

Indonesian EFL Students' Writing Anxiety: Gender Overview

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the relationship between gender and foreign language writing anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers' students. Utilizing a qualitative case study, the research involved 56 participants, divided equally between male and female students, all enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program at a state university in North Sumatra. A survey of the Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale (SLWAS) was assigned to participants to determine their level of anxiety. To explore how gender, anxiety levels, and students' experiences and engagement with second/foreign language writing anxiety are connected, the data gathered from the questionnaire were analyzed and grouped according to the participants' gender. The data analysis shows that among male respondents, 32.14% experienced high writing anxiety, 64.28% reported moderate anxiety, and 3.58% had low anxiety levels. For female respondents, 39.28% experienced high anxiety, 57.14% reported moderate anxiety, and 3.58% had low anxiety levels. Overall, both male and female participants possess varying levels of writing anxiety, with a higher percentage of females experiencing high anxiety compared to males, although the difference is not significant. More extensive research, incorporating a wider variable, is needed to deepen our understanding of how gender relates to writing anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Considering its essential nature in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Brown, 2000; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000), various studies have been extensively conducted in investigating the factors that cause students' incompetence in writing English. Among these factors, writing anxiety has emerged as an important area of research, in which a number of studies have been conducted to investigate the internal and external factors that contribute to students' insufficient proficiency in writing English (e.g. Cheng, 2002; Daud et al., 2005; Karakaya & Ulper, 2011; Martinez et al., 2011). Further investigations into student

writing anxiety have led to the suggestion of various treatments and methodologies aimed at addressing underlying issues, such as the implementation of an Academic English Writing Program (Lee & Lee, 2023), the adoption of Content and Language Integrated Learning (Lahuerta, 2020), and the utilization of Wiki-Mediated Collaborative Writing (Rahimi & Fathi, 2021). These studies have remarked these approaches as potential solutions, providing students with practical techniques to overcome their writing challenges.

To that extent, proficiency in writing is an important skill that EFL pre-service teachers must develop, given its significance as an important subject in their educational lives (Deane et al., 2008; Warschauer, 2010). In a research teaching environment (in higher education), writing skill is studied by the students through a series of writing subjects, namely Basic Writing, Intermediate Writing, Creative Writing, and Academic Writing. As written in the curriculum, students are expected to demonstrate the ability to write at a specific level in accordance with the lesson plans. Ultimately, they are required to reach a scholarly level of writing proficiency, as evidenced by their successful completion of a thesis at the end of the study. However, in practice, some students still possess low capability in writing. There are some reasons why students' writing capabilities are still low, including limited exposure to authentic writing, lack of motivation, poor guidance and feedback, ineffective teaching methods, and ultimately writing anxiety (Akbari, 2015; Cheng, 2004; Jebreil et al., 2015; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014). Writing anxiety is a common barrier that affects students' writing capability (Cletzer et al., 2022; Khalil, 2022; Sabir et al., 2022). Some students may feel stressed or fearful when faced with writing tasks, leading to a lack of confidence and inhibiting their ability to express themselves effectively. This anxiety can arise from various factors, such as a fear of making mistakes, negative past experiences, or pressure to meet high expectations.

Writing anxiety is caused by some factors including gender. Gender relates to a person's societal traits, while sex refers to a person's biological qualities (Newman, 2012). Therefore, by acknowledging that sex is related to a man's and a woman's biological characteristics, gender and sex can be distinguished from one another (Santrock, 2017). Even biological factors—like the neurological distinctions between the male and female brains are taken into account in this context of language acquisition (Lee, 2020). Examining the correlation between writing anxiety and gender holds importance as it provides a deeper understanding of potential gender differences in writing anxiety experiences. This knowledge helps educators develop

certain strategies to support students' specific needs. Additionally, it addresses gender stereotypes and societal expectations, creating a more inclusive learning environment.

Understanding the connection between writing anxiety and gender allows for the adaptation of instructional approaches to better approach male and female students. It promotes non-gender-biased content by identifying and addressing disparities in writing anxiety experiences. Ultimately, this research enhances overall student well-being and academic success through interventions that reduce anxiety and promote positive writing experiences. To fill the gap in existing empirical research, this study seeks to investigate the levels of writing anxiety among EFL pre-service teachers in their second or foreign language learning, focusing on the role of gender distinctions. The aim is to reach a comprehensive understanding of the correlation between gender and the processes and outcomes of English writing skill development. The primary research question in this study is whether gender variations have a significant impact on writing anxiety.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing anxiety can be described as “a general feeling of unease, nervousness, or apprehension experienced by a writer before, during, or after engaging in a writing task” (Bloom, 1985; Hassan, 2001; Wynne et al., 2014). This type of anxiety can be particularly problematic for students who are required to complete writing assignments as part of their academic lives. Research has shown that writing anxiety can lead to poor writing performance, avoidance of writing tasks, and even a decreased desire to engage in future writing activities (Wynne et al., 2014). To address writing anxiety in students, it is important to understand the potential causes of this type of anxiety. Some researchers have suggested that writing anxiety may be the result of negative experiences with writing in the past, fear of evaluation, or a lack of confidence in one's writing abilities (Wynne et al., 2014). In addition, six items were measured: perceived intellectual ability, perceived job competence, perceived creativity, perceived social acceptance, perceived scholastic competence, and perceived self-worth are other factors contributing to writing anxiety (Onwuegbuzie, 1999).

Writing anxiety faced by students can be different between individuals, depending on its variable, including gender. The anxiety between male and female students can be different but also can be the same. Karakaya & Ulper (2011) found that there is no significant difference between male and female students writing anxiety. Abu Shawish and Abdelraheem (2010) and Shang (2013) also found similar results. Meanwhile, it was found that male students experience

greater anxiety compared to their female counterparts (Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015; Pappamihel, 2002). Al Asmari (2013) also found that female students exhibit comparatively lower levels of writing anxiety. Meanwhile, Huerta et al., (2017) and Martinez et al., (2011) discovered that females possess higher writing anxiety than men. So, it indicates that whether gender affects writing anxiety cannot be concluded.

However, whether gender determines anxiety in writing can be caused by some factors, such as social expectations and gender roles (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2020; Cocuk et al., 2016; Hz, 2022), stereotypes (Hz, 2022; Rodríguez et al., 2009), negative feedback (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2020), perfectionism (Khosravi et al., 2023), and lack of confidence (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2020; Razak et al., 2017). The difference can also be related to brain composition difference (Liu et al., 2020). Females may feel more pressure to conform to societal expectations of being better communicators and writers than males, leading to higher levels of anxiety when it comes to writing (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2020; Cocuk et al., 2016). Likewise, females may be more likely to be perfectionists and set higher standards for themselves (Khosravi et al., 2023), and females may lack confidence in their writing abilities (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2020; Razak et al., 2017), leading to higher levels of anxiety when it comes to writing. In addition, females may be more likely to receive negative feedback on their writing (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2020), and females may be more likely to internalize negative stereotypes about their writing abilities (Rodríguez et al., 2009), leading to higher levels of anxiety when it comes to writing.

Despite the existence of studies on the relationship between writing anxiety and students' gender in various contexts, such as university level in the global context (Karakaya & Ulper, 2011; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Shang, 2013) (e.g. Karakaya & Ulper, 2011; Quvanch & Si Na, 2022; Shang, 2013), and EFL level in the global context (Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2020; Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015; Rasool et al., 2023). However, there is still limited research on this topic in the context of Indonesian EFL higher education level. The current body of literature has provided valuable insights into writing anxiety patterns and gender differences in various educational settings across different countries. However, the Indonesian EFL higher education context brings its unique set of cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical factors that may influence students' writing anxiety and its correlation with gender.

METHODS

Research Design

In this paper, the researchers adopted a qualitative case study to investigate a phenomenon in its natural context. The researcher employed multiple sources of information to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the problem, avoiding a single perspective and considering various complexities (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Data were gathered using a semi-structured method. The gathered information was then analyzed utilizing two different methods: statistical count was applied to quantitative data obtained from student questionnaires, which consisted of 28 questions assessing their levels of writing anxiety, while a constructive analysis was conducted on qualitative data specifically the comparison of responses from various participants.

Participants

A total of 56 students, 28 males, and 28 females, enrolled in a state institution in North Sumatra's English Language Education Study Program were included in this study. The participants' age average is limited to 18 to 21, as they are English Education students who will be English teachers in the future. The participants were randomly selected from different classes and were currently taking the Academic Writing course as part of their semester credits. Prior to this, each student had finished a sequence of writing courses in preceding semesters, moving from basic to intermediate and advanced writing.

Procedure of Data Analysis

In the first phase of the investigation, the researchers employed an adapted form of the Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale (SLWAS), which was first created by Y.-S. Cheng (2004), to the participants. The scale consisted of 28 items that were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. A highly high level of anxiety was represented by a score of 5, and a modest level of anxiety was indicated by a score of 1. By utilizing this scale (see Table 1), the researchers aimed to assess and measure the extent of writing anxiety suffered by the respondents.

Table 1. Anxiety scale ranging

Scale Ranging	Description
5	Extremely
4	Very
3	Moderately
2	Slightly
1	Not at all

The questionnaire consisted of a total of 28 questions, each scored on a scale from 1 to 5. The maximum reachable score on the scale was 140, reflecting the highest possible level of writing anxiety, while the minimum score was 28, indicating the lowest level of anxiety. Participants' responses were proportional to the degree of anxiety they experienced. Based on their self-reported scores, the researchers categorized participants with a score of 140 into three distinct categories: low anxiety (scores ranging from 1 to 46), moderate anxiety (scores ranging from 47 to 93), and high anxiety (scores ranging from 94 to 140).

To investigate the relationship between gender, level of anxiety, and students' experiences and engagement with second/foreign language writing anxiety, the data obtained from the questionnaire were further analyzed and categorized based on the participants' gender. This allowed the researchers to explore how gender may influence students' experiences, practices, and levels of anxiousness in writing.

FINDINGS

The respondents' degree of writing anxiety was assessed through the analysis of completed questionnaires of the Second Language Writing Anxiety Scale (SLWAS) by Y.-S. Cheng (2004), and they were categorized into gender-specific groups, as shown in the table below. The division into male and female groups allowed for a comprehensive examination of anxiety levels in writing among all participants.

Table 2. Writing anxiety level of EFL pre-service teachers

Level	Male		Female	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
High (94-140)	9	32.14	11	39.28
Moderate (47-93)	18	64.28	16	57.14
Low (1-46)	1	3.58	1	3.58

Table 2 shows among the male respondents, 9 individuals, accounting for 32.14% of the total male respondents, felt really anxious whilst writing, with scores ranging from 94 to 140. Additionally, 18 male respondents, making up 64.28% of the male participants, reported a moderate level of writing anxiety, with scores ranging from 47 to 93. Only 1 male respondent (3.58%) exhibited a low level of writing anxiety, scoring between 1 and 46. For the female respondents, 11 individuals, representing 39.28% of the total female respondents, displayed a high level of writing anxiety, scoring between 94 and 140. Moreover, 16 female respondents (57.14%) reported a moderate level of writing anxiety, with scores ranging from 47 to 93. Similar to the male group, 1 female respondent (3.58%) had a low level of writing anxiety, scoring between 1 and 46.

Additionally, a more comprehensive evaluation was carried out by compiling all of the replies. This allowed the researcher to determine the overall degree of apprehension towards writing among the participants. The summarized results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Average of anxiety level

Respondents	Anxiety Level Average	Level
Male	82.25	Moderate
Female	85	Moderate

Table 3 displays the results of the respondents' average anxiety levels towards writing, categorized by their gender. Among the male participants, the average anxiety level was calculated to be 82.25, which falls within the "Moderate" anxiety category. Similarly, for the female participants, the average anxiety level was determined to be 85, also categorized as "Moderate" anxiety. These findings indicate that both male and female respondents expressed a similar level of moderate apprehension when it comes to writing. The average scores provide valuable insights into the overall writing anxiety experienced by the participants, suggesting that a moderate level of anxiety is prevalent among both male and female respondents in the study.

Furthermore, the research made a clear distinction between the two groups of respondents based on their anxiety levels by conducting a more detailed analysis of the responses to each questionnaire item. This in-depth examination allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the specific factors contributing to anxiety levels in each group.

Table 4. Average of anxiety level between two genders at specific points

No	Statements	Score	
		Male	Female
1.	I feel anxious when I have to write in English.	2.61	2.86
2.	I find it difficult to start writing in English.	2.64	2.86
3.	I feel uncomfortable with grammar and spelling when writing in English.	2.96	3.07
4.	I am unsure of my writing abilities in English.	2.86	3.43
5.	I feel uneasy with the structure and format of writing in English.	3.14	2.89
6.	I struggle to find the right words when writing in English.	3.54	3.36
7.	I have difficulty expressing ideas and thoughts in English.	3.14	3.18
8.	I lack confidence in writing in English.	2.89	3.18
9.	I worry about the final outcome of my writing in English.	3.18	3.64
10.	I find it challenging to choose the right words when writing in English.	3.50	3.39
11.	I am not very confident in grammar and spelling when writing in English.	3.18	3.39
12.	I am not very confident in constructing cohesive paragraphs in English.	3.39	3.57
13.	I find it difficult to convey ideas and thoughts clearly in English.	3.36	3.54
14.	I struggle to understand writing instructions in English.	2.89	2.75
15.	I find it difficult to accept criticism or feedback in English about my writing.	2.00	1.96
16.	I feel overwhelmed when writing English compositions under time constraints.	3.43	3.21
17.	I feel nervous or sweaty when writing English compositions under time pressure.	2.79	2.46
18.	My heart races when I write English compositions under time constraints.	2.79	3.00
19.	I broke into a cold sweat when suddenly asked to write in English.	2.75	2.64
20.	I worry that my English writing is far worse than others.	3.11	3.54
21.	I frequently lose my train of thought when I begin writing in English.	2.68	2.82
22.	I usually do anything to avoid writing in English.	2.29	2.14
23.	I go to great lengths to avoid situations where I have to write in English.	2.25	1.96
24.	I fear that others will mock my English writing if they read it.	2.82	3.29
25.	I am afraid my writing will be chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	3.04	3.11
26.	If my English writing is to be evaluated, I am worried about getting a very low grade.	2.96	3.46
27.	When I write in English, I frequently worry that I'm not following English writing conventions in the way I express and arrange my ideas.	3.14	3.46
28.	When writing in English, I often worry that my writing does not conform to cultural norms.	2.93	2.82
Average		2.94	3.04

Table 4 presents a comprehensive view of the writing anxiety experienced by male and female students in English writing. It presents a list of 28 statements related to various aspects of writing anxiety, and the corresponding scores for both male and female students. On average, male students have a writing anxiety score of 2.94, while female students have a slightly higher average score of 3.04. This indicates that, on average, female students tend to experience slightly more anxiety related to English writing compared to male students. However, it is important to note that the differences in average scores between the genders are not significant.

DISCUSSION

Specifically, there are substantial differences in the point of “I worry that my English writing is far worse than others” between the two genders. Female students are more anxious than male students, scoring 3.11:3.54. This indicates that female students express significantly

higher levels of anxiety when it comes to comparing their English writing abilities with those of others, perceiving their skills to be far inferior compared to their peers. The observed difference in scores suggests that female students may be more self-critical and prone to feelings of imperfection in comparison to male students when it comes to their English writing proficiency. This difference could be influenced by various factors, such as social comparisons, self-perception, or internalization of societal expectations (Al-Kubaisy et al., 2020; Cocuk et al., 2016). In the Indonesian context, females may engage in more frequent and intensive social comparisons with their peers (Hz, 2022), leading to intense anxiety about their writing abilities and concerns about being judged or falling short of perceived standards.

Additionally, self-perception plays a crucial role, as females might be more critical of their writing skills, leading to increased self-doubt and anxiety when facing writing tasks. Moreover, the internalization of societal expectations regarding gender roles and academic performance may also contribute to the hard anxiety experienced by female students in writing. Societal norms maintain the conception that females who are intelligent and competent in certain academic domains and casual contexts are attractive (Hz, 2022) could create additional pressure and stress for female students when it comes to writing tasks.

On the contrary, there is a notable difference in writing anxiety between male and female students concerning two specific aspects of English writing. When it comes to the point “I feel uneasy with the structure and format of writing in English”, male students have an average anxiety score of 3.14, whereas female students’ average score is 2.89. Similarly, in terms of “I struggle to find the right words when writing in English”, male students show a higher anxiety score of 3.54, while female students have an average score of 3.36. These differences indicate that male students experience more anxiety than their female friends when it comes to these particular writing challenges, while the numerical differences might not be substantial. The reason behind this phenomenon can be connected to the superior structure of the female brain in the prefrontal cortex, as highlighted by Liu et al., (2020), where women have greater prefrontal cortex dominance. The human prefrontal cortex, situated at the frontal part of the brain, serves as the central hub for executive functions. These functions role various tasks such as problem-solving, overseeing complex activities, predicting the outcomes of actions, and anticipating events in the surrounding environment (Liu et al., 2020). The observed greater prefrontal cortex dominance in women might play a role in enhancing their ability to effectively navigate certain writing structural and grammatical challenges. The prefrontal cortex, being responsible for executive functions like problem-solving, planning, and cognitive flexibility,

could contribute to women's capacity to organize their thoughts, structure their writing, and find appropriate words more effectively. This cognitive processing could potentially lead to lower levels of anxiety when experiencing writing tasks.

The data in the table "I worry about the final outcome of my writing in English" indicates that female students tend to have higher levels of anxiety about the final outcome of their writing in English compared to male students, with average scores of 3.64 and 3.18, respectively. This suggests that female students may possess greater concerns about the overall quality and assessment of their written work in the English language. These concerns may arise from a strong aspiration to perform well academically and meet assumed standards, resulting in intensive anxieties regarding the evaluation of their writing. Similarly, the scores for the statement "If my English writing is to be evaluated, I am worried about getting a very low grade" also show a similar pattern, with female students expressing more anxiety than male students. The average scores for females and males are 3.46 and 2.96, respectively. This indicates that female students might be more engaged with the potential negative judgment of their English writing, leading to concerns about receiving a low grade or evaluation that falls below their expectations. The presented data and the statement of Al-Kubaisy et al., (2020) underscore the importance of comprehending the psychological impact that evaluations and assessments can have on students' writing anxiety, particularly among female students. The fear of evaluation appears to be a significant factor contributing to the higher levels of writing anxiety experienced by female students, as indicated by the differences in their average scores compared to male students.

Averagely, the female students feel more anxious than male students, although the scoring is not significant, 2.94:3.04. It suggests that, on average, female students tend to experience pretty higher levels of anxiety compared to male students in terms of writing. In other words, while there is a minor numerical difference in the average anxiety scores between females and males, this difference is not considered significant enough to draw definitive conclusions about gender-based variations in writing anxiety. Hence, the findings of this study match and mismatch with previous studies. This study is similar to some previous studies, such as those by Karakaya & Ulper (2011), Abu Shawish and Abdelraheem (2010), and Shang (2013), which suggest that there is no significant difference in writing anxiety between male and female students. Additionally, Huerta et al., (2017) and Martinez et al., (2011) discovered that female students possess higher writing anxiety than males. Conversely, this study

contradicts other research, including studies by Pappamihiel, (2002) and Kirmizi and Kirmizi (2015), which indicate that male students may experience more anxiety compared to their female counterparts. In addition, Al Asmari (2013) found that female students exhibit relatively lower levels of writing anxiety.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the presented findings provide valuable insights into the writing anxiety experienced by male and female EFL students in their foreign language writing. While the average anxiety scores suggest that female students tend to experience higher levels of anxiety compared to male students, the numerical difference is not considered statistically significant. These findings highlight the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing writing anxiety and its relationship with gender. Writing anxiety is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be influenced by individual differences, contextual factors, and societal expectations. Therefore, it is crucial for educators and institutions to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that addresses the unique writing challenges faced by students of all genders. By understanding and addressing writing anxiety proactively, educators can empower students to develop their writing skills with confidence and achieve their academic goals effectively.

LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD

When evaluating the results, it is important to consider the limitations of the study. First, given the limited sample size, the results may not be as broadly applicable. Second, the study used a self-report questionnaire to measure writing anxiety, which may be susceptible to biases such as social desirability bias. Third, the study did not control for other factors that may influence writing anxiety, such as age, prior writing experience, and language proficiency. Fourth, the study did not explore the causal relationship between writing anxiety and gender.

Future researchers should address these limitations by increasing the sample size, using multiple methods to measure writing anxiety, controlling for other factors that may influence writing anxiety and exploring the causal relationship between writing anxiety and gender. Additionally, future researchers could explore other factors that may contribute to writing anxiety in EFL contexts, such as cultural differences, teacher expectations, and assessment practices. They could also develop and evaluate interventions to reduce writing anxiety and improve EFL students' writing performance.

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