anxiety. Thus, learners' fears of teacher's negative feedback, the lack of self-esteem, low writing motivation, and their negative beliefs about writing as an unattractive task can be included in affective domain that significantly affecting learners' writing anxiety level.

As noted, teachers' negative feedback can be considered as one of contributing factors to arouse the learners' anxiety feeling in essay writing process. The data resulted from interview showcased that the content of negative feedback from teachers frequently tended to be ambiguous and inconsistent leading him to be so difficult to respond the feedback provision from teachers. There are a number of determining factors contributing to such condition occurred such as the difference of proficiency level, understanding, and expectations between the instructor and the students about the writing assignment, as also pointed out by Lea and Street (1998). In fact, the data from the other participant revealed that she felt so afraid of making mistakes in her writing project leading them to avoid to submit their writing projects to the teacher and launched the so-called "self-fulfilling prophecy", as also reported by an earlier study (Atkinson, 2012, p. 1). Those afraid feelings of performing error writing appeared as they tended to worry of being criticized by the instructor as mentioned by the earlier study (Latif, 2012). More specifically, he reported that their afraid of having negative feedback arose from the instructor's overuse feedback that tended to focus only on students' error writing without concerning on students' academic and psychological needs.

Indeed, the notion of corrective feedback has been considered as an essential mean to respond to the learners' linguistic errors. Theoretically, the nature of feedback provision must not only contain correcting learners' linguistic errors but also provide the corrective inputs focusing on particular grammatical errors areas. For some prominent scholars, several aspects must be included in the feedback provision such as motivational values (Sabti et al., 2019), adequate feedback method (e.g. written, oral, or electronic feedback) (Latif, 2012), as well as supervision during writing and revision processes (Choi, 2013; Sabti et al., 2019).

Although many researchers argued that feedback is not necessary to be implemented during learners' writing processes (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 2017; Reynolds & Kao, 2019; Zamel, 1985), yet the recent study reported that feedback can significantly increase learners' writing performance (Reynolds et al., 2021; Wilson & Roscoe, 2019). Viewed from different angles, the failure of acquiring the positive inputs from the instructor also significantly decreases the learners' self-efficacy during essay writing process, as also reported by an earlier study (Jones, 2008). Moreover, the students with low level self-efficacy can seriously diminish their writing motivation and achievement (Hidi & Boscolo, 2007; Pajares, 2003) that can have significant impacts on their performances (Raoofi & Maroofi, 2017).

As mentioned earlier, students' writing motivation has a vital role in building learners' essay writing anxiety. The earlier study (Saghafi et al., 2017) reported that learners' writing motivation level, expectations, attitudes, and interest can significantly affect their writing anxiety. More recently, Sabti (et al., 2019) claimed that there was a negative correlation between learners' writing motivation and writing anxiety. Learners with low level of writing motivation may experience higher level of writing anxiety and undermine their writing performance and achievement during essay writing processes. However, Sabti (et al., 2019) also argued that learners' writing motivation was positively correlated with their self-efficacy. This statement was congruent with a study by Pajares (2003) indicating that learners with high level of self-efficacy tend to have greater level of writing motivation. To take this matter further, Sabti (et al., 2019) also reported that such situation significantly affects learners' writing performance. Still from the same reference, he also argued that learners with higher writing anxiety level performed poorer writing performance. Yet, those who have higher self-efficacy and writing motivation level, produced better quality of writing performance (Megawati, 2016; Zajacova et al., 2005).

Lastly, based on our overall analysis, there is a different of writing anxiety level between different gender. In this case, Indah was indicated to have higher level of writing anxiety than Ahmad. The data showed that gender significantly affect learners' writing anxiety level as supported by the results of the earlier studies (Y.-S. Cheng, 2002; Huerta et al., 2017) claiming that female students tended to experience higher level of anxiety feeling than males.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative-narrative study aimed to explore undergraduate EFL students' essay writing anxiety situated in a private university in the eastern of Java, Indonesia. For all data-gathering process, this current study employed a series of semi-structured interviews which were then analyzed by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) theory. After peer debriefing process (Janesick, 2015), the findings of this study revealed that learners' low level of writing skill, confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and grammatical knowledge, gender, instructor's negative

feedback, and writing motivation appeared as the major factors contributing to shape their anxiety feelings during essay writing processes. It can be inferred that learners' writing anxiety was significantly affected by both internal and external factors (Lubis & Rahmawati, 2019). The findings also reported that those negative feelings were significantly affect learners' writing performance and achievement. Learners with higher level of anxiety tend to produce lower writing performance and vice versa.

The current research findings also indicated that writing anxiety negatively affects learners' writing performance and achievement. Learners tended to produce poor quality writing performance and achievement when they experienced high level of writing anxiety during their writing processes. Therefore, to overcome these issues, the instructors should be able to provide an intensive guidance and adequate feedback method for the students during their essay writing and revision processes. More, not only the teachers, but students also have to be more aware in reducing their writing anxiety themselves by managing their emotional feelings (mood, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-confidence, interest, and motivation) in a stable way, so that they can complete their essay writing task easily and produce a better quality of writing performance. Therefore, teachers need to facilitate the students' need by creating a positive atmosphere and classroom activities during essay writing processes such as providing a complete writing assistance, resolving learners' writing difficulties, and giving motivational feedback.

As in all research, some research limitations probably exist in the current study. First, the participants involved in this study were still extremely limited (n = 2, 1 male and 1 female). Therefore, it is highly recommended for the future study to conduct a study with larger-scale participants. Second, the data in this study were only contextualized in the Eastern of Java, Indonesia, which did not widely cover larger geographical areas. Future researchers could then investigate a study in exploring learners' essay writing anxiety in various geographical.

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