

THE INFLUENCE OF DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING IN REDUCING EFL STUDENTS' WRITING ANXIETY

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Abstract

Writing is considered important because it is one of the four English skills that take a significant role in the success of students' language learning. However, it is undeniable that writing, especially for EFL college students, is still regarded difficult and frustrating (Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). As a result, students experience writing anxiety which affects the quality of their writing. This paper investigated factors that influenced students' writing anxiety and how dialogue journal writing helped students reduce their writing anxiety. This study was based on qualitative research in which anxiety rubric from Ferris & Hedgcock (1998) and questionnaires were administered to gather the data. Besides, samples of journal entries were also used as data collections. The study concluded that there were three major factors influencing the students' writing anxiety: (1) making grammatical mistakes, (2) having difficulty in finding ideas, and (3) making minimum requirement mistakes. The study also revealed 5 specific ways on how dialogue journal helped the students reduce their writing anxiety: (1) Learning grammatically correct sentences, (2) creating a writing habit, (3) providing good examples on how to develop ideas, (4) Learning minimum requirement, and (5) facilitating student-teacher relation.

Keywords: EFL students' writing anxiety dialogue journal writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing is generally considered important because it is one of the four English skills that play a significant role in the success of students' language learning. However, it is undeniable that writing, especially for EFL college students, is regarded difficult and frustrating (Graham, Harris, &

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Mason, 2005). The English Language Education Study Program (ELESP) curriculum divides the learning of writing into 6 compulsory courses before writing their thesis or final paper. However, students' common belief is that writing is still considered difficult. Sawalha et al. (2012) state that EFL college students' common difficulty "lies not only in generating and organizing ideas but also in translating these ideas into readable texts" (p. 6).

This study is related to Basic Writing Skills Class. This is a writing class that must be taken by students of semester one. Based on the Basic Writing Skills course outline, it is described that students are able to write good English sentences and short paragraphs. Hence, by the end of the semester, students are able to construct grammatical and meaningful sentences with good minimum requirements. According to Burton and Carroll (2001), this is often viewed challenging and frustrating since semester one students are those who have just graduated from senior high schools with no basic theory of writing skills and lack of writing practice. As a result, students are not really fluent and confident in writing.

Moreover, many findings identify that writing activity is not far from correcting students' paper in terms of grammatical mistakes. Students' writing will end up being judged and commented by the teacher more on grammar correctness and organization than the content (Wu, 2003). This, of course, will create stressful condition for new college students that will decrease their motivation and confidence to write. In this study, the researcher focuses on the use of dialogue journal writing to scaffold students' writing confidence. Therefore, this study aims to (1) find out factors that influence students' writing anxiety and (2) find out how dialogue journal writing reduces students' writing anxiety.

Hasan (2001) defines writing anxiety as "a general avoidance of writing behavior and of situations thought to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing" (p.4). Normally students who experience difficulties in their prior writing activities/classes will continuously face writing anxiety (Sawalha, Salem, & Foo, 2012) although each of them will have different levels of anxiety compared to others (Casanave, 2004). This is also supported by Cheng (2002) who claims that there might be different reasons of anxiety, but some common causes range from not having self confidence to having problems with classroom activities and teaching methods.

One considerable factor that highly contributes to the students' writing anxiety is students' cultural background and their prior experience about writing. Levine (2003) reports that "students who are from monolingual backgrounds tend to feel more anxious than those who come from bi- or multilingual ones" (p. 10). Besides, students who are not

accustomed to write in their first language face stronger anxiety in English writing class because they are lack of practice. Furthermore, students' prior experience on English writing class is also negative, in that teachers emphasize more on correcting students' grammatical and mechanical errors (Wu, 2003).

Many studies have been conducted to dig into factors that cause students' writing anxiety in EFL writing classroom setting. Hassan (2001), throughout his studies, highlights some major factors of writing anxiety from "linguistic and cognitive perspective, such as poor skill development, inadequate role models, lack of understanding of the composing process, authoritative, teacher-centered, and product-based model of teaching" (p.4). In relation with this, it is also noticed that the insufficient grasp of vocabulary and grammar contribute to students' writing anxiety (Hyland, 2003). These are very evident in their writing product, in that many of them still use inappropriate word choices and parts of speech which might cause misunderstanding of meaning. Furthermore, different basic concept of sentence structure such as sentence fragments, subject-verb agreement, parallelism, etc between L1 and English is also claimed to be the main source of frustration (Sawalha et al., 2012).

According to Daud and Kasim (2005), writing anxiety will affect directly to students' writing performance, which will lead to the quality of the writing. Further effect will result on students' tendency to avoid writing activity and to perform with less motivation (Kara, 2013). Finally, several research studies (e.g. Book, 1976; Bloom, 1985; Cheng, 2002, and Daud & Kasim, 2005) have been conducted addressing the effects of writing anxiety on students' writing performance. The findings obviously discover that students with low anxiety write more words and paragraphs than students with high anxiety. Besides, low-anxiety students' writing will contain more information and explanation. Hence, it can be concluded that reducing writing anxiety will result on students' qualified writing product and more positive attitudes.

As it has been stated before, many EFL college students often experience more negative and anxious feelings toward writing than native language writers (Matthews, 2006). Therefore, teachers should conduct a non-threatening writing activity in class where teachers do not only focus on grading the accuracy. When students have positive feeling about writing, they will be able to perform in any types of writing better. Many studies have found the use of dialogue journals to be beneficial in reducing students' writing anxiety. Peyton (1997) as cited by Regan (2003, p. 37) states:

[The dialogue journal is] a written conversation in which a student and a teacher communicate regularly over a semester, school year, or

course. Students write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back regularly, responding to students' questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. The teacher is a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the student, rather than the evaluator who corrects or comments on the student's writing.

This means that the learning context will be less stressful for students since the teacher does not evaluate and correct their errors on the grammar, content, and organization.

Studies have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of dialogue journal writing on ESL/EFL students' learning and have found many benefits of it. One of the benefits is the improvement of students' expression of personal views and writing purpose (Carroll & Mchawala, 2001). Besides, it is beneficial to the development of writing fluency. Peyton & Reed's (1995) study (as cited by Holmes & Moulton) states that "students' use of language in terms of the number of words and rhetorical complexity is improved" (p.225). However, numerous researchers have validated that the anxiety reduction becomes the most important benefit of dialogue journal writing (Holmes & Moulton, 1995; Peyton, Staton, Richardson, & Wolfram, 1990). In addition, Hsu's 16-week study with a group of students in Taiwan discovered similar findings in that dialogue journal enhanced students' writing development and fostered their writing confidence (2006). It was stated that their perceptions of themselves as writers improved and, therefore, they were more motivated to write.

METHODS

Participants

The main purpose of this study was to explore how dialogue journal writing can reduce students' writing anxiety. This research was conducted in Basic Writing Skills class of English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University. Basic Writing Skills is one of the compulsory writing subjects that must be taken by semester one students. The class is normally divided into 6 parallel classes. Each class consists of around 30 students. The participants of this study were 29 students from class D.

Data Instruments

This research was a qualitative research. The researcher used anxiety rubric, questionnaires, students' reflection, and samples of students' dialogue journals to gather data in order to answer the formulated problems. In order

to find out whether students experience writing anxiety or not and what are factors that influence students' writing anxiety, the researcher distributed anxiety rubric. The rubric is adapted from Ferris & Hedgcock (1998, pp. 239-240). The rubric is as follows:

TABLE 1
Anxiety Rubric (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, pp. 239-240)

Directions: Below are a series of statements about writing. There is no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by checking whether you (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) Agree, or (5) Strongly agree with the statement.							
+/-	No	Statements	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
+	1.	I avoid writing.					
-	2.	I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.					
-	3.	I look forward to writing down my ideas.					
+	4.	I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be evaluated.					
+	5.	Taking a composition course is a very frightening experience.					
-	6.	Handing in a composition makes me feel good.					
+	7.	My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition.					
+	8.	Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.					
-	9.	I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication.					
-	10.	I like to write my ideas down.					
-	11.	I feel confident in my ability to express clearly my ideas in writing.					
-	12.	I like to have my friends read what I have written.					
+	13.	I am nervous about writing.					
-	14.	People seem to enjoy what I write.					
-	15.	I enjoy writing.					
+	16.	I never seem to be able to write down my ideas clearly.					
-	17.	Writing is a lot of fun.					
+	18.	I expect to do poorly in composition classes even before I enter.					
-	19.	I like seeing my thoughts on paper.					
-	20.	Discussing my writing with others is an					

		enjoyable experience.					
+	21.	I have a terrible time organizing ideas in a composition course.					
+	22.	When I hand in a composition, I know I am going to do poorly.					
-	23.	It's easy for me to write good compositions.					
+	24.	I don't think I write as well as most other people.					
+	25.	I don't like my compositions to be evaluated.					
+	26.	I am not good at writing.					
Writing anxiety score							

The writing anxiety score was measured from the calculation. The lowest possible score was 26 and indicated an absence of writing anxiety. Meanwhile the highest possible score was 130 and indicated extremely high anxiety. Besides, this rubric helped the researcher to identify factors that influence students' writing anxiety.

The researcher also distributed questionnaires. The questionnaires contained two types of questions: (1) close-ended questions and (2) open-ended questions. The questions in the questionnaire are as follows:

TABLE 2
 Questions for the questionnaire

No	Questions
1.	Do you like writing?
2.	Before taking Basic Writing Skills class, did you feel anxious when the lecturer asked you to write a paragraph about your personal information? Why/ Why not?
3.	What factors influenced your writing anxiety? (you may choose more than one following options) a. Having difficulty in finding ideas b. Having lack of vocabulary c. Having difficulty in producing correct sentences d. Making grammatical mistakes e. Making minimum requirement mistakes f. Being evaluated
4.	After using dialogue journal writing for 1 semester, how does the dialogue journal writing help you reduce your writing anxiety?
5.	Did the lecturer provide responses towards your writing in the dialogue journal?
6.	Did you find that her responses help you reduce your writing anxiety? Please elaborate your answer.
7.	Did you find that her responses help you improve your writing ability? Please elaborate your answer.

8.	According to you, what is/are the benefit(s) of the dialogue journal writing?
9.	What is/are your suggestion(s) to improve the use of dialogue journal writing in your writing class?

The close-ended questions were aimed to find out factors that influence students' writing anxiety. The open-ended questions were aimed to find out how dialogue journals helped students reduce their writing anxiety and investigate which particular part(s) of dialogue journal writing had the biggest contribution in reducing the anxiety. Finally, the students' dialogue journals are also analyzed in order to observe their thoughts, feelings, and writing experiences.

Research Procedures

The research was conducted for 14 weeks. In the beginning of the semester, the researcher assigned the students to write on a free topic for 10 minutes. The purpose was to introduce the concept of dialogue journal writing. The students, then, were asked to take a writing anxiety test by responding to the anxiety rubric. The next step, the researcher explained the general purpose of the research and the guidelines about what needed to be accomplished for the following 13 weeks. The students participated in the dialogue journal writing project for 13 weeks. The students wrote dialogue journals once a week. The journals were collected to be analyzed. The researcher also distributed questionnaires in the last meeting. Finally, the researcher analyzed the data. The anxiety rubric was interpreted, the questionnaires were also interpreted to illustrate the results, and samples of the students' dialogue journal writings were selected and discussed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Preliminary Study

On the first meeting, the anxiety rubric which is adapted from Ferris & Hedgcock (1998, pp. 239-240) was distributed to 29 students in Basic Writing Skills class. There were 26 statements in the rubric with 5 degrees to indicate how far the students agreed with the statements: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree (see appendix 1). The rubric was aimed to find out whether students experienced writing anxiety or not. The writing anxiety score was measured from the calculation. Figure 1 shows the result of the anxiety rubric.

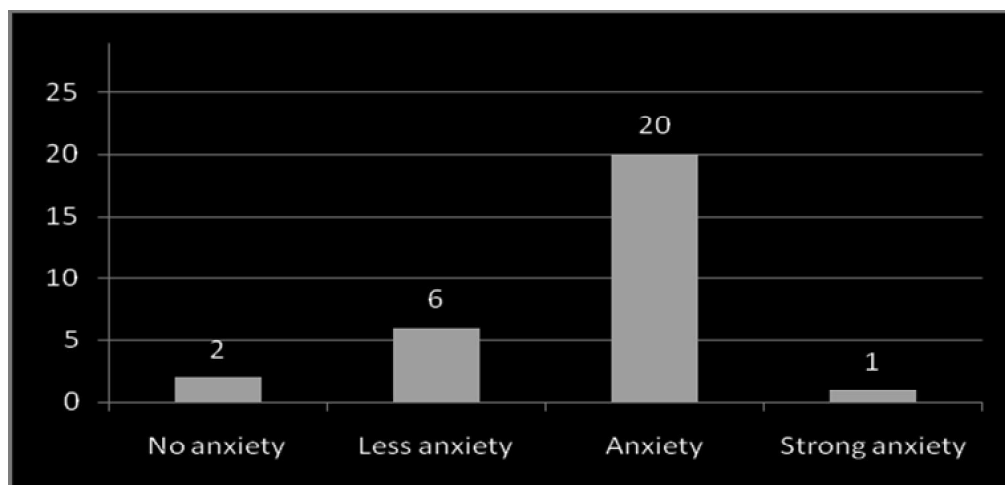


Figure 1. The result of the anxiety rubric

From the preliminary anxiety rubric figure above, it was found that out of 29 students, 72, 4% faced writing anxiety and the level was categorized high shown by the score from 79 to 101. Meanwhile, 27, 6% stated that they did not face any writing anxiety. However, their scores were far above the possible score of anxiety absence which is 26. Their scores were ranged from 48 – 67. The researcher concluded that they, to some extent, still experienced very small amount of anxiety. Starting from this point, the researcher was interested in knowing the specific factors that influenced their writing anxiety. Besides, the researcher also used dialogue journal for one semester to find out how it could help students reduce their writing anxiety.

Factors that Influence Students' Writing Anxiety

Factors that influence students' writing anxiety are related to the first formulated problem to be answered in this study. The researcher used questionnaire and analyzed the students' first reflection to find out the factors of writing anxiety. The researcher wrote six major factors of writing anxiety from Hyland (2003) and Sawalha et al. (2012) in the questionnaire and asked the students to choose which factors really influenced their writing anxiety. The six major factors were: (1) Having difficulty in finding ideas, (2) Having lack of vocabulary, (3) Having difficulty in producing correct sentences, (4) Making grammatical mistakes, (5) Making minimum requirement mistakes, and (6) Being evaluated. The following figure shows the visual representation of the students' answers.

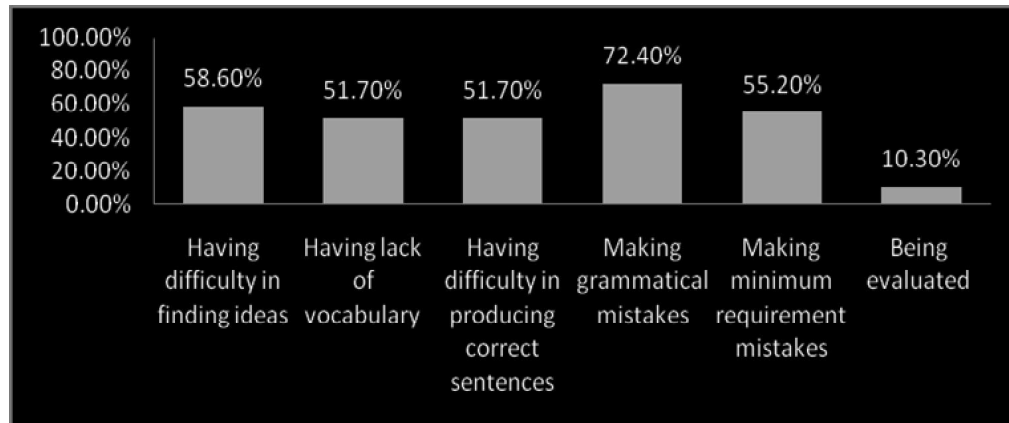


Figure 2. Factors that influenced students' writing anxiety

The data in Figure 2 reveals 3 major factors that really influenced students' anxious feeling towards writing.

1. Making grammatical mistakes

Based on the questionnaire, 72, 4% agreed that they felt anxious when writing because they were afraid of making mistakes related to grammar, especially tenses. The phenomena can also be analyzed further from the students' journal reflection and writing. One student illustrated her anxious feeling in one of her reflections in the dialogue journal:

... I found many difficulties in English writing, especially sentences and grammar. Tenses such as past tenses and perfect tenses are difficult to understand. I am afraid if I make grammar mistakes in my writing. Because of that, I always feel not confident.

Similar to the above reflection, another student mentioned that making grammatical mistakes was her biggest fear in writing. Moreover, she often brought up the discussion about grammar in her dialogue journal and asked for my explanation. One of the examples is as follows:

Miss, I am very afraid of grammar. If I try to study by myself, I can't understand. I want to ask you. When do we use who, which, and that? And I think I have too much "the" in my sentences. I also feel confused about tenses, what and when I can use the correct tenses. Every day, I always wait for the day that I share this problem with you.

2. Having difficulty in finding ideas

Among 29 students participated in this research, 58, 6% stated that they experienced writing anxiety because they had difficulty in finding ideas to write. As written by students in their dialogue journals:

I am worried if I cannot follow your writing class because I have difficulty in finding and expressing ideas in writing.

... I only write without knowing it's correct or not. It's always difficult to find topic, ideas ... I don't know ...

Not being accustomed to write in English in senior high school and not having good English vocabulary were claimed as the main causes of this difficulty.

3. Making minimum requirement mistakes

55, 2% pointed at minimum requirements as the main cause of their writing anxiety. Minimum requirements mentioned here were related to spelling, agreement/concord, verb group, and punctuation. Many of them stated that they never learned minimum requirements in senior high school.

Dialogue Journal Writing and Anxiety Reduction

This section deals with how dialogue journal writing helps students reduce their writing anxiety. The general result gathered from the questionnaire was indeed similar to Hsu's (2006) finding which showed that dialogue journal helped students enhance their writing development and writing confidence. It was found that students' perceptions of themselves as writers improved and, therefore, they were motivated to write. All of the respondents claimed that they became more confident to write after using dialogue journal writing. As two students, S8 and S28, stated:

It helps me so much to improve my confidence. At first, I felt anxious when writing down something. The lecturer's responses really help, especially her motivation (S8).

It helps me improve my writing skills and confidence. I also feel happier to write. Usually I write in the dialogue journal. My lecturer reads it. When she identifies any mistakes she will rewrite similar sentences in her responses. So she actually gives the correct ones but not correcting my writing directly. That's why I feel ok, relax (S28).

Further, the result of the questionnaire revealed 5 specific ways on how dialogue journal helped students reduce their writing anxiety. The detailed explanation is as follows:

1. Dialogue journal helps the students to learn grammatically correct sentences. From the questionnaire, it was found that 51, 7% stated that dialogue journal helped them learn grammatically correct sentences. They mostly learned from the lecturer's responses as shared by S7 and S15:

Using dialogue journal, I think I feel more confident in writing because I can learn grammatically correct sentences from the lecturer's responses (S7).

It helps me learn how to make sentences correctly. The lecturer uses correct sentences in her responses, so I can learn from them (S15).

Learning grammatically correct sentences here refers to learning of correct tenses and the use of verb and to be forms, as stated by S21:

It helps me learn to write correctly in simple present tenses and some other tenses, so I become more confident (S21).

2. Dialogue journal helps students create a writing habit. 44, 8% agreed that dialogue journal helped them get used to writing. They normally wrote once a week in their dialogue journal with any topics they wanted to share. However, they could also write more whenever they had something to share to the lecturer. In other words, it was believed that dialogue journal opened more opportunity for them to write and, therefore, brought positive effects for them. It was expressed by S16 that:

Dialogue journal helps me increase my confidence in writing and my willingness to write in English because I get used to writing regularly (S16).

3. Dialogue journal provides good examples on how to find and develop ideas. 41, 4% claimed that they did not feel anxious because the dialogue journal really helped them find and develop ideas for writing. They mentioned that they learned good examples from the lecturer's responses.

TABLE 1
Students' Questionnaire on finding and
developing ideas through dialogue journal

Students	Comments
S18	It helps me to be accustomed to find ideas more easily because she always gives me new ideas in her response.
S27	It helps me improve my writing skills. I learn how to develop ideas well from her responses.

4. Dialogue journal helps the students learn minimum requirement

Although minimum requirement was emphasized in Basic Writing Skills course objective, the result of the questionnaire showed that there were only 20, 6% who admitted that their understanding of minimum requirement was improved because they could learn from the lecturer's responses in the dialogue journal. They were actually aware that it became the focus of the course; however, they were still afraid of grammar more than it. The minimum requirement in this discussion refers to Agreement (S-V agreement, Noun/Pronoun agreement), verb group, punctuation, articles, and spelling. S26 mentioned in the questionnaire that:

It motivates me to write confidently. I don't need to be anxious because my writing is not evaluated. I also learn grammar, such as the use of verb and when I have to use to be forms, etc, and minimum requirements especially the correct forms of punctuation from her responses (S26).

5. Dialogue journal helps the students build strong positive connection with the teacher

Finally, 31, 0% of the students felt that they were helped to have close connection with the lecturer. As a result, they could express their feeling and stories freely. S12 expressed this part in the questionnaire:

... I can tell and express my feeling and ideas to the lecturer and she always responds. Her responses make me more confident to write my idea. We talk just like friends (S12).

An agreement also came from S23 who wrote:

It helps me to be more confident because writing becomes a habit. Besides, I can learn from her responses, so I know when I make mistakes by comparing my writing and her response. She always responds nicely, so I feel close and

relax. She supported me and tells me not to be afraid of making mistakes (S23).

This close and positive connection shown by the students above make the students feel comfortable and relaxed. As a result, they became more confident in writing and, therefore, reduced their writing anxiety.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, it was found that all of the students faced writing anxiety in the beginning of the class, although the levels were different. Yet the result of the study proved that dialogue journal writing helped students reduce their writing anxiety. It was mostly because dialogue journal helped them improve their writing through the teacher's responses. However, although the main idea of dialogue journal writing is to be free from teacher's revision and grading, some students suggested that the lecturer correct their grammatical mistakes. Therefore, teachers who want to implement dialogue journal in their writing class can also consider giving some comments on repeated mistakes while responding to their writing. However, teachers need to be aware that too many comments on grammar can make students feel anxious.

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