

**TEACHING WRITING TO EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: SOME IMPORTANT ISSUES  
(Reducing Writer's block and Breakthrough to Better Teaching)**

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**Abstract**

This article discussed that the students' difficulties in writing can be triggered by a lot of factors, but to solve those difficulties is never ending story. While correction of piece of writing is believed can helped students improve their writing, but the fact that the implementation of correction still cannot solve the problem. Moreover, students tend to be apprehensive. Writing apprehensive is dealing with the anxiety about writing. Students feel fear when they are assigned to write a piece of writing. This nevertheless, is a problematical issue that needs to be solved by the writing instructor or teacher. Some experts stated that writing apprehension can be caused by several factors, such as lack of writing strategies, inappropriate teachers' writing teaching techniques, inappropriate contain of writing textbooks, and the students' cognitive. Therefore, a better teaching instruction perhaps will minimize students' apprehension in writing. This article tries to give an insight for a better teaching writing and how to deal with the problem that the students face when writing.

**Keywords:** *writing skill, writers' block, writing apprehension, apprehensive*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Writing in university has been regarded as one of the complex English skills that require thoroughly ways in order to produce a highly rich piece of writing. Writing is also one important skill for academic success. It therefore, needs a lot of efforts on making the students write better. These efforts will be potential when they go to the right target. However, most of the effort is aimed at skill building and grammar instruction. Writing in university is not only about producing a grammatically correct piece of writing, but the writing should show a well communicative writing that can deliver what the writer intended to convey.

More development on writing teaching approaches have been growing in the recent decade, such as “portfolio assessment, peer evaluation, conferencing with instructors, communicative approaches, computer writing software, mail exchange, etc” (Lee, 2003, p. 112). Those approaches have been underpinned by researches that show their effectiveness on teaching and learning. Yet, most writing instructors still cannot give up conservative grammatical error correction and cannot successfully apply the new approaches mentioned above. The gap between research findings and the practice in real classrooms never seems to be filled. Accordingly, the cause of students’ writing difficulties has not yet been discovered.

A number of researches on English as Foreign Language (EFL) writing have been conducted. Those researches view EFL writing as a complex and continuing process that need some remedies to overcome. In this case, students not only deal with writing techniques but more serious than that. This is what we call writing apprehension or anxiety where students have problems with their negative affective domain toward writing. This term was coined by Daly and Miller (1975) but later the most common researcher on this field is Lee and Krashen (2002). Apprehension can be triggered by several factors; namely, students' traumatic past experiences in writing, lower expectations and negative responses from teachers, and the lack of writing competence (Lee, 2003, as cited in Daly, 1979 & 1985; Daly & Wilson, 1983; Duke, 1980; Harvley-Felder, 1978; Miller, 1975). It can be assumed that those factors are from learning and teaching experience the students get. Teacher should know that the learning experience that the students will have will eventually determine the success of students in learning. Continuous and extreme grammar correction will undeniably affects students affective in learning which later contribute to the students’ competent performance. Ineffective teaching is also related to this issue.

The relationship of writing apprehension and students’ writing proficiency has also been researched widely. The link between students’ writing and their apprehension, attitude and perhaps self-efficacy is believed to cause

students' poor performance in writing. Long time before, Truscott (1996) had identified that the harmful cause of apprehension is the over applied of grammar correction when assessing students' writing. He believed that it will not only attack students confident but also it cause traumatic effect. He further stated that producing a successful writing needs a limited amount of stress condition. Hassan (2001) asserted that apprehension and writing are negatively influenced. He contended that to lower students' apprehension and anxiety levels could be solved by replacing "teacher's evaluation with peer or self-evaluation whenever possible". As cited in Singh and Rajalingam (2012), a study conducted by Hanna (2010) showed that there are differences found between students who have low and high apprehension toward their writing performance. The students who highly have apprehension feelings tend to have poor quality writing and mostly avoid writing assignment compared to low apprehensive students.

Similarly, a study conducted by Erkan and Saban (2011) on Writing Performance Relative to Writing Apprehension, Self-Efficacy in Writing, and Attitudes towards Writing proved that "when one's attitude towards writing is good, one's apprehension about writing would be lower" (p. 184). Thus, the link between apprehension and writing performance does have influential effect that cannot be taken into granted.

On contrary, a study investigated by Singh and Rajalingam (2012) confirmed that the

relationship between writing apprehension level and writing proficiency indicated that the higher the apprehension level the better the respondents performance. Interestingly, this result indicates that the more anxious the students feel when producing writing the more careful they are in writing and this will lead to better writing. These findings however, contradict the previous studies and make us think that, students who have high apprehension might approach their writing with negative attitudes and avoid writing whenever there was an opportunity. This study is also supported by Horwitz (1991). Therefore, it can be caused not only by students uncomfortable moment but also their competent.

This study however, leads us to discuss more the problematical issue regarding students writing performance. Without doubt, it can be concluded that students writing performance is surely affected by writing apprehension but also their cognitive. Attitude and self efficacy are two main aspects that cannot be avoided when talking about those problematical things. Therefore this paper will discuss those issues more and hope to give more insightful ideas to a better teaching writing.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Some Important Issues in Teaching Writing**

One of the important issues in teaching writing is when dealing with assessment. Teacher, as the one who check students' paper is hoped to give a proper feedback on the students' papers.

This is probably the most controversial issue because it is believed that giving correction on the students' paper can trigger writing apprehension. Grammar correction or error correction is considered offensive and harmful (Lee, 2003). She further stated that "Students' *perceived importance* of error correction and teachers' response did not significantly account for how they performed in actual writing, i.e., their writing performance does not reflect the effectiveness of teachers' comments and error correction, if there is any"

On the other hand, a lot of studies have been conducted on students' writing errors. The errors related to grammar are mostly noticeable (Zitouni, 2015; Mohamed & Zouaoui, 2014; Ghabool, 2012). The finding of the researches showed that one of the causes of the errors is inappropriate used of given feedback. This is however, become a complicated issue among writing teachers. On one hand, the study suggested that giving feedback such as error correction and grammar correction will help students to perform better writing, but on the other hand, the correction of grammar error will lead to apprehension that can cause writing difficulties.

Moreover, this issue will lead to more debatable argument. One is certain is there is a problem with the instruction and writing process in the classroom and the implementation of that instruction and process after all.

Other important issue is the influence of knowledge. Learned knowledge has played

important role toward second language acquisition. Without doubt, knowledge can help students check their errors in language utterance or while writing. According to Lee, (2003), the learned knowledge can work well in three required condition: sufficient time, focus on form, and know the grammar rule. If one of these conditions is absent, thus the monitor or learned knowledge will not work as expected. Writing apprehension is believed will create monitor over user who tend to focus on form than on content, which leads to more fluent production but lack of accuracy. To conclude, only students who are interested in studying grammar can get greater impact of error or grammar correction (Krashen, 2002).

Finally, writing apprehension can be minimized with reading. "The Reading Hypothesis delivers what grammar instruction and correction cannot deliver" (Lee, 2003, p. 122). Writing competent can be developed through reading. A study conducted by Mermelstein (2015) showed that extensive reading did contribute to the improvement of writing skill. Certainly, there is no single method that fits for all, but this reading program is believed to have a certain effect on students writing's performance (Kirin, 2010) even it only improves the students' written work to a certain level.

## **2. Writer's block**

To produce a good piece of writing is not easy; it needs a lot of stages to follow. One biggest difference between expert writer and

novice writer is on the planning stage. Expert writing tend to have a well organized writing but novice writer miss this stage. In this part, the novice writers have some difficulties in dealing with their writing. The most related difficulty in writing is writing apprehension. Badrasawi, Zubairi and Idrus (2016) confirmed that students' writing apprehension is as follow,

“Writing apprehensive is frightened by a demand of writing; they fear evaluation of their writing; they usually avoid writing; their writing tasks or assignments are late or non-existent and their anxiety of writing is often reflected in their written products and their behaviors and attitudes about writing situations” (p. 135).

This situation has been believed as a trigger of problematical issue in writing. Without doubt, apprehension in writing is unavoidably occurred. Bishop (1989) stated that students with high level of apprehension tended to have less control over usage and written form compared to students who have low level apprehension. Moreover, high Apprehension students tended to write shorter and lack of syntactically complete phrases or sentences.

According to Al Asmari (2013), writing apprehension is similar to writing anxiety, where the students in this condition feel fear of the writing process. Additionally, Kara (2013) identified that writing anxiety can either be the cause or the effect of poor writing performance, because there some studies that claims poor writing performance is caused by undeveloped skills in writing. Her study revealed that the

students who have anxiety in writing stated that “because they do not have writing habit and they occasionally wrote in their previous experience and they are not used to writing and express themselves in writing because in their previous education they are familiar taking tests” (p. 108).

However, other complex writing blocks also influence the writing performance of the students. They mentioned that they have low writing skills such us in organizing ideas, and combining those ideas in a good way. They also claimed that their English is not enough to express themselves clearly. Moreover, teacher motivation and feedback are also considered important to boost students' writing performance. The writing teaching technique may also cause writing anxiety, for instance the teacher did not provide enough example and interesting way of teaching. Another problem is the use of appropriate writing textbook. Textbook which fail to provide enough example and exercises is believed can cause the lack of writing ability (Jahin, 2012; Kara, 2013; Al Asmari, 2013; Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2016). That problematical issue therefore, leads to writing anxiety. In this case, teacher should prevent the anxiety to occur in the learning process.

To sum up, writer's block will frequently happen to every writer, but the way how to deal with it is matter, in this part, teacher should minimize the block from the students and make them to slightly have low apprehension when writing process take place.

### **3. Teaching Writing Enhancement**

To reduce writing apprehension from the students, a better improvement on writing instruction should be paid attention. Some insight to a better teaching probably will be helpful. Providing them with a traditional and product oriented way of teaching writing should be considered.

In many countries, creating and discovering and also experimenting a new instruction in teaching writing has been evolving for decades. Many articles have published the findings of the research on a new way of teaching writing. However, there is always gap between the research findings and the implementation in the classroom. A lot of questions appeared regarding the issue, what the teacher should do when confronting the writing text of the students, how the teacher corrects them, and how to assess them. Those questions need to be answered soon in order to reduce the block of students writing.

Lee (2003) revealed that there are some important points need to be considered in order to reduce the blocks. First of all, it is related to the process of writing. When the teaching goal is to increase students' awareness of well-organized writing process thus it will improve students' ability in writing. Likewise, before that, Badger and White (2000) affirmed that "Writing in process approaches is seen as predominantly to do with linguistic skills, such as planning and drafting, and there is much less emphasis on linguistic knowledge, such as

knowledge about grammar and text structure" (p. 154). Similarly, in the process approach the students are required to comprehend the process of writing, generating their ideas, outlining, drafting, and writing a final paper (Qamariah, 2016).

The other point that can generate better writing instruction is the thinking process. Wallas (as cited in Lee, 2003) proposed this term as incubation. This is related to subconscious process of generating ideas. Lee (2003) suggested that some preparation for thinking process can be conducted by talking (discussing), but writing is a very prevailing way of presenting ideas to the subconscious mind, because writing can lead us to correspond to our current thoughts on the page. Thus, the thinking process seems to occur well when our mind in a relax condition.

Therefore, writing teacher should provide some time for the students to alert their thinking subconsciously by preparing them to the stage of discussing the topic and let them write their ideas in the paper. In traditional classroom, or in the product approach, we tend to limit the time for the students, so they do not have time to think.

Subsequently, this process needs to be followed by other conscious process, for example planning, outlining, drafting, revising and writing.

The next point that can be implemented in writing instruction is the writing process itself. The students should spend time more on the

writing process. Starting from brainstorming that is generated from incubation process, then planning, drafting, revising and editing and reread, and might be do some more revising process will lead to well-organized piece of writing. Nunan (1991) stated that the process approach writing concentrates in steps of producing a piece of writing that involve reflecting on, discussing and reworking on good drafts of a text. Ho (2006, p.2) urged that comparing to traditional methods which stress on writing product, the process approach has brought about improvement of writing instruction over years. Has been implemented to different level of teaching models, the process approach of writing has been believed to cause significant result in creating a better writing (Sun, 2009, p.155).

Experts say that, good writers do many revision steps compared to poor writers. Thus, the focus is not only on form of the writing but more importantly on the content. Revising some word choice several times before writing the final paper is also conducted by advance writer. Lee (2003) stated that for poor writers, they consider revision to be editing, simply making a neater version of the previous draft, but for experienced writers, revision strategies are part of the process of discovering meaning (p.128). Therefore, doing revision on the writing helps students find the problem and then solve them,

find some irrelevant sentence and inappropriate points and revise them.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper explains some causes of difficulties faced by students in writing. The explanation started from the affection that is apprehension in writing which cannot be pushed aside because it will unavoidably happen. Then, it explains the cognitive aspect such as writing skills and strategies that also become the cause of the difficulties in writing. Subsequently this paper tried to give some insightful ideas in dealing with those difficulties and help to create better writing instruction such as bringing process in the classroom, raising the mind of the students in order to generate new ideas and conducting writing process by stressing on planning and revising stages. Therefore, this paper is hoped can give some ideas for the writing teacher to create a comfortable condition for the student in doing their writing process and also to create a better teaching instruction.

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