

Writing Anxiety of Indonesian EFL Learners: Possible Causes and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were to find the causes of Indonesian EFL learners' writing anxiety and how they cope with writing anxiety at one of the state junior high schools located in the rural area of Banyuwangi. In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with the five participants who potential experienced in writing anxiety. The findings of this study revealed that the causes of writing anxiety were internal cause, external causes, and linguistic causes. The internal causes include psychological sources. External causes include: (1) classroom practices and (2) interpersonal threats. While, linguistic cause include writing aspects. In addition, the strategies that the Indonesian EFL learners use to cope with writing anxiety was categorized into a theme named strategies to cope writing anxiety.

Keywords: writing anxiety, causes of writing anxiety, the strategy to cope writing anxiety, EFL learners

Introduction

Background of the Research

In Indonesia, English is a foreign language and has been taught and used as a compulsory subject at secondary school since Indonesia's Independence Day, August 17, 1945 (Ary, 2010). Nur (2004) said, although English is one of the languages that need to be learned in school, in fact, Indonesian students still face some issues in learning English. She added, this is related to oral and written in English. One of the problems related to the obstacles of students' writing in English so far is about writing anxiety (Erkan & Saban, 2011; Javadi-Safa, 2018; Toba et al., 2019).

Writing anxiety is a sense of anxiety that arises when someone does writing. This is a fear, tension, and worry that arises as a result of something unexpected and undesirable in writing. Several previous researchers from different countries have found that there are many reasons which can trigger the emergence of writing anxiety. They proved, the reasons of students' writing anxiety in English are poor English language skills, poor in generating the idea, fear of evaluation, low of self-confidence, teachers' attitude, low of practice writing in English, limited vocabularies, etc (Aloairdhi, 2019; Badrasawi et al., 2016; Cheng, 2004); Chin Lin et al., 2017; Gkonou, 2011; Ho, 2015; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Liu & Ni, 2015; Mulyono et al., 2020; Olanezhad, 2015; Yetis ,2017)

In Indonesia, the exploration of writing anxiety is very rarely done (Kusumaningputri et al., 2018). In this opportunity, I am trying to conduct further research and focus on the problem of writing anxiety, especially about the causes of writing anxiety and strategies to cope with this feeling towards junior high school students. Mulyono et al. (2020) mentioned that students from secondary school experience higher levels of writing anxiety rather than university students. Referring to this, by conducting qualitative research entitled "Writing Anxiety of Indonesian EFL Learners: Possible Causes and Coping Strategies," I explored the causes of writing anxiety in junior high school students and how they cope with this feeling in depth. Later, the information that I described can help teachers and other researchers in the future to be aware and responsive or even can determine strategies for overcoming the problem of Indonesian EFL learners' writing anxiety.

Literature Review

Writing in the Context of English as a Foreign Language.

It is undeniable that writing in English in a foreign language is a challenging activity for most EFL learners (Haiyan & Rilong, 2016). In their research, Erkan and Saban (2011) stated writing in English in the context of a foreign language requires learners to have appropriate thinking strategies and allow them to express themselves in English successfully. They added another reason why writing in English as a foreign language is more challenging because it is a complex activity requiring linguistic expertise, grammar, vocabulary, and writing conventions from pupils. In addition, Chamot (2005) revealed that finding good ideas and connecting them is the most complex challenge for the EFL learners while they are writing. In her research, Yetis (2017) said that the writing process's final result is a registered product that the reader will read later. Of course, this will be very easy for readers to find mistakes because, unlike other skills, a writing product is something that can be researched with the eyes. That is why writers must take those writing aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, ideas, and coherence seriously.

Writing Anxiety as a Foreign Language Anxiety

Nowadays, problems related to language learning are fascinating to discuss for researchers. No exception is the problem about Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Foreign language anxiety presents in various aspects in foreign language learning, specifically it can be occurred in the activities in English language learning that need producing the output,

including in writing (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017). Writing in English as foreign language anxiety is a language-skill-specific-anxiety that happened while learners do writing in English (Cheng et al., 1999). Usually, it is characterized by the coming feeling of restless, pounding, or not being ready to write (Jawas, 2019).

Some previous researchers proved that writing anxiety comes because of certain reasons (Aloairdhi, 2019; Badrasawi et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 1999; Chin Lin et al., 2017; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Liu & Ni, 2015; Mulyono et al., 2020; Yetis, 2017). Those can come from internal which include lack of experience in writing, lack of self-confidence, afraid of making mistakes, the assumption that writing is a very difficult activity, and fear of the evaluation of their writing. Other reasons also come from external, such as time pressure, negative feedback from teachers, peer competition, linguistic sources (grammar, spelling issues), and ideas of writing.

Writing anxiety in EFL students can cause issues and have negative consequences for their language acquisition. According to Daly (1978), Liu & Ni (2015), and Aloairdhi (2019), the fundamental effect of writing anxiety is that it can diminish students' writing skill and achievement in a foreign language, as well as obstruct their language learning.

Strategies for Coping Writing Anxiety

Some previous researchers have conducted research about learners' writing anxiety and included their strategies for dealing with writing anxiety. The results showed that pausing during their writing activity, trying to be confident, taking a break, discussing the problem with their friends, managing their time, trying to stay focus and calm, comforting themselves, reading their friends' work, continuing their write although they got their anxiety, revising their work repeatedly, and trying to find some information from the dictionary (Badrasawi et al., 2016; Liu & Ni, 2015; Qashoa, 2014; Jawas, 2019).

Previous Research Studies on Writing Anxiety

Several researchers have conducted research about this writing anxiety (Liu & Ni, 2015; Aloairdhi, 2019; Jawas, 2019; Cheng, 2004; Qashoa, 2014). This certainly help to provide more convincing information and references. To begin with, Liu & Ni (2015) Aloairdhi (2019) and Jawas (2019), have conducted reseaches about writing anxiety toward university students. On this occasion, the focused on the pattern, effect, and causes of writing anxiety. Moreover, a qualitative study also have been done by Cheng (2004). He explored about the

causes of writing anxiety toward graduate students. To conclude, based on the results of these studies I found, the causes of writing anxiety vary widely. it can come because uncertainty, difficulty to write the first sentence, being afraid of their exam result, limited vocabulary, ideas of writing, lack of practice, writing genre or topic, evaluation, lack of confidence, grammatical rules, time pressure, direct essay assignment in the classroom, the lecturer, and the individual assignment. Further, a study on the level of writing anxiety has been carried out by Mulyono et al (2020). they found that all students of various levels experienced writing anxiety with different levels of low, moderate, or high levels. they also found that secondary level students had higher writing anxiety than university students.

Methodology

Research Design

The aimed of this study was to explore the causes of Indonesian EFL learners' writing anxiety and also how they cope with this feeling. To achieve this, the data were collected qualitatively by using semi-structured interviews. Thus, the design of this research was a descriptive case study. The case study was choosen to get in depth data by obtaining the more natural and original data from interview.

Participant

The participants of this study were the ninth grade students at one of the state junior high schools located in the rural area of Banyuwangi. They were especially the five participants with the characters having the highest level of writing anxiety or having the greatest potential for experiencing writing anxiety from one of the class choosen. The determination of these five participants was based on the calculation of the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) by Daly & Miller (1975).

Data Collection Method

The data were collected by interviewing the participants. I used the open-ended question that was formulated from Liu & Ni's interview concept (2015) that covered questions about students' past experiences of writing in English, students' feelings when writing in English, the reasons or causes for their writing anxiety, and coping strategies in dealing with writing anxiety.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, all of the responses from the participants were analyzed properly. Thematic analysis that was proposed by Braun and Clark (2006) was used to analyze the data. There were six phases that became the guidance for conducting data analysis as Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed. They were familiarizing the data, generating the codes, looking for candidate themes, reviewing the themes, defining & labelling the themes, and producing the report.

Research Findings

The results of the data analysis indicated that there were three main categories of themes as the causes of the students writing anxiety and one category of theme dealing with the strategies to cope with their writing anxiety. Those main categories were: (1) Internal cause of writing anxiety, (2) External causes of writing anxiety, (3) Linguistic cause, and (4) Strategies to cope writing anxiety.

Internal Causes

The origin of writing anxiety come from a variety of factors, particularly from inside the students themselves. Based on the interview data analysis, it was proven that the internal cause was from the psychological sources aspect (Aloairdhi, 2019). The psychological sources were causes that come from the internal side of the student writer. It was purely the result of the student's emotion and mental condition. The data below revealed that psychological sources were: (1) students' fear making mistakes in their writing, (2) students' low self-confidence, and (3) uncertainty as discussed below.

Students said that they felt anxiety when writing because they were afraid of making mistake in their writing product. For example, when I ask, "what are the causes of writing anxiety that you have?", one of my participant said:

Excerpt 1 *"I'm afraid there will be many mistakes in my writing" (fear of making mistakes, *P1, Oct 25th 2021)*

In the other hand, writing anxiety was evident due to students' low self-confidence. This was related to the participant's believe that her comprehension about English was still weak. Therefore, her low self-confidence caused anxiety when she wrote a draft in English.

Excerpt 3 *“I'm not confident in my work. My English is bad, so sometimes when I try to correct by myself, I will feel that my writing is bad too. Sometimes I also read it many times but it feels like something is missing” (low self-confidence, *P3, Oct 25th 2021)*

Uncertainty among pupils was a psychological factor that contributes to writing anxiety. Uncertainty was arised as a result of the participants' fear of inconsistency in his writing and lack of understanding of their own writing

Excerpt 1 *“I'm not sure if my writing will be appropriate” (uncertainty, *P4, Oct 25th 2021)*

External Causes

In addition to internal causes, writing anxiety could also be produced by external circumstances beyond the students' control. Based on the data analysis, it was found that several aspects belonged to external causes were: classroom practices (Aloairdhi, 2019) and interpersonal threats (Cheng, 2004). For more details, they are presented in below.

Classroom Practices

Classroom practices were the causes that dealt with the time constraint, kind of writing task, and in-class practice writing.

Excerpt 1 *“When writing in the class, (the teacher) usually gives a time limitation and I must submit my work during the lesson hours as well. Sometimes, I haven't really finished my writing but I have to submit it. This can make me feel anxiety” (time constraint, *P1, Oct 25th 2021)*

Excerpt 2 *“It's also (about) the time for writing assignments. If the time is short, I become more anxious and more panicked” (time constraint, *P3, Oct 25th 2021)*

This finding was also in line with the results by Kusumaningputri et al.(2018), Aloairdhi (2019), and Cheng (2004). According to what the participants expressed above, they often felt worried about the time restrictions given by the teacher during the writing

process. This usually happened when they did writing tasks in class. They often thought that they did not have enough time to complete and submit their writing in the decided time.

Kind of writing task also seemed to be one of the triggers for the emergence of writing anxiety. It was their responses after I asked them, "what kind of writing assignment makes you feel more anxious?". They answered that certain types of tasks could increase their writing anxiety.

Excerpt 1 *"Writing long paragraphs (makes me feel anxious), it is like writing about experiences or stories. If the text is long, I usually need more time to do it, while the time given by the teacher is usually limited. If that's the case, my anxiety and panic will get worse. ..."* (**kind of writing task, *P1, Oct 25th 2021**)

Excerpt 2 *"I feel more anxious if I was asked to write an essay"* (**kind of writing task, *P3, Oct 25th 2021**)

Excerpt 3 *"Writing procedure text or descriptive text (can make me more anxious)"* (**kind of writing task, *P4, Oct 25th 2021**)

Based on the participants' responses, I concluded that writing a text or writing something in a long text could cause writing anxiety, such as a story, an essay, a descriptive text, a recount text, etc. Furthermore, when they were asked why, many of them responded that it was due to time constraints, grammar issues, difficulties generating an idea, and uncertainty about their writing product. Therefore, it could be possible for students to get worse writing anxiety.

Previous research from Aloairdhi (2019), Kusumaningputri et al. (2018), and Shang (2013) proved writing anxiety often appears when students are doing practice in the classroom. This statement was also in accordance with the results of the data excerpts below.

Excerpt 1 *"Usually when there is a writing assignment or writing test in class, my anxiety can increase. When writing in the class, (the teacher) usually gives a time limitation and I must collect my work during the lesson hours as well. Sometimes, I haven't really finished my writing but I have to submit it. This can make me feel anxious. Besides that, being seen by the teacher while working on it made me even more anxious"* (**in-class**)

*practice writing, *P1:Oct, 25th 2021)*

From the quotes, it was found that writing anxiety could be caused by in-the class practice writing, such as in-class writing tasks or writing tests. It was also in line with the findings from Jawas (2019) and Cheng (2004). The participants also stated that this was due to the teacher's time constraints and direct monitoring during class tasks or the writing tests, which could create their writing anxiety.

Interpersonal Threats

Cheng (2004) argued EFL Learner writing anxiety might arise from aspects of interpersonal threats. In this context, he said this interpersonal threat was related to the threats of interpersonal relationships and interpersonal evaluation between teachers and students or students with their classmates, which could contribute to the extent of anxiety while writing. The parts of interpersonal threats found in the interview data were: interpersonal evaluation, teacher emotion, teacher attitude, and writing without reference to app.

Excerpt 1 *"I also feel the most anxious if my teacher will see or correct my writing later" (interpersonal evaluation, *P1:Oct, 25th 2021)*

Excerpt 2 *"Then, I'm also embarrassed and afraid that if my writing is read to one class and it is considered wrong by my friends..." (interpersonal evaluation, *P2:Oct, 25th 2021)*

From the quotes above, it was known some participants felt anxious and afraid when their writings were read and evaluated by the teacher or their classmates. Somehow, that evaluation could make them embarrassed because the evaluation given was negative directly in front of the class.

The excerpt below mentions the teacher's emotion also contributed to the emergence of the students' writing anxiety.

Excerpt 1 *"In the past, it (writing anxiety) was like because of the teacher who was angry"(teacher emotion, *P3:Oct, 25th 2021)*

The participant said his previous teacher was a person who got angry quickly and always demanded all students be able to write in English. The teacher even gave punishment to students who did not do their work. The teacher's treatment like this once made him want to skip his English class, *"In the past, I even wanted to skip my English class"* (Participant 1).

Next, the data excerpt below briefly mentions the teacher's movement in monitoring students' work could also cause students' feelings of anxiety when writing.

Excerpt 1 *“Besides that, being seen by the teacher while working on it made me even more anxious” (teacher attitude, *P1:Oct, 25th 2021)*

For the last, the data excerpt below revealed that the student got anxiety in writing when she wasn't allowed by the teacher to operate or find the information on the internet.

Excerpt 1 *“There's more, if I have a writing assignment but I am not allowed to see it on the internet or google translate, it makes me anxious too” (writing without reference to app, *P5:Oct, 25th 2021)*

As known, it is common that most foreign language learners have a great dependence on supportive tools in their learning process. Students' dependence on the application as a reference medium in the learning process also negatively affects them as this writing anxiety. Therefore, as stated above, it is possible they got anxious about writing when they were not using the internet or google translate.

Linguistic Causes

One of the sources of writing anxiety also came from linguistic sources. It was closely related to the structure of language and all its aspects. In this study, the interview results proved that linguistic sources were illustrated from the writing aspect itself, as reported below.

Writing Aspects

Writing aspects were all the important points in writing and sometimes became the evaluation material of a writing product. These aspects of writing include content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics (Heaton, 1991). Based on the results of the interview data, the points contained in the writing aspect were grammatical issues, vocabulary selection, and ideas organization.

Excerpt 1 *Besides that, in English, we have to pay attention on the grammar too, right? Well, this grammar can also make me feel*

*anxious because I don't know grammar hehe” (grammatical issues, *P1:Oct, 25th 2021s)*

Excerpt 2 *“I also don't understand grammar, even though when we write in English, we have to pay attention to the grammar. This grammar sometimes scares me when I have a writing assignment” (grammatical issues, *P3:Oct, 25th 2021)*

First, according to the quotes above, the participants reported feeling anxious and scared when faced with grammatical issues in the writing activity. This problem arose because students assumed they did not understand grammar adequately, which leads to unpleasant feelings when undertaking English writing exercises. Furthermore, Kusumaningputri et al. (2018) mentioned this also because students paid too much attention to grammar and sentence structure rather than the content and process of their writing, so they felt the anxiety.

The excerpts below also show that students felt writing anxiety due to the English vocabulary selection.

Excerpt 1 *“I'm afraid of choosing the wrong English vocabulary. I'm not sure if my writing will be appropriate” (vocabulary selection, *P4:Oct, 25th 2021)*

Excerpt 2 *“Then, the vocabulary selection in the text also sometimes scares me. I am afraid if I choose the wrong words and put them wrong” (vocabulary selection, *P5:Oct, 25th 2021)*

They were afraid the words they used in writing the text were wrong. Furthermore, they also felt worried they couldn't arrange the vocabulary adequately and appropriately, making their writing disorganized.

The last, ideas organization, is also one of the points that appeared in the writing aspect.

Excerpt 1 *“...Again, when writing paragraphs, the ideas must match with each other, right?, in this part I'm afraid that the contents of my writing are out of sync and will become messy when I read it later” (ideas organization, *P1:Oct, 25th 2021)*

The data excerpt above shows that the participant got anxiety because she was afraid that the arrangement of their ideas was out of sync, which made their writing messy when read.

Strategies to Cope Writing Anxiety

As all students have said before, writing anxiety is a feeling that has been shown to damage mood and even affects students learning processes and outcomes. In this case, they had their ways of dealing with writing anxiety that struck them. From the analysis results, the strategies that students used to cope with their writing anxiety were cognitive strategy and affective strategy. All those will be described in the following section:

Cognitive Strategy

Cognitive strategy is a strategy related to intellectual activity and material understanding. For conceptual clarity, they will be discussed below.

The data excerpt below showed that students utilized a variety of cognitive strategies to cope with their writing anxiety, such as having a discussion with friends and or teachers, using supporting applications, and drafting.

Excerpt 1	<i>“Usually I also write concepts like that on paper so that my writing will be good when it's finished”(drafting, *P3:Oct, 25th 2021)</i>
Excerpt 2	<i>“I ask my friends too”(having a discussion with friends, *P4:Oct, 25th 2021)</i> <hr/> <i>“I often use google”(using supporting apps, *P4:Oct, 25th 2021)</i>
Excerpt 3	<i>“Ask my friends what makes it difficult for me to do it. I looked at their work too. When I understand and my anxiety is reduced, I can continue my own work”(having a discussion with friends, *P5:Oct, 25th 2021)</i> <hr/> <i>“Usually I ask the teacher too”(having a discussion with teacher, *P5:Oct, 25th 2021)</i> <hr/> <i>“Besides, like I said earlier, using my handphone to look for additional information or translating sentences is also one of</i>

*my strategies to reduce my anxiety in writing in English.(using supporting apps, *P5:Oct, 25th 2021)*

Writing anxiety usually arises due to students' ignorance or confusion about something, so they used to reduce their writing anxiety by asking friends and teachers about their difficulties. In addition, the students also often used several applications on their smartphones to help them cope with their writing anxiety. The applications they used were google search and google translate. For the last, according to the quote above, it turned out that the drafting method could be used to cope with writing anxiety. In the interview data, this student revealed that she felt terrible in English lessons and was not confident in his writing. He used this drafting method to restore his confidence so that his writing anxiety did not get worse.

Affective Strategy

The aspects that illustrate the affective strategy are self-control, pausing, and fighting the feeling. For further explanation, all data will be discussed as follows.

The data excerpt below shows that doing self-control by allowing oneself to be calm was the first step to coping with writing anxiety. In addition, the students also fought anxiety and tried to continue their work as well as possible. It was because they wanted to get the score.

Excerpt 1 *Usually I control myself first, calm myself or ask my friends about what I'm confused about.(doing self-control, *P1:Oct, 25th 2021)*

*"I keep on writing. As much as possible I fight the feeling of anxiety rather than later not doing it and not getting a grade"(fight the feeling of anxiety, *P1:Oct, 25th 2021)*

Excerpt 2 *"I kept quiet first. Because when I was worried I lost focus, what I did was just stay quiet for a while"(pausing, *P2:Oct, 25th 2021)*

Excerpt 3 *"At least I'm quiet while thinking about the strategy first" (pausing, *P3:Oct, 25th 2021)*

Lastly, one participant stated that he took a break to cope with his writing anxiety. This participant said writing anxiety could make him lose focus and make his writing messy.

Considering that, the quote above it clearly proved that taking a break or pausing before continuing to write was one of the ways he used to overcome writing anxiety.

Discussion

One of the main aims of this study was to find the causes of writing anxiety among the junior high school students when they write in English. The causes that the students expressed were comparable to those that had been considered in some previous studies (Aloairdhi, 2019; Badrasawi et al., 2016; Cheng., 2004, Chin Lin et al., 2017; Gkonou, 2011; Ho, 2015; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018; Liu & Ni, 2015; Mulyono et al., 2020; Olanezhad, 2015; Jawas, 2019; Yetis, 2017). They were psychological sources, interpersonal threats, classroom practices, and writing aspects. However, there are several new points in classroom practices aspect and interpersonal threats aspect that have been found in this study. They were including the types of assignments and writing without reference to supporting applications which proved can cause writing anxiety. In interviews, students revealed that there were several types of writing assignments that can increase their anxiety, such as an essay or a certain text. Furthermore, some of them stated that this was related to the problem of time restriction in doing their work. In addition, the discovery of writing without reference to app as one of the causes of writing anxiety is a new thing in this study. Previously, in his findings, Cheng (2004) revealed that one of the causes of writing anxiety was writing without reference to books or scientific works such as articles. This implicitly shows that at this time, students more often use or even depend on some supporting tools in doing their writing so, when they don't have the chance to use it, they feel anxious while writing.

Furthermore, This study also found that one of the causes of writing anxiety is due to interpersonal threats. This finding is in line with the results of studies from previous researchers, namely Cheng's. interpersonal threats here means social treatment or threats from outside and are considered unpleasant from both teachers and classmates, one of which is a negative evaluation. This makes students feel afraid and embarrassed so that they feel anxious when they are given writing assignments

In the other hand, this study also succeeded in conducting further exploration of the strategies students used to deal with writing anxiety. Almost the same as previously found by previous researchers, the strategies used by students include having a discussion with friends, having a discussion with the teacher, using supporting apps, drafting, doing self-control, fighting the feeling of anxiety, and pausing.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the causes of the Indonesian EFL learners' writing anxiety and their strategies to cope with this writing anxiety. The study results revealed that the causes of students' writing anxiety emerged from internal cause, external causes, and linguistic causes of writing anxiety. Psychological sources were found in internal causes. This involved students' uncertainty, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence. Meanwhile, aspects included in external causes were interpersonal threats and classroom practices. These interpersonal threats came from students' external relationships, such as interpersonal evaluation, teacher emotion, teacher attitude, and writing without reference to the app. In the other hand, classroom practice aspects consisted of time constraints, kind of writing task, and in-class practice writing. The last cause is linguistic cause that cover about writing aspects, such as vocabulary, grammatical issues, and organization of ideas.

Furthermore, this study also examined how these students coped with writing anxiety that attacked them. The findings revealed that, even though they got writing anxiety, they attempted to continue and finish their writing. They used some affective and cognitive strategies to deal with writing anxiety. This affective strategy refers to activities related to their attitudes and behavior during writing anxiety, such as doing self-control, fighting the feeling of anxiety, and pausing. In contrast, cognitive strategies refer to activities related to their ability to understand the context of writing, such as conducting discussions with teachers and friends, searching for additional information in search and translation applications, and drafting their writing.

Suggestions

Even though writing anxiety is a problem that is sometimes overlooked and dismissed, this study successfully demonstrated that writing anxiety attacked the students, and the causes were arisen from a variety of sources, both internal, external, or linguistic sources. Responding to this, the teacher has a vital role in minimizing the writing anxiety that attacks the students. As suggested, the teacher needs to create a flexible learning activity and motivational learning atmosphere so that writing anxiety can be suppressed as little as possible. For example, giving students a freedom to choose writing topics and/or motivating and appreciating students' writing processes. The teachers must also have sensitivity to

students' conditions so that definite steps can then be taken to overcome the writing anxiety that occurs in students.

Furthermore, the future researchers in their study are expected to dig even deeper into the causes of writing anxiety by using the survey method and involving the teacher's perspective on the strategy to cope with students' writing anxiety.

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