

Academic Writing Anxiety on Undergraduate Thesis Writing

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Abstract

Academic writing anxiety is a common barrier for undergraduates, particularly during thesis writing, impacting both performance and well-being. While general writing anxiety has been studied, this research focuses specifically on thesis writing. The study aims to identify factors contributing to academic writing anxiety in students and the symptoms they experience. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants from the English Language Education program at the State Islamic Institute of Palangka Raya, all of whom had taken a thesis course. The researcher adapted the SWLAI instrument for data collection and applied content analysis to interpret the results. Findings reveal that factors such as fear, high or low expectations, self-esteem, lack of ability, stress, and communication issues with lecturers contribute to anxiety. Common symptoms include physical disturbances and avoidance behaviors. The results of this research findings are expected to be a consideration for various parties to arrange the best way to prevent or handle anxiety in the implementation of thesis writing as a final project.

Keywords: Academic Writing; Anxiety; Undergraduate; Thesis

INTRODUCTION

The final project (thesis) is a mandatory requirement for earning a bachelor's degree in Indonesian universities, typically taken no earlier than the sixth semester. As a scientific paper, it demonstrates a student's academic ability to solve problems and must follow specific theoretical and methodological frameworks based on their field of study as part of the degree requirement. A thesis is needed to evaluate the ability and feasibility of students while studying in the major they are pursuing before being given a bachelor's degree. This makes the thesis a mandatory and binding demand to be completed by students. However, not a few students fail to get a bachelor's degree because one of the barriers in doing a thesis is anxiety.

Compared to existing relative and previous studies that have explored general academic writing anxiety or writing a thesis on anxiety in undergraduate students in general, this research specifically focused on thesis writing anxiety among undergraduate English teaching department especially those in universities in Indonesia where thesis is a requirement to get a bachelor's degree in more depth and specific not only at the time of writing the thesis but also when the entire thesis is made from the beginning of the thesis being planned, formulation, implementation, to the completion of the thesis. Thus, this study aims to identify factors contributing to academic writing anxiety in students and the symptoms they experience, so that it can be considered for those who are writing a thesis or related parties in making good decisions in preventing and overcoming anxiety that will or have been faced by students.

As reported by Liu and Huang (2021:1425) "The majority of students believe that writing a final assignment is a burden." This occurred because finishing a thesis takes a lot of effort and time from the student. This feeling of burden causing anxiety to the students when working on their thesis. According to Sabti et al (2019) anxiety can cause impact on students performance.

The main contributor that cause anxiety is “stress” according to Shiri et al. (2012:87). The experience of a perceived threat (real or imagined) to one's mental, physical, or spiritual well-being, and “fear” that refers to the specific set of emotions or brain states that are elicited in an organism when it confronts danger.” According to Na and Quvanch (2022) linguistic problems, time pressure, and fear are the factor that can affect students’ anxiety in the process of writing. Similar results also come from research conducted by Wern and Rahmat (2021) where fear of failure, time pressure, and linguistic difficulties affecting students’ anxiety during writing. This academic related anxiety problem also can be occurred by un-“even” students’ ability and skill in writing. the inability of students to write certain sections can be a hindrance in writing the thesis they are currently working on, because basically writing scientific papers such as theses is very different from other scientific writings (Mirawdali et al., 2018). Thesis will rely not only on one's ability to write, but also on various other things such as problem observation, problem research, trial-error, problem solving, and so on. However, students' ability to write can also be influenced by various things such as the lack of intake of writing education in class (Cheng, 2004).

The article previous studies conducted by Grisel Englin Kawengian and Adaninggar Septi Subekti examines the causes of thesis writing anxiety among Indonesian EFL students and proposes strategies to address it. Key factors include the perceived inability to express ideas effectively in English and fear of negative evaluation from supervisors. Suggested strategies to alleviate anxiety include using grammar-checking tools, reading journal articles to enhance academic understanding, and fostering a supportive consultation atmosphere with supervisors. The study highlights the importance of early exposure to academic texts and grammar in curricula and encourages supervisors to provide constructive feedback to help students manage thesis writing anxiety. (Kawengian & Subekti, 2024). Study conducted by Atin Kurniawati and Arief Eko Priyo Atmojo also examines the factors contributing to thesis writing anxiety among EFL graduate students, its effects on their thesis completion, and strategies to overcome it. Key causes include personal challenges such as family and financial issues, professional obligations like full-time work, and institutional factors such as poor interactions with administrative staff. The anxiety leads to procrastination, self-doubt, and fear of making mistakes. To address these issues, the authors suggest identifying problems proactively, building strong communication with supervisors, and maintaining self-motivation. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding these factors to support students in managing anxiety and successfully completing their theses. (Kurniawati & Atmojo, 2022).

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design with phenomenological approach, which aims to comprehensively understand phenomena related to the research topic (Bouzioti, 2023), such as behaviors, perceptions, motivations, and actions, through detailed descriptions expressed in words and phrases (Ayton et al., 2024). The research questions and methodology began broadly and became more focused as the investigation progressed. This study is carried out carefully so as not to violate ethical consideration. Primary data were collected through interviews with twelve students selected using purposive sampling. The participants were selected using purposive sampling with the criteria students of the Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Study Program at IAIN Palangka Raya who were working on their thesis as a final project, spanning the 8th to 14th semester. The selection with these criteria is to ensure that the research population is at the stage of working on the final project in the form of a thesis. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analyzed data, the researcher applied strategies to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability by doing things like Extension Observation, Covert Observation, Triangulation, and Member Check.

This research used interviews as an instrument, adapted from Y.S. Cheng's Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI). SLWAI instrument are valid and reliable to assess students' anxiety in second-language writing and also can be applied easily and flexibly. This study combined inductive content analysis (ICA) with narrative data analysis. One kind of qualitative analysis that is frequently used to text-based data, such as written transcripts of conversations or written documents, is inductive content analysis. Member checking was used to validate the data. Qualitative research focuses on examining non-numerical data to understand social realities, including attitudes, beliefs, and motivations, and is often referred to as a naturalistic method due to its focus on natural settings.

Table 1. Research Instrument

Factors	Question
Student Internal Factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you think that you have experience in using English? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How would you describe your English skills? - Do you think that your English skills are sufficient to complete your thesis? - Do you often use English in your daily life? - What are the problems or obstacles for you in using English? 2. Do you think that you are inexperienced in writing an academic paper? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How often you are involved in writing an academic paper? - What makes you think that you inexperienced in writing an academic paper? 3. How do you think you assessed your academic ability in English during college? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you feel able to master the topics and materials given during the lecture? - Have you ever assessed your ability to use English? - Do you have a way to overcome your academic problems related to English ability, how do you overcome it? 4. Does the negative perception make you think that writing a thesis is troublesome? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What makes you think that writing a thesis is troublesome? - Can you describe the process of writing a thesis in your opinion?
External Factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you think that learning during college is enough to help you in working on your thesis? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why do you think learning during college is not enough to help you do your thesis? - What part did you feel lacking during your studies in supporting you in writing your thesis? 2. Does the evaluation process that occurs during thesis guidance make you feel hindred or burdened?

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- Can you explain how the evaluation of the guidance process is carried out during the thesis writing?
 - Does the evaluation in thesis guidance help you in improving your writing skills and the quality of your thesis writing?
 - Can you explain how the evaluation process should occur during the thesis guidance process?
3. **What academic and non-academic factors do you think are the obstacles for you in writing a thesis?**
 4. **Do you think the emphasis on time plays an important role in the anxiety you feel when working on your thesis?**
 - Why is time emphasis so important for you in the anxiety you feel while working on your thesis?
 - Can you describe how long it takes you to write a thesis in one day?
 - Can you describe how long do you think is ideal for writing a thesis in one day?
 - How often do you do thesis writing guidance? Can you explain?
 - How long does it take for lecturers to evaluate your thesis guidance process?
 5. **Are there any linguistic factors that become obstacles for you in carrying out thesis writing?**
 - Can you describe any linguistic problems that are obstacles for you in working on your thesis?
 - Is the linguistic problem for you one of the causes of anxiety that you feel when working on your thesis?
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- Identify mental problems
6. **How often do you feel anxiety while working on your thesis?**
 - How long do you feel anxiety when doing your thesis?
 7. **Does the writing anxiety who occurs to yourself have an impact on your self-esteem?**
 - What are the reasons in order you feel writing anxiety affecting your self- esteem?
 - Does the writing anxiety who occurs to yourself have an impact on the urge to do a thesis when experiencing anxiety?
 8. **In your opinion, what causes you to experience anxiety when working on your thesis?**
 - What do you think are the main causes of anxiety that you experience when doing your thesis?
 9. **Are there any specific symptoms that you feel when experiencing anxiety during the thesis?**
 - What symptoms do you feel when you experience anxiety while working on your thesis?
 10. **What do you think can help you in overcoming anxiety while doing your thesis?**
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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Factor Causing Anxiety

Internal Factors

Fear

It was found that there were students who experienced anxiety when writing their thesis due to fear. Fear is one of internal factor that come from students during writing process. There are two kind of fears that are found in students who are writing their thesis. The first is the fear of making mistakes and the second is the fear of rejection. Students who are writing their thesis tend to be afraid of making mistakes which will cause the revision of their thesis to take longer to submit to their thesis supervisor. After submitting their thesis revision, they still feel fear of rejection from their thesis supervisor regarding the results of the revisions they wrote in their thesis, this causes them to become lazy when it comes to meeting and seeking guidance from their thesis supervisor. This fear of rejection is also influenced if previously the student and one/both of the thesis supervisors were at odds or had a bad relationship.

This factor causing anxiety stated by students DF:

“I am afraid if my lecturer rejects my proposal. It is because my proposal have rejected several times before by my lecturer” (Interview)

Similar Problem also happens to students MF:

“I actually afraid if my lecturer gives me many corrections so that I will feel like I have a lot of mistakes, especially if I carry out guidance with my peers or junior” (Interview)

Students Expectation

Students who have expectations also tend to experience anxiety. This is because students' expectations vary, ranging from expectations that they can graduate quickly, expectations that they will find an easy supervisor, expectations that their thesis will be easy, and so on. When these expectations are not appropriate, they will become an internal burden that hinders students from carrying out their thesis writing and causes anxiety in themselves. In reality, this expectation arises when students consider themselves capable of overcoming and underestimate the problems that will arise when working on their thesis without being self-aware of their own abilities.

This problem stated by students HH:

“I thought my thesis would be easy because I felt that the material I wrote was enough not to get any more revisions from my supervisor.” (Interview)

Not only students HH, but students MR also stated:

“I expect my supervisor will go easy on me because I'm on my 12th semester but it turns out to be not what I expected.” (Interview)

Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

Students who tend to experience anxiety are also usually caused by self-esteem and self-confidence that are too high or too low. Students who have high self-esteem and self-confidence more often have expectations about various things related to matters related to their thesis, so that when their expectations do not match reality they will feel down and experience anxiety more easily. According to Na and Quvanch (2022), one thing that contributes to students' anxiety during the writing process is a lack of confidence. On the other hand, students who have low self-esteem and self-confidence also experience anxiety more easily. This is because students with low self-esteem and self-confidence will think that they are inferior and compare

themselves with other people so that they feel stressed about the various problems they face while working on their thesis.

High confidence found in student IS statement:

“I can talk in English fluently and use English properly in my daily life but still I have more revision on my thesis that I thought its not a mistake in writing.” (Interview)

Student SS statement show he don't have much confidence:

“I actually don't have a basic skill on English to begin with so I don't have much confidence on my writing.” (Interview)

Lack of Ability

Students' abilities in using English on their thesis is also a cause of anxiety. There are students who think their English language abilities are sufficient to complete their thesis smoothly, but in reality their skills are only at the standard of average English language learner students or even below average. Students' low abilities are usually the ability to provide output using English and also the ability to teach English. The student's ability to provide output using English is the most prominent in the thesis work, especially in the writing form, because students are required to provide work that can satisfy the wishes of the thesis supervisor. The student's inability to fulfill the wishes of the thesis supervisor make the student burdened due to the pile of revisions that the student must complete.

Students' ability in mastering the material they research in working on their thesis can also influence their anxiety (Y. Liu, 2020). Material that students are not able to master properly will make it difficult for students to complete their thesis and require students to re-study the material they will study. This process takes a long time, sometimes so that students feel pressured by time when working on their thesis. Other things that can make student comprehension on their material an obstacles are the student's inability to master technology related to the material, the student's inability to find information related to the material, and the lack of information provided regarding the thesis material being worked on by the student.

Students' inability to master the material occurs when the education provided by teachers is uneven. This is because each individual teacher has their own diverse teaching style and each individual students have different stages in their ability. This diversity can have negative impacts to their anxiety during writing thesis. The negative impacts that occurs is the mismatch or gap between the learning provided by the teacher and the students' abilities. This is not entirely the teacher's fault because on the other hand there are also students who are unable or unwilling to catch up with the lag they have experienced in the learning stages.

This problem found in student DF statements:

“Actually, I am not proficient in using English, especially in writing, I have difficulty pouring what I think into English writing, maybe because my ability to compose and string words is limited, but it seems that it is also because my grammar and vocabulary skills are not very good compared to my peers.” (Interview)

Another problem with ability also happens to student RA:

“Unable to use computer or laptop properly is another inability for me. The inability to search for material on the internet using certain applications and typing or processing data using unfamiliar applications is also a troublesome problem.” (Interview)

Different problem with ability also happens to student SS;

“Sometimes my supervisor ask me to find resource that can support my thesis form the internet, but sometimes the literary work that related to my study is really hard to find, and I fell overwhelmed by that rquest,” (interview)

External Factors

Stress and Pressure

Students who feel anxiety when working on their thesis are also influenced by stress and pressure factors, both academic and non-academic. One of academic term of this pressure is the limit of time they have to complete their thesis. Students are required to complete their studies quickly and on time during a certain academic year period. This requirement makes students feel stressed when the end of the semester approaches (Aloairdhi, 2019), while students who are carrying out their thesis writing feel that there is no progress in the research they are working on.

Non-academic form of cause in this pressure can be social pressure experienced by students, this pressure causes students to occur when students interact in the social environment both within college and outside college. Students will get peer pressure from their lag from comparing fellow students who have a more advanced and faster process in writing thesis. Overwhelmed by social pressure can affect students academic performance (Garcia et al., 2023).

This problem occurs to student JS:

“I feel overwhelmed by many things this semester, Writing my unfinished thesis made me depressed, especially towards the end of the semester, because if I was late again then I would have to pay for college again, even more so if I had to get gossip from my friends who had already graduated.” (Interview)

Similar problem also happens to students HR:

“Time pressure is what really pressures me, even though there are no more lectures piling up, but dividing the time for 9 to 5 work and the time to consult about the thesis with the supervisor is very troublesome, especially if the schedule collides.” (Interview)

Problems in Communicating

Every student has different thoughts, especially regarding the thesis they are working on. Students' freedom in working on their thesis is sometimes limited by lecturers who direct their thesis research to topics they don't like. This gives students an internal burden when working on their thesis, thus creating new problems in the form of anxiety, laziness, and dislike directed towards certain lecturers. This lack of student freedom occurs when students who are working on their thesis do not dare to give opinions regarding their wishes in working on and directing their thesis to their supervisor, so that the decision in directing the writing of their thesis rests with the thesis supervisor.

Evaluation process during writing thesis is one of communication happens between students and their supervisors. Evaluation process can affect students anxiety when writing thesis (Quvanch & Si Na, 2022). The harsh word by the supervisor or their bad direction can cause anxiety on students making the evaluation of their thesis a negative process during writing thesis (Nawawi et al., 2024). This negative process when writing thesis causing fear to students.

This problem happens to student YH:

“How do you say it, when I explain the meaning of my research objectives, sometimes my thesis supervisor interprets it with the wrong meaning but I don't dare to correct them.” (Interview)

Symptoms of Anxiety

Disorders of the Body's Systems

Symptoms of problems with the body's working system are the easiest to occur in students who experience anxiety. Disorder of the body's system is caused by somatic anxiety when writing thesis. This symptom occurs when anxiety becomes unbearable for students who are working

on their thesis, resulting in disturbances in one of the functions of the body's organs/systems which can disrupt the student's process of working on their thesis.

The cause of this organ or organ system disorder occurs because when students experience anxiety, the brain in the amygdala section will send a signal to the hypothalamus which then gives a signal to the adrenal glands which makes the adrenal glands produce the hormones epinephrine (adrenaline), norepinephrine and cortisol. Excessive hormonal imbalance in the body will cause disorders which can include dizziness, headaches, nausea, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, and difficulty speaking. This is happened because over-activation of the amygdala (Hu et al., 2022). This disturbance affects students writing performance, making students having a hard time to overcome their anxiety when writing their thesis. On the other hand, when the hormones caused by anxiety are not excessive in the body, these hormones can have a positive impact on students who are working on their thesis, such as encouragement (euphoria), increased focus, increased awareness, and also increased mental abilities.

Avoidance Behavior

Avoidance behavior is the behavioral manifestation of anxiety. For instance, students may delay working on their thesis for weeks or fail to complete revisions requested by their supervisor. This is the riskiest option since, if students choose not to write their thesis, revise it, or work with a supervisor, they won't be able to make any adjustments or progress on their project. The reason students work on this thesis is not because they are lazy or don't want to complete their thesis, but they do not want to face with problems that will come when working on their thesis so the students tend to do other thing that unrelated and unnecessary to progress on their thesis such as hanging out with friends, playing video games, and scrolling on social media. This is a type of avoidance behavior which is situational avoidance Lebow ((2022).

Avoidance behavior also caused by amygdala of the brain that sends signal to sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) when students having anxiety. Students must decide to choose to face the problem or avoid it. On the one hand, when students choose to avoid problems, students will fall into avoidance behavior and choose to escape with other activities. When students fall into avoidance behavior, other disorders may occur which can disrupt the process of working on their thesis, such as behavior disorder, mental disorders, and social disorders. On the other hand, when students choose to face the problems they face, they will work on and complete their thesis either sooner or later depending on how they solve the problems that exist when working on their thesis in the future. Students who choose to face their problems when experiencing anxiety tend to have clearer minds and focus on their goals.

Discussion

In life there will always be obstacles that will test human beings in becoming better. There is no exception for university undergraduate students who are working on a thesis to get a bachelor's degree. One of the obstacles that often arises in this activity is anxiety. Anxiety should be something that can be overcome in various ways. The best way to overcome a problem is to prevent the problem and know the root cause of the problem itself. From the results of the problems that have been researched on twelve students who are working on their thesis, it was found that anxiety can affect the work of body organs and also the behavior of students who are working on their thesis. Thus, anxiety can be a big obstacle for undergraduate students in writing a thesis. This is very important to note because writing is an ability that must be mastered by students and thesis is an absolute requirement for students in achieving their bachelor's degree, especially in Indonesia. With the problem in the form of anxiety experienced

by students, it is necessary to prevent and overcome the anxiety faced by students so that students can work on their thesis without feeling burdened by the anxiety they experience. From the identified problem, it can be determined that to overcome anxiety coping strategies can be used by students such as below:

1. Set a Plan

A well-thought-out thesis goal affect performance during writing thesis. It can help students have a clear goal to finish the thesis effectively. By setting a plan, students will have more detail about their research such as data, methods, and resource. To properly set the plan students suggested to perform an extensive review of the current literature, which can assist you in better understanding the proposed study, learn to use appropriate knowledge of experimental and/or theoretical frameworks, keep thorough and legible notes at all times so students can refer to them when students start writing the thesis, the writing process needs to be evaluated not only by advisor but also by peers and other subject matter experts in addition to the research advisor, and finally find coping strategies to overcome future problems during writing process.

2. Use Technology

The usage of technology in writing can greatly improve students English language ability (Hasibuan, 2014). Technology can also helps students in writing. One of important factor of using technology is efficiencies. It can reduces effort and time when writing (Pramiastuti et al., 2020).

3. Have a Positive Mind

Students thought can affect performance in writing (Gwyer, 2017). Negative thought can reduce students will in writing when faced with obstacles that they think can't overcome that can cause anxiety. By replacing negative thought students have with positives thought it can help reduce anxiety (Eagleson et al., 2016).

4. Get Some Help

Students can ask for help from anyone to overcome the anxiety they feel, either by overcoming the anxiety directly or by overcoming the factor that causes anxiety. Help can come from anyone, be it peers, family, lecturers, and professionals. Friends and family can be a means to reduce anxiety by providing emotional encouragement. Teachers, Instructors, and Lecturers although cannot (and should not) serve as mental health professionals, they can learn about mental health challenges relating to anxiety and familiarize themselves to be aware of it so they can choose a better direct approach students in teaching or giving guidance to prevent factors causing anxiety (Hsu & Goldsmith, 2021). Mental health support professionals such as psychiatrists and psychologists are highly recommended to cope if students feel anxiety that they feel overwhelmed with.

CONCLUSION

One of the challenges that students have when writing their theses is anxiety. Students must identify the cause of their anxiety and devise a strategy to deal with it in order to overcome it. According to research done on twelve students completing their thesis as a final project, fear, student expectations, self-esteem and confidence, comprehension, stress and pressure, and a lack of communication are the main causes of the anxiety these students feel while working on their thesis. When writing a thesis as a final project, students who face anxiety-triggering

elements will experience two primary symptoms: avoidance behavior and a disturbance of the body's system. Thus, it is hoped that students who will carry out thesis writing can have knowledge of anxiety that is likely to be experienced in the future and become a consideration in overcoming anxiety, especially students who use thesis as a form of final project to get a bachelor's degree.

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