Writing Anxiety Among Indonesian EFL Students in Online Discussion Forum

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Abstract

In the context of online learning increasingly adopted by an Indonesian higher education institution, students must adapt to new modes of instruction, which may lead to anxiety, particularly in EFL writing through online discussion forums. This study aims to identify and describe the types, levels, and contributing factors of writing anxiety, as well as how students manage their anxiety in online discussion settings. A mixed-methods approach with a concurrent triangulation design was used to understand the phenomenon. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews with twenty-five first-semester master's students in the English Education Study Program at a private university in Jakarta.The findings revealed that most students experienced moderate anxiety, with cognitive anxiety being the most prevalent type. Contributing factors included linguistic difficulties, fear of negative comments, and time pressure. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of supportive instructional strategies and self-regulation in reducing writing anxiety among EFL learners in digital contexts.

Keywords: Writing Anxiety; EFL Learners; Cognitive Anxiety; Coping Strategies; Online Discussion

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has become a transformative element in higher education, providing learners with increased flexibility and access to educational resources. In the early development of online education, it was promoted as a solution to logistical barriers in traditional classrooms, especially in developing countries (Nguyen, 2015). Over time, the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and other digital platforms became common in facilitating both synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences (Zainuddin & Keumala, 2018). In Indonesia, many higher education institutions have integrated online learning into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program, with online discussion forums becoming a popular method for encouraging student writing and interaction (Akmal, 2017; Onyema et al., 2019). Writing in a foreign language is often accompanied by psychological challenges, especially for EFL learners. Writing anxiety has been identified as a significant affective barrier to language learning, characterized by nervousness, negative self-evaluation, and fear of criticism (Cheng, 2004; Horwitz, 2001). Students who experience this anxiety may avoid writing tasks, experience cognitive overload, and show reduced performance in academic writing. As online learning platforms became widespread, scholars began to explore how writing anxiety manifests in digital environments. Coman et al. (2020) found that asynchronous learning environments often limit real-time interaction, leading students to feel isolated and unsure about the quality of their writing. David et al.(2018) reported that low-proficiency learners struggled with online journal writing due to unclear instructions and insufficient feedback. Similarly, Griffin and Roy (2022) highlighted that the public nature of online forums intensified students' fear of being judged by peers and instructors. In the Indonesian context, several studies have examined the local dimensions of writing anxiety. Hapsari (2017) and Wahyuni et al. (2019) found that linguistic

difficulties, limited writing practice, and low self-confidence are common causes of anxiety among EFL students. Sagara (2020) specifically investigated anxiety in online writing classes and concluded that asynchronous learning could exacerbate cognitive anxiety due to delayed feedback and minimal instructor presence. Pasaribu and Dewi (2021) emphasized that Indonesian students often feel increased anxiety during online writing tasks, especially when faced with tight deadlines and unclear expectations. Despite these contributions, few studies have focused on postgraduate EFL students engaging in fully online discussion forums. Most prior research has centered on undergraduate learners or blended learning environments. This leaves a gap in understanding how writing anxiety emerges in asynchronous, text-based interactions among more advanced students. Furthermore, the coping strategies these learners use to navigate online writing anxiety remain underexplored. This study explores writing anxiety among first-semester Indonesian EFL postgraduate students in online discussion forums. It examines the types and levels of anxiety, identifies contributing factors, and investigates students' coping strategies. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study offers insights to help educators and instructional designers reduce writing anxiety and improve student participation in online academic discussions.

METHOD

Research Design
This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine writing anxiety among Indonesian EFL students in online discussion forums.These methods approach was chosen to triangulate findings and ensure a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study followed a concurrent triangulation design, where both data types were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then merged for interpretation. This design allowed for a more holistic view of writing anxiety by cross-verifying results from different sources and methods.

Participants
The participants for this study were twenty-five first-semester master's students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at a private university in Jakarta. These participants were selected as they had recently transitioned into online learning, providing a clear understanding of the challenges students face when adapting to this mode of education. The study was conducted over a period of three months from May to July 2024. The students were purposively selected to represent a range of experiences in online learning, ensuring that the sample was homogenous in terms of their academic program but diverse in other factors, such as language proficiency and background.

Instruments and Procedures
This study employed two main instruments for data collection: closed-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

1. **Questionnaires:**
   Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI): The SLWAI, developed by Cheng (2004), was used to assess the types and levels of writing anxiety. The inventory contains 22 items that measure somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behaviour. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The total SLWAI score was categorized into three levels of anxiety:

Table 1. Illustrates how the SLWAI scores are classified according to anxiety levels

SLWAI Scores	Levels of Writing Anxiety
65 points and above	High Anxiety

| 50 - 64 points | Moderate Anxiety |
| Below 49 points | Low Anxiety |

Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (CSLWAI): This inventory, adopted from Rezaei and Jafari (2014), was used to identify factors contributing to writing anxiety. The 10-item CSLWAI measures factors such as linguistic difficulties, fear of negative comments, and time pressure, among others. These two inventories allowed for an in-depth understanding of both the causes and levels of writing anxiety.The questionnaires were distributed to the participants via Google Forms, and responses were collected through WhatsApp and Instagram, ensuring that the data collection process was accessible and convenient for all students.

2. Semi-Structured Interview

To supplement the quantitative data and gain more nuanced insights into students' experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six randomly selected participants. These interviews were held through video calls on WhatsApp, allowing for flexible interaction and ensuring that the participants were comfortable sharing their thoughts. The interview questions were designed to explore three key aspects: types and levels of writing anxiety, factors contributing to anxiety, and coping strategies students used to manage anxiety. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. The questions were structured into two categories:

    a. General Questions: These questions mirrored those in the questionnaires, focusing on the types, levels, and factors of writing anxiety.

    b. Specific Questions: These addressed coping strategies, based on (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004), asking students how they dealt with their anxiety in the online discussion forum.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed in two phases: quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis.

1. **Quantitative Data Analysis:**

    The quantitative data from the SLWAI and CSLWAI questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics via SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean, total score, and percentage for each level of writing anxiety, enabling the classification of participants into high, moderate, or low anxiety levels.

2, **Qualitative Data Analysis:**

    The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic coding. This process involved identifying recurring themes in the responses and organizing them into categories. The coding helped to extract patterns related to students' coping strategies and the underlying reasons for their writing anxiety. After transcribing the interviews, the themes were categorized according to the research questions, specifically focusing on types of anxiety, factors contributing to anxiety, and coping mechanisms.The results from the interviews were then interpreted narratively, with a particular emphasis on understanding students' personal experiences and how they managed their anxiety in online discussions. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study was able to provide a comprehensive analysis of writing anxiety in online learning environments and offer insights into strategies for reducing this anxiety.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results
Levels of Writing Anxiety

The results from 25 first-semester master's students in the English Education Study Program at a private university in Jakarta revealed various levels of writing anxiety in online discussion forums. The data were collected using the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), with students' scores ranging from 39 to 81. Based on the scoring criteria, participants were categorized into three levels: low, moderate, and high anxiety.   As shown in Table 1, 10 students (40%) experienced high writing anxiety with a mean score of 74.10, while 9 students (36%) were in the moderate category with a mean of 58.44. Six students (24%) fell into the low anxiety category, scoring between 39 and 48, with a mean of 43.17. The overall average across all participants was 61.04, placing the group within the moderate anxiety range.

Table 1. Levels of Writing Anxiety (N = 25)

Level of Anxiety	N	Min. Score	Max. Score	Mean	Percentage (%)
High Writing Anxiety	10	66	81	74.10	40.0%
Moderate Writing Anxiety	9	52	61	58.44	36.0%
Low Writing Anxiety	6	39	48	43.17	24.0%
Total	25	39	81	61.04	100.0%

These findings suggest that although a significant number of students experienced high anxiety, the group's overall tendency reflected moderate writing anxiety. Similar patterns have been reported in previous studies that examined writing anxiety in online learning environments (Hapsari, 2017; Pasaribu & Dewi, 2021). It is likely that individual backgrounds, technological adaptation, and self-efficacy in writing all contribute to the variation observed among students, even within a single institution.

Types of Writing Anxiety

The SLWAI consists of three subscales: somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behaviour. The analysis showed that cognitive anxiety was the most dominant type among the participants, with a mean score of 24.40. This was followed by somatic anxiety (mean: 20.84) and avoidance behaviour (mean: 17.76).

Table 2. Types of Writing Anxiety (N = 25)

Type of Anxiety	Total Score	Mean
Somatic Anxiety	521	20.84
Cognitive Anxiety	610	24.40
Avoidance Behaviour	444	17.76

Cognitive anxiety refers to students' mental distress, such as negative thinking, self-doubt, or fear of negative judgment about their writing. Many students reported being overly concerned about their grammar and vocabulary use, especially when they had to express arguments in a public forum. According to Cheng (2004), cognitive anxiety significantly disrupts the writing process by creating mental blocks that reduce confidence and clarity. These results are consistent with other research in online contexts, where cognitive anxiety remains a primary concern for EFL learners(David et al., 2018).Students also shared during interviews that they felt worried when their ideas might be misinterpreted or criticized by their lecturers or peers. These reactions indicate that, beyond technical skills, psychological readiness plays a vital role in shaping students' writing behaviour in online settings.

Factors Contributing to Writing Anxiety

To further understand the causes of writing anxiety, participants completed the Causes of Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (CSLWAI), which includes ten key anxiety-inducing factors.

Table 3. Causes of Writing Anxiety (N = 25)

No	Factor	Total Score	Percentage (%)
1	Fear of Negative Comments	137	11.49%
2	Fear of Writing Test	112	9.39%
3	Insufficient Writing Practice	116	9.73%
4	Insufficient Writing Technique	114	9.57%
5	Lack of Topical Knowledge	97	8.12%
6	Linguistic Difficulties	140	11.76%
7	Pressure for Perfect Work	121	10.17%
8	High Frequency of Assignments	118	9.91%
9	Time Pressure	134	11.28%
10	Low Self-Confidence	118	9.91%
	Total	**1207**	**100%**

Among these factors, linguistic difficulties ranked highest (11.76%), followed closely by fear of negative comments (11.49%) and time pressure (11.28%). These findings reflect challenges often faced by EFL students in online learning contexts. For instance, Pasaribu & Dew (2021) also found that limited vocabulary and grammar mastery contributed significantly to students' anxiety in a Moodle-based writing course. Similarly, Griffin & Roy (2022)emphasized that the fear of being evaluated either by peers or instructors could inhibit students from participating actively in online discussions. Interview results supported the questionnaire findings. Students reported that they were often unsure about how to construct sentences or organize arguments effectively, which caused them to hesitate or avoid participating altogether. They also noted that short response deadlines added pressure and limited their ability to revise or clarify their thoughts, increasing their sense of inadequacy. These constraints can be especially problematic in asynchronous forums where communication depends heavily on clear and accurate written language (Coman et al., 2020; Griffin & Roy, 2022).

Coping Strategies for Writing Anxiety

In addition to exploring levels, types, and causes of writing anxiety, this study also investigated how students manage their anxiety during online writing tasks. The coping strategies were examined through semi-structured interviews with six participants and were classified based on the model proposed by Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004), which identifies five main strategies: preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer-seeking, and avoidance. The most frequently mentioned coping strategy was preparation, particularly in the form of reviewing grammar, expanding vocabulary, and drafting responses in advance before posting them to the forum. Students noted that preparing outlines or seeking clarification from peers or instructors beforehand gave them more confidence to write. This supports previous findings that preparation reduces anxiety by increasing control over the writing process (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). Positive thinking also played a critical role in managing writing anxiety. Several students mentioned the use of affirmations and self-motivation to challenge their negative beliefs about writing in English. This strategy helped them reframe writing tasks as

opportunities to improve, rather than as threats to their self-esteem a result consistent with Sagara (2020), who found that EFL students who adopted a growth mindset were better able to regulate their anxiety in online settings. Another common strategy was peer-seeking, where students consulted friends to proofread their drafts or discuss the topic before posting. The sense of emotional support from peers was particularly valuable in overcoming fear of negative judgment, echoing the findings of Wahyuni et al. (2019), who emphasized the importance of collaborative learning in reducing language anxiety. While relaxation techniques such as breathing or taking breaks were mentioned, they were less commonly used. Only one student described using mindfulness or physical relaxation before writing. Notably, avoidance was mentioned by a few students, but not as a recommended strategy. In fact, students who resorted to avoidance (e.g., delaying responses or staying silent in forums) reported higher levels of anxiety overall, aligning with earlier findings that avoidance behaviors often intensify rather than alleviate anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). These results suggest that students can benefit from being explicitly taught effective coping strategies. Providing workshops or resources on self-regulation, writing skills, and peer collaboration may help students reduce their anxiety and engage more confidently in online discussions.

Discussion

This study revealed that among the 25 postgraduate EFL students participating in online discussion forums, moderate levels of writing anxiety were most common, with cognitive anxiety emerging as the dominant type. These findings are consistent with multiple studies that identified cognitive anxiety characterized by negative expectations, fear of evaluation, and intrusive thoughts as the most disruptive and prevalent form of writing anxiety in EFL learners(Alzahrani & Alshaikhi, 2023; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018). This type of anxiety significantly hinders writing fluency and self-confidence, even among advanced-level students. A key finding of this study is the identification of linguistic difficulties, fear of negative comments, and time pressure as the primary contributing factors to writing anxiety. These results closely reflect the findings of Wahyuni and Umam (2017), who emphasized that students' low confidence in vocabulary, grammar, and coherence often leads to anxiety in academic writing contexts. Similarly, Alzahrani and Alshaikhi (2023) found that linguistic challenges, time constraints, and fear of instructor feedback were among the top anxiety triggers for Saudi EFL university students. These consistent findings across cultural contexts underline the universal stressors EFL learners face when producing academic writing online. Time pressure, in particular, plays a critical role. While asynchronous discussion forums provide some flexibility, the deadlines associated with weekly or time-bound posts create a stressful environment, especially when students feel unprepared or are second-guessing their language use. This was echoed in findings by Quvanch & Kew (2022), who noted that time constraints and pressure to perform perfectly under evaluation significantly elevated anxiety levels among Afghan EFL learner. This study also explored coping strategies, with preparation, positive thinking, and peer-seeking behaviour emerging as the most effective. These align with the coping strategies reported by Nugraheni (2023) who found that Indonesian undergraduate students relied on both cognitive and affective strategies, such as mental rehearsal and peer support, to overcome their writing apprehension . These strategies help reduce uncertainty, especially for tasks requiring extended thought and language planning. Importantly, students who resorted to avoidance behaviors such as postponing tasks or disengaging reported higher anxiety levels, confirming that passive coping mechanisms may amplify stress. This supports the perspective of Rezaei and Jafari (2014), who argued that avoidance typically worsens writing performance and reinforces negative psychological associations with writing tasks. Despite the limited sample size of 25 students, the patterns found are consistent with larger-

scale studies conducted in various contexts (Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan), suggesting a degree of generalizability. However, future research should include multi-institutional samples to explore how institutional support and instructional design affect writing anxiety in diverse EFL populations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the writing anxiety experienced by 25 first-semester master's students in the English Education Program at a private university in Jakarta during participation in online discussion forums. The findings revealed that the majority of students experienced moderate levels of writing anxiety, with cognitive anxiety being the most prevalent type. The main contributing factors included linguistic difficulties, fear of negative comments, and time pressure. Importantly, the study also explored how students cope with writing anxiety, identifying preparation, positive thinking, and peer-seeking as the most effective strategies. These coping methods helped students navigate the challenges of writing in a foreign language, particularly in asynchronous and text-based environments that often lack immediate feedback. Given the homogeneity of the sample (students from a single institution), the study provides a focused yet insightful account of how writing anxiety manifests in a localized context. However, the lack of demographic variation limits the generalizability of the results to other populations. Future research could extend this study by comparing students across multiple institutions or exploring the long-term impact of specific coping strategies on writing performance. For educators, the findings emphasize the need to foster a supportive online learning environment where students feel safe to express their ideas. Structured interventionssuch as peer review sessions, low-stakes writing opportunities, and explicit training in writing techniques could help reduce anxiety and enhance participation in online discussions. As online learning continues to evolve, understanding and addressing students' emotional experiences will be crucial for maximizing engagement and academic success in digital platforms.

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