

Writing Anxiety in an EFL Recount Text Classroom: A Case Study of Eighth-Grade Students

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines the writing anxiety experienced by eighth-grade students during an English recount-text writing lesson at SMP Negeri 3 Pakem, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, focusing on how three focal students display cognitive, somatic, and avoidance-related anxiety while composing a recount text about Indonesian Independence Day celebrations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three eighth-grade students and their English teacher, non-participant classroom observation, and a five-dimension self-assessment writing questionnaire, then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that limited vocabulary and grammatical uncertainty were the most frequently reported sources of anxiety, manifesting behaviorally as delayed writing onset, reliance on translation applications, and dependence on peers. A marked gap emerged between students' moderate self-ratings and the more serious errors documented during observation, suggesting limited metacognitive awareness of their own writing weaknesses. Contextual factors, including a supportive teacher-student relationship, freedom to choose personally relevant topics, and visually engaging series of pictures, appeared to ease anxiety, though the series of pictures alone did not eliminate hesitation to write. The study recommends combining visual scaffolding with explicit vocabulary instruction, sustained teacher rapport, and low-stakes practice to reduce writing anxiety among junior high school EFL learners.

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Introduction

Learning to write in English poses one of the most demanding challenges for junior high school students in Indonesia, particularly because writing requires the simultaneous coordination of vocabulary retrieval, grammatical accuracy, idea organization, and audience awareness within a foreign language system. Under the current Kurikulum

Merdeka framework, eighth-grade students at the junior secondary level are expected to compose short functional and narrative-based texts, including recount text, a genre that requires learners to retell a personal experience in chronological order using Simple Past Tense and appropriate time connectives. While the genre itself draws on familiar personal experiences, many students still struggle considerably when asked to transform these experiences into written English, often producing minimal output, relying heavily on translation tools, or avoiding the writing task altogether. This challenge is consistent with prior evidence that explicit, genre-based instruction is needed to help junior high school students master the structural and grammatical demands of recount text writing (Mastura et al., 2020).

This reluctance to write is frequently linked in the literature to writing anxiety, an affective barrier that specifically concerns learners' negative emotional reactions toward the process of composing in a second or foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986; Nugroho & Ena, 2021; Zhong, 2025). Writing anxiety has been described as comprising several interrelated dimensions, commonly categorized as cognitive anxiety, or worry about one's own linguistic competence and the quality of the finished product; somatic anxiety, or the physical tension and discomfort associated with the writing task; and avoidance behavior, or the tendency to delay, minimize, or evade writing altogether (Kaimuddin et al., 2023; Zhong, 2025). These dimensions do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact with contextual variables such as teacher rapport, task design, and the availability of instructional scaffolding to shape how strongly a learner experiences and displays anxiety in a given classroom moment.

Recent studies conducted in various EFL contexts have consistently found that junior and senior high school students experience moderate to high levels of writing anxiety, with cognitive anxiety and avoidance behavior typically reported as the most pronounced dimensions (Kaimuddin et al., 2023; Nugroho & Ena, 2021; Rasool et al., 2023; Zhong, 2025). Zhong (2025), for instance, surveyed 343 junior high school students in China and found that avoidance behavior was the most prominent anxiety dimension overall, although it tended to decrease as students progressed from Grade 7 to Grade 9, while confidence-related anxiety peaked specifically in Grade 8, the same grade level examined in the present study. In the Indonesian context, learners have been found to cope with foreign language anxiety through a range of strategies, including seeking peer assistance, simplifying their output, and displaying visible signs of discomfort such as prolonged silence or repeated erasing (Abdurahman & Rizqi, 2020). Writing anxiety has also been shown to correlate negatively with writing self-efficacy, meaning that students who feel more anxious about

writing tend to hold weaker beliefs in their own capability to produce competent text ([Almutairy, 2024](#); [Soleimani et al., 2020](#)).

Despite this growing body of research, most existing studies on junior high school writing anxiety rely predominantly on quantitative questionnaires such as the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory, which, while useful for establishing prevalence and broad patterns, offer limited insight into how anxiety actually unfolds moment-to-moment inside a specific classroom, or how it interacts with an individual student's self-perception of their own writing competence. Qualitative, context-rich case studies that triangulate interview data, direct classroom observation, and student self-assessment remain comparatively scarce, particularly at the junior high school level in Indonesia and in relation to text types such as recount text that are explicitly tied to personal experience. This gap is significant because affective responses to writing are highly situated; a student's anxiety in one lesson, with one teacher, using one instructional medium, may differ meaningfully from the aggregate patterns captured by a survey administered across a larger and more heterogeneous sample.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the phenomenon of writing anxiety as it emerged during a classroom observation at SMP Negeri 3 Pakem, Yogyakarta, focusing on a recount-text writing lesson that incorporated a series of pictures as instructional media. During this observation, a striking pattern was recorded: despite a carefully structured Presentation-Practice-Production lesson, the use of a contextually relevant series of pictures depicting Indonesian Independence Day celebrations, and sustained encouragement from the class teacher, the majority of students in Class VIIID were unable to begin or sustain independent writing, while a smaller group of roughly one third of the class engaged with comparatively greater initiative. This uneven engagement, together with the strong emotional language used by students in follow-up interviews, including expressions of feeling not confident, afraid, or unable to understand instructions, suggested that writing anxiety, rather than motivation alone, was an important underlying factor shaping students' classroom behavior.

Visual instructional media, including series of pictures, have long been advocated as tools capable of easing the burden of foreign language writing by providing concrete, non-linguistic scaffolding for idea generation and text organization ([Wahono & Afifah, 2022](#)). Studies situated in the Indonesian EFL context have shown that a series of pictures can help students clarify the structural stages of a text, expand relevant vocabulary, and reduce the perceived difficulty of a writing task ([Romi et al., 2025](#)), while a study focusing specifically on recount text found that a series of pictures improved students' ability to sequence and

elaborate on personal historical events (Gayatri & Gaffar, 2023). However, the same body of literature also notes that visual media can foster a degree of dependence, and that its benefits are best realized when paired with guided writing practice rather than treated as a stand-alone solution (Romi et al., 2025). This nuance is directly relevant to the present study, since a series of pictures was already present as an instructional element in the observed lesson, offering a natural opportunity to examine whether, and to what extent, visual scaffolding alone was sufficient to offset the anxiety that students displayed.

Another important dimension concerns the relationship between students' self-perceived writing competence and their actual writing performance. Writing self-efficacy, or a learner's belief in their own capacity to complete a writing task successfully, has been found to correlate negatively with writing anxiety (Almutairy, 2024; Soleimani et al., 2020), yet the direction and accuracy of this self-belief is not always straightforward. When students lack sufficient metacognitive awareness of their own errors, their self-assessment may not reliably track their actual performance, complicating any simple assumption that lower anxiety necessarily reflects stronger underlying competence. This study therefore also considers self-assessment data alongside direct classroom observation, allowing for a comparison between what students believed about their own writing and what was actually documented in their written output and classroom behavior.

The fieldnote recorded during the observation offers further texture to this picture. During the Presentation phase, the teacher displayed a series of pictures depicting scenes from an Indonesian Independence Day celebration, including a sack race, a krupuk-eating race, and a flag ceremony, intending the images to serve as a visual scaffold connecting the recount text topic to students' lived experiences. Yet the classroom atmosphere during this phase remained largely passive; when the teacher asked students whether they had ever joined an Independence Day competition, only a small number of students responded, and their answers were brief. This early passivity foreshadowed a more pronounced divide during the subsequent Practice and Production phases, in which roughly one third of the class engaged with the model text and writing task with some initiative, while the majority remained disengaged, waiting for the teacher to approach them individually before beginning to write. Such patterns of uneven engagement, hesitation, and reliance on translation are precisely the kind of classroom-level evidence that a case study is well positioned to capture and interpret in relation to writing anxiety.

Rather than measuring the prevalence of writing anxiety across a large sample, this study adopts a case study design to explore, in depth, how writing anxiety is experienced, expressed, and, at times, mitigated by three focal eighth-grade students within their actual

classroom context. Understanding this phenomenon at the level of individual students, rather than only at the level of aggregate classroom statistics, matters because it is ultimately individual students, not classes as undifferentiated wholes, who experience the discomfort of not knowing where to begin, who reach for a translation application out of uncertainty, or who quietly decide that writing in English is simply too difficult to attempt without help.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What forms and sources of writing anxiety are experienced by eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Pakem when writing a recount text in English?
2. How does writing anxiety manifest in students' classroom behavior and in the gap, if any, between their self-assessment of writing ability and their observed writing performance?
3. What contextual factors appear to intensify or mitigate students' writing anxiety during the lesson?

By triangulating student interviews, a teacher interview, classroom observation, and a self-assessment questionnaire, this study aims to provide a grounded, classroom-situated account of writing anxiety that can inform both future instructional design and the broader understanding of affective barriers to English writing among Indonesian junior high school students. The supportive role of a warm teacher-student relationship in easing learners' affective burden (Li, 2022) and the documented, though partial, benefit of a series of pictures as a scaffolding tool for recount text writing (Gayatri & Gaffar, 2023; Wahono & Afifah, 2022) are of particular interest, since both featured directly in the classroom context under study.

Method

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018) to obtain an in-depth, context-bound understanding of writing anxiety as experienced by eighth-grade students within a single, naturally occurring English lesson. A case study design was considered appropriate because writing anxiety, as an affective and highly situated phenomenon, is best understood through multiple, converging sources of evidence gathered within its real classroom context rather than through decontextualized measurement alone (Yin, 2018). The case examined in this study is bounded by place, namely Class VIIID at SMP Negeri 3 Pakem; time, namely the observation session on 12 May 2026; and activity, namely a recount text writing lesson on the theme of Celebrating Independence Day taught using the Presentation-Practice-Production method.

B. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 3 Pakem, a public junior high school in the Sleman Regency of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The class under study, VIIID, consisted of approximately 30 students and was taught by an English teacher, using the Nusantara textbook's Chapter 1 unit on recount text. Three focal students were purposively selected from Class VIIID to represent the range of engagement and confidence levels observed during the observation session: a student who displayed relatively higher confidence and enjoyment of English despite some self-doubt, referred to here as Student 1 (N); a student who displayed comparatively indifferent or avoidant engagement, referred to here as Student 2 (F); and a student whose engagement was strongly mediated by peer support and external tools such as translation applications, referred to here as Student 3 (R). Purposive selection of this kind is consistent with case study logic, which prioritizes information-rich cases capable of illuminating the phenomenon under investigation rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the class English teacher was interviewed to provide a complementary, instructor-level perspective on students' motivation and writing difficulties.

C. Data Collection Instruments

Four instruments were used to collect data for this study. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the three focal students, each comprising ten questions on learning motivation and ten questions on writing skills, allowing students to elaborate freely on their experiences, feelings, and coping strategies in relation to English writing. Second, a parallel semi-structured interview, also comprising ten questions on motivation and ten on writing instruction, was conducted with the class teacher to triangulate the students' accounts with the instructor's classroom-level observations. Third, a structured non-participant classroom observation checklist consisting of 25 behavioral indicators was used to record observable signs of engagement, hesitation, and avoidance during the writing lesson, with the researcher seated unobtrusively at the back of the classroom. Fourth, a self-assessment questionnaire adapted from Brown and Bailey's (1984) writing rubric as presented in Brown and Abeywickrama (2019) was administered to the three focal students, comprising 25 statements across five writing dimensions, namely Organization, Content, Grammar, Mechanics, and Style and Quality of Expression, rated on a 1-5 Likert scale, together with an open-ended comment section. This combination of instruments was intended to allow triangulation across self-report, direct behavioral observation, and instructor perspective, strengthening the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

D. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in a single observation session on 12 May 2026, from 07.00 to 09.00 Western Indonesian Time. The researcher observed the entire lesson as a non-participant, seated at the back of the classroom, and completed the observation checklist in real time. Individual interviews with the three focal students were conducted later the same day, from 12.00 to 13.00 Western Indonesian Time, while the class teacher was interviewed during the observation session itself; all interviews were documented in structured interview transcripts signed by both the researcher and the respective participants. The self-assessment questionnaires were completed independently by students at the end of the session.

E. Data Analysis

Data from the three sources, namely interviews, the observation checklist, and self-assessment questionnaires, were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which involved becoming thoroughly familiar with the interview transcripts, fieldnote, and questionnaire responses; generating initial codes related to expressions of difficulty, discomfort, avoidance, and confidence; collating codes into candidate themes representing recurring patterns of writing anxiety and its contextual moderators across the three focal students; and reviewing and refining these themes against the observation checklist and teacher interview data to ensure they were grounded in multiple, convergent sources of evidence. Rather than treating the three data sources as separate strands, the analysis deliberately cross-referenced them, for example by checking whether a student's self-reported confidence in the interview matched the corresponding self-assessment ratings and the behavior recorded in the observation checklist and fieldnote.

F. Trustworthiness

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, this study relied on methodological triangulation across interviews, classroom observation, and self-assessment questionnaire data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview transcripts were reviewed and signed by each student participant and the teacher, providing a form of participant validation of the recorded responses. The researcher also maintained reflective fieldnotes throughout the observation to document contextual details and to guard against over-interpretation of isolated behaviors. Finally, because the researcher was also the students' English teacher, the researcher's dual positioning as both observer and instructor designer was made explicit throughout the analysis, and interpretations were checked against the independent teacher interview to reduce the risk that the researcher's own expectations about the value of a series of pictures unduly shaped the reading of the data.

Findings and Discussion

The following section presents the findings of this case study, organized around nine interrelated themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of student interviews, the teacher interview, classroom observation, and the self-assessment questionnaires. [Table 1](#) first summarizes the profile of the three focal students to orient the discussion that follows.

Table 1. Profile of the Three Focal Students

Student	Engagement Pattern During Observation	Primary Reported Source of Anxiety	Primary Coping Strategy
Student 1 (N)	Comparatively attentive; expressed interest in personal and hobby-related topics	Limited vocabulary; not fully confident	Reviewing and revising her own writing independently
Student 2 (F)	Indifferent; described lessons as not very exciting; reluctant on writing tasks, especially in the afternoon	Grammar, particularly verb tense and punctuation	Copying from a friend who understands the task
Student 3 (R)	Peer-dependent; engagement affected by time of day	Difficulty reading and pronouncing English text; uncertainty about instructions	Asking friends and using AI tools such as ChatGPT

A. Cognitive Anxiety: Vocabulary and Grammar as the Dominant Worry

Across all three focal students, the most frequently and consistently reported source of writing anxiety centered on cognitive concerns about their own linguistic competence, particularly vocabulary and grammar. Student 1 (N) explained that her main difficulty in writing was vocabulary, stating that she often does not know the meaning of words, and that this same uncertainty made her feel not fully confident about her ability to succeed in English even when she was willing to work hard. Student 2 (F) located his difficulty more specifically in grammar, citing verb conjugation and punctuation as his greatest obstacles, while Student 3 (R) reported that he frequently did not know how to read or pronounce English words correctly, which in turn undermined his confidence in producing a coherent written text. These self-reports converge closely with the classroom observation, which documented that, across the class as a whole, tense errors and subject-verb agreement errors were widespread in students' recount text drafts, alongside limited and repetitive vocabulary.

Student 1 (N): “tidak tahu arti” (“[I] do not know the meaning”); vocabulary is her main difficulty, and she also finds it hard to understand the task instructions. Asked whether she believed she could succeed in English if she worked hard enough, she answered “tidak pede” (“not confident”), for the same reason. (Student Interview 1, Motivation item 5 and Writing item 2, 12 May 2026)

Student 2 (F): grammar is his main difficulty, specifically verb conjugation (“verb 1, verb 2, verb 3”) and punctuation (“titik, koma”, i.e., full stops and commas). He also stated that he was “tidak pede” (“not confident”) because he found vocabulary difficult

and felt he still lacked ability. (Student Interview 2, Motivation item 5 and Writing item 2, 12 May 2026)

Student 3 (R): “enggak tahu cara baca” (“[I] do not know how to read [them]”); he does not know how to read or pronounce English words correctly and cannot read the sample text given in class fluently, which he linked to his difficulty with grammar. (Student Interview 3, Writing item 2, 12 May 2026)

This pattern is consistent with recent findings that cognitive anxiety, rather than somatic anxiety, tends to be one of the most prominent dimensions of writing anxiety among EFL learners across different educational levels (Kaimuddin et al., 2023; Zhong, 2025). Zhong (2025) similarly found that, among junior high school students in China, confidence-related anxiety peaked precisely at Grade 8, the same grade level examined here, suggesting that the eighth-grade transition point may carry particular affective weight as students face increasingly demanding writing tasks while their linguistic resources remain under development. The present findings extend this pattern by illustrating, at the level of individual students, how a single perceived linguistic gap, whether in vocabulary or grammar, can become the anchor around which broader feelings of low confidence are organized.

It is also worth noting that none of the three focal students framed their cognitive anxiety as a general dislike of English; rather, each pinpointed a specific linguistic component that troubled them. Student 1 (N)'s concern with vocabulary meaning, Student 2 (F)'s concern with verb forms and punctuation, and Student 3 (R)'s concern with reading and pronunciation together suggest that cognitive writing anxiety at this grade level may be less a single, undifferentiated worry and more a cluster of distinct micro-anxieties, each tied to a particular linguistic subskill. This distinction matters pedagogically, because it implies that a single, generic confidence-building intervention may be less effective than targeted support addressing each subskill directly, for instance through focused vocabulary previews before a writing task for students like Student 1 (N), explicit tense-and-punctuation mini-lessons for students like Student 2 (F), and guided reading-aloud practice for students like Student 3 (R).

B. Avoidance Behavior: Hesitation to Begin and Reliance on External Aids

The classroom observation captured avoidance behavior in vivid, concrete form during the Production phase of the lesson. Despite having received explicit instruction and a model text during the Presentation and Practice phases, the majority of students in Class VIIID sat for an extended period without writing, stared at blank notebooks, or glanced repeatedly at the series of pictures without translating that visual input into written sentences. Several students opened Google Translate and entered Indonesian sentences word by word, while

others searched printed dictionaries item by item rather than composing sentences directly in English. Student 2 (F)'s interview responses corroborate this pattern directly: he described tending to copy from a friend who understood the task rather than attempting the writing independently, particularly when he did not understand the instructions. Student 3 (R) likewise reported a strong tendency to ask friends for help when stuck, especially when he saw that others had already finished, and described using AI tools such as ChatGPT to locate vocabulary and understand text structure.

Student 2 (F): rather than planning his own text, he tends to “nyontek” (“copy”) from a friend who understands the task; he stated that when he does not understand the instructions, he asks a classmate who does. (Student Interview 2, Writing item 3, 12 May 2026)

Student 3 (R): he thinks about what to write but is “kadang enggak yakin” (“sometimes not sure”), and when he is unsure he tends to “tanya teman” (“ask a friend”) rather than work it out alone, particularly when he sees that others have already finished. He also reported using YouTube videos and AI tools such as ChatGPT to find vocabulary and to understand how a text should be structured. (Student Interview 3, Writing items 3, 6 and 9, 12 May 2026)

Teacher: most students are reluctant at the beginning of a task; they sit without writing for quite a long time, look at what their peers are doing, or ask whether they can write in Indonesian first, and students in this class in particular need individual prompting before they start. (Teacher Interview, Writing item 7, 12 May 2026)

These behaviors align closely with the concept of avoidance as one of the core dimensions of writing anxiety (Kaimuddin et al., 2023; Nugroho & Ena, 2021; Zhong, 2025) and with documented coping strategies among Indonesian EFL learners more broadly, which frequently include seeking peer assistance and adopting simplified or externally supported responses when faced with a threatening language task (Abdurahman & Rizqi, 2020). Notably, Zhong (2025) found that avoidance behavior, while the most pronounced anxiety dimension overall among junior high school students, tended to decrease from Grade 7 to Grade 9; the heavy reliance on translation tools and peer copying observed in this Grade 8 class may represent a transitional stage in which avoidance is still strong but has begun to take more resourceful, technology-mediated forms rather than complete non-participation. This pattern also mirrors evidence from other Indonesian EFL classrooms, where students have been found to lean on Google Translate and similar tools as a convenient, if sometimes over-relied-upon, scaffold when a writing task feels too demanding to attempt unaided (Satriawan et al., 2026).

C. Somatic and Situational Triggers: Time of Day and Classroom Conditions

A less commonly discussed but clearly articulated trigger of anxiety in this case was the timing of the writing lesson within the school day. Student 2 (F) explicitly linked his negative feelings toward writing tasks to afternoon sessions, describing himself as feeling lazy to

write when the classroom was hot and he felt sleepy. Student 3 (R) drew a similar contrast, reporting that he felt quite happy about writing in the morning when he was still alert and could think clearly, but that he became sleepy and unmotivated in afternoon sessions. While the lesson analyzed in this study was itself conducted in the morning, both students' comments point to a somatic, physiologically grounded dimension of writing anxiety that is closely tied to fatigue and classroom comfort rather than to the linguistic demands of the task itself.

Student 2 (F): he is "tidak senang" ("not happy") when given a writing task, and finds it particularly difficult in afternoon classes, when he feels "malas nulis" ("lazy to write") because the room is hot and he is sleepy. (Student Interview 2, Writing item 1, 12 May 2026)

Student 3 (R): he feels "lumayan senang" ("quite happy") about writing in the morning, when he is still alert and "masih nyambung ke pikiran" ("still connected to the mind", i.e., he can still think clearly), but in afternoon sessions he tends to feel sleepy and unmotivated. (Student Interview 3, Writing item 1, 12 May 2026)

This finding nuances the cognitive- and avoidance-dominant picture reported in much of the existing literature (Kaimuddin et al., 2023; Zhong, 2025) by highlighting a context-specific, schedule-related trigger that has received comparatively little attention in prior junior high school-level writing anxiety research, and that instructors may be able to address directly through timetabling or through adjusting the pacing and format of afternoon writing tasks.

D. The Self-Perception Gap: Moderate Self-Ratings Amid Persistent Errors

A striking pattern emerged when the three students' self-assessment questionnaire responses were compared against the classroom observation and fieldnote data. All three students rated themselves predominantly in the 3-to-4 range across the five writing dimensions of Organization, Content, Grammar, Mechanics, and Style and Quality of Expression, with a number of items in Grammar and Mechanics rated 4 or 5 and only occasional ratings of 2, indicating a fairly confident self-assessment of their command of tense, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and capitalization. This self-assessment stands in marked contrast to the observation fieldnote, which documented that tense errors and subject-verb agreement errors were widespread across the class, and that even the more engaged group of students, who produced comparatively more developed texts, still exhibited clear grammatical and tense inaccuracies. As the fieldnote itself concluded, students' moderate-to-high self-ratings did not consistently reflect the actual quality observed in their written outputs, suggesting that students possessed limited awareness of their own specific writing weaknesses at this pre-treatment stage.

Written comments on the self-assessment questionnaire, 12 May 2026 (original spelling retained):

Student 1 (N): "Aku tidak suka bahasa inggris karena kurang memahami" ["I don't like English because I don't understand it well"].

Student 2 (F): "Aku tidak suka bahasa Inggris karena susah, aku suka karena seru" ["I don't like English because it is hard; I like it because it is fun"].

Student 3 (R): "Aku nggak suka bahasa, bahasanya nggak tau" ["I don't like the language, I don't know the language"].

This gap between self-perceived competence and observed performance echoes findings in the broader literature on the relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety, which report a moderate negative correlation between the two constructs (Almutairy, 2024; Soleimani et al., 2020): learners who feel more anxious about writing tend to hold weaker efficacy beliefs, and vice versa. However, the present case suggests an important qualification to this relationship. Rather than reflecting an accurate, if pessimistic, appraisal of their own skills, some students' self-ratings appeared to be shaped more by limited metacognitive awareness of specific error types than by a precise internal calibration of ability. In other words, moderate confidence on a self-assessment questionnaire does not necessarily indicate low anxiety, nor does it necessarily indicate accurate self-knowledge; instead, it may partly reflect students not yet possessing the metalinguistic vocabulary or explicit grammatical knowledge needed to identify their own errors, an important consideration for the design of instructional feedback in future writing lessons. This tendency is consistent with a recent meta-analytic review showing that students, particularly younger learners with limited feedback and content knowledge, tend to overestimate their performance relative to expert ratings, which lends broader empirical support to the self-perception gap observed among the three focal students in this study (León et al., 2023).

This disjunction between self-report and observed performance also carries a methodological implication for studies of writing anxiety more broadly. Because much of the existing literature relies on self-report instruments such as the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory to establish anxiety levels (Kaimuddin et al., 2023; Nugroho & Ena, 2021; Zhong, 2025), and because self-efficacy is likewise typically measured through self-report scales (Almutairy, 2024; Soleimani et al., 2020), there is a risk that both constructs are jointly shaped by the same limited metacognitive awareness documented in this case. A student who does not yet recognize a subject-verb agreement error may report comparatively low anxiety about grammar not because grammar genuinely poses little threat to them, but because they are not yet aware that a threat exists. This observation

strengthens the case for combining self-report instruments with direct observation of actual written output and classroom behavior, as was done in the present study, particularly when working with junior high school learners whose explicit grammatical knowledge is still developing.

E. The Role of Teacher Rapport in Moderating Anxiety

One of the clearest and most direct pieces of evidence for a contextual moderator of writing anxiety came from Student 2 (F)'s account of how his experience of writing activities depended heavily on which teacher was present. He explained that writing tasks felt easier when taught by a teacher he felt comfortable with, but that with a stricter teacher he felt intimidated and found writing tasks noticeably harder. This finding provides direct, first-person evidence for the broader claim in the literature that a positive, rapport-based teacher-student relationship functions as a protective factor against foreign language anxiety and contributes meaningfully to students' emotional well-being in the EFL classroom (Li, 2022). This finding aligns with systematic review evidence identifying a supportive, low-anxiety teacher-student relationship as one of the more consistently effective classroom-level factors for mitigating foreign language anxiety across diverse educational settings (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021).

Student 2 (F): writing activities make it easier for him to express his ideas, but it depends on the teacher; with a teacher he feels comfortable with it is easier, while with a stricter teacher he feels "takut" ("afraid") and finds the task harder. (Student Interview 2, Writing item 7, 12 May 2026)

It also suggests that writing anxiety in this class is not a fixed trait residing solely within the student, but a relational phenomenon that shifts depending on the immediate instructional and interpersonal context, a nuance that quantitative, single-timepoint surveys are less well positioned to capture but that qualitative case study methodology can reveal directly through student testimony.

F. Topic Choice and Personal Relevance as Anxiety Reducers

All three focal students independently identified topic familiarity and personal relevance as factors that made writing noticeably easier. Student 1 (N) reported that traveling topics made writing easier for her because she could connect the topic with personal experience, making writing feel more natural, while Student 2 (F) identified food topics, and Student 3 (R) identified game- and esport-related topics, as easing his writing process because the content related to things he already knew and enjoyed. All three also explicitly valued the freedom to choose their own topic, describing this choice in terms that suggested it felt empowering, in the sense that it allowed them to search for ideas

independently rather than working from an unfamiliar or externally imposed prompt. The class teacher's own account corroborates this pattern, noting that she deliberately links topics to students' everyday experiences, such as school activities, food, and personal contexts, in an effort to make lessons feel more relevant and accessible.

Student 1 (N): traveling topics make writing easier, because she can connect them with her own experience, which makes the writing feel more natural. (Student Interview 1, Writing item 5, 12 May 2026)

Student 2 (F): "makanan" ("food") topics make writing easier for him. (Student Interview 2, Writing item 5, 12 May 2026)

Student 3 (R): game and e-sport topics make it easier for him to write, and he finds the task manageable when he is allowed to choose a topic he already knows, such as a game or a hobby. (Student Interview 3, Writing items 5 and 7, 12 May 2026)

Teacher: "I try to link topics to things students already know or have experienced. For example, I use contexts like school activities, food, and everyday situations." (Teacher Interview, Motivation item 3, 12 May 2026)

This finding is consistent with the broader understanding that reducing the cognitive load associated with content generation, by allowing students to write about what they already know, can ease the affective burden of a foreign language writing task and increase students' willingness to begin writing rather than avoid it.

G. A Series of Pictures as a Partial, Not Complete, Anxiety-Reducing Scaffold

A series of pictures depicting Indonesian Independence Day activities was prominently used throughout the observed lesson, displayed at the front of the classroom during both the Presentation phase, to activate prior knowledge, and the Production phase, as a visual reference students could draw on while writing. Consistent with prior research indicating that a series of pictures can help EFL learners clarify text structure, generate ideas, and expand relevant vocabulary (Gayatri & Gaffar, 2023; Romi et al., 2025; Wahono & Afifah, 2022), several students in the more engaged subgroup did appear to use the pictures productively, referencing them for ideas and vocabulary as they composed their recount texts.

However, the fieldnote also documented that the majority of students continued to hesitate even with the series of pictures clearly visible, glancing at the images without translating them into written output, which suggests that visual scaffolding alone was not sufficient to overcome the cognitive and avoidance-related anxiety documented in this study. This finding aligns with the caution raised in the literature that a series of pictures and other visual media are most effective when integrated with guided writing support rather than treated as a self-sufficient intervention (Romi et al., 2025), and it underscores the need to pair visual scaffolding with more explicit affective and linguistic support in

future instructional design.

Fieldnote FN.01, Presentation phase: prompting the class with the series of pictures, the teacher asked, "Anak-anak, kalian pernah ikut lomba 17 Agustus? Lomba apa yang kalian ikuti?" ("Children, have you ever joined a 17 August competition? Which competition did you join?"). Only a small number of students responded, and their answers were brief.

Fieldnote FN.02, Production phase: with the series of pictures still displayed, the teacher repeated, "Ayo, sudah dimulai belum? Tulis saja dulu, tidak apa-apa kalau salah." ("Come on, have you started yet? Just write first, it is okay if it is wrong.") Most students nevertheless began writing only after she approached them individually.

A plausible explanation for this partial effect lies in the distinction between a visual medium's capacity to support content generation and its capacity to reduce linguistic anxiety. A series of pictures is well suited to prompting ideas and providing a chronological structure for a recount text, functions that address the content and organization dimensions of writing (Gayatri & Gaffar, 2023; Wahono & Afifah, 2022). However, they do not, on their own, supply the vocabulary or grammatical forms a student needs to translate a visually prompted idea into an accurate English sentence. For students whose anxiety was rooted primarily in cognitive uncertainty about vocabulary and grammar, as documented in the first theme above, a picture of a sack race may successfully generate the idea that they want to describe the event, while leaving entirely unresolved the more anxiety-inducing question of which past-tense verb form to use or which word correctly names the activity in English. This distinction suggests that future instructional design should deliberately pair the series of pictures with targeted vocabulary banks or sentence frames tied directly to the images, rather than assuming that visual richness alone will translate into written fluency.

H. Fear of Negative Evaluation and Attitudes Toward Remedial Teaching

A further theme that emerged consistently across all three interviews concerned students' attitudes toward remedial instruction and grading practices. All three students reported disliking remedial sessions and expressed a preference for being given additional practice questions rather than facing what they perceived as punitive consequences for low performance. At the same time, all three responded positively to grades and rewards as motivators, reporting that they would study harder if their grades were low, and Student 1 (N) in particular noted that she had never been ridiculed by the teacher for a low grade, a detail that appeared to matter to her.

All three students: they do not like remedial sessions ("tidak suka remedi") and prefer to be given additional questions or tasks ("soal") rather than what they perceive as punishment. (Student Interviews 1, 2 and 3, Motivation item 9, 12 May 2026)

This pattern suggests that students' anxiety is closely tied to a fear of negative evaluation, one of the core components identified in the classic conceptualization of foreign language classroom anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), and that the manner in which underperformance is addressed by the teacher, whether through what is perceived as punitive remediation or through supportive, practice-oriented feedback, has a direct bearing on students' willingness to engage with writing tasks without added apprehension.

I. Synthesis: An Interconnected Picture of Writing Anxiety

Table 2 synthesizes the sources of anxiety and the contextual factors that appeared to intensify or mitigate them across the three focal students. Taken together, the findings suggest that writing anxiety among these eighth-grade students was not a single, undifferentiated affective state, but a layered phenomenon combining a cognitive core, namely uncertainty about vocabulary and grammar; a behavioral expression, namely avoidance through translation tools, peer reliance, and delayed onset; and a somatic dimension tied to fatigue and classroom conditions, all of which were, in turn, moderated by relational and instructional context, including teacher rapport, topic choice, and the availability, though not sufficiency, of visual scaffolding such as a series of pictures.

Table 2. Cross-Case Synthesis of Sources and Mitigating Factors of Writing Anxiety

Dimension	Sources of Anxiety (Intensifying Factors)	Mitigating Factors
Cognitive	Limited vocabulary; uncertainty about grammar and tense; difficulty reading/pronouncing English text	Model texts; dictionaries; teacher explanation of structure
Avoidance	Fear of starting incorrectly; unfamiliarity with instructions	Peer assistance; translation tools; teacher's individual prompting
Somatic	Afternoon fatigue; heat; low alertness	Morning scheduling; short, manageable tasks
Self-Perception	Limited metacognitive awareness of specific errors	Explicit, dimension-specific feedback
Relational	Strict or unfamiliar teacher presence	Supportive, approachable teacher rapport
Content/Topic	Unfamiliar or imposed topics	Freedom to choose personally relevant topics
Instructional Media	Passive viewing of pictures without guided translation into writing	Series of pictures combined with guided, structured writing practice

Conclusion

This case study examined writing anxiety among three eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Pakem during a pre-treatment recount-text writing lesson, using interviews, classroom observation, and a self-assessment questionnaire. Students' anxiety was anchored primarily in cognitive concerns about limited vocabulary and uncertain grammar, and it was expressed behaviorally through delayed writing onset, reliance on translation applications, and dependence on peers. A somatic dimension linked to fatigue and

classroom conditions also emerged as a trigger for at least two of the three focal students. A gap was observed between students' moderate self-ratings and the more serious grammatical and structural errors documented during observation, suggesting that anxiety coexists with limited awareness of specific writing weaknesses. A warm teacher-student relationship, the freedom to choose personally relevant topics, and a series of pictures as a visual scaffold appeared to ease anxiety, although the pictures alone did not overcome the hesitation to begin writing shown by most of the class.

This study has limitations. The case was bounded to three focal students and one teacher within a single class and a single observation session, so the findings are not statistically generalizable and offer instead a transferable understanding of how writing anxiety manifests in one classroom. Data were also collected at a single point in time, before any instructional treatment, which limits insight into how these patterns change over a sustained intervention. Future research could extend this design longitudinally across multiple lessons, include a larger and more diverse sample of focal students, and compare the anxiety trajectories of more engaged and less engaged subgroups as instructional treatment, such as recount-text teaching based on a series of pictures, is introduced and refined.

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