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Writing Anxiety in an Afghan EFL Setting: Voices From Five Afghan Students

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ABSTRACT

Language writing anxiety is a phenomenon that majority of EFL students, particularly Afghan English language learners, experience. To address this issue, this qualitative study explored the reported experiences of five Afghan undergraduate English majors, studying at an Afghan university, with writing anxiety. After collecting data through semi-structured interviews, the data was transcribed verbatim, and four major themes were constructed. The results revealed that anxiety has both positive and negative effects on students. The findings also showed that participants' little exposure to writing activities was the major reason behind their writing anxiety. The participants reported that receiving feedback from teachers, doing extensive reading, developing their vocabulary knowledge and practicing writing were the major strategies they had used to overcome writing anxiety.

Keywords: EFL Writing, Writing Anxiety, Afghan EFL Learners, Students' Reported Experiences

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a natural feeling that may happen in different situations, such as preparing for a job interview, speaking in a public place for the first time, or taking an exam. This phenomenon is crucial in education, particularly in language learning process. According to Kara (2013), anxiety is considered as “one of the factors that affect the process of learning” (p. 104). Besides, Chin Lin (2009) noted that anxiety is a type of feeling that provides positive attitudes; for example, it warns us to think critically about issues that seem serious to us. He also noted that these emotions and feelings help us to evaluate potential threats and respond to them in an appropriate way, perhaps by paying attention.

Writing is one of the main language skills which requires visual memory, attention, study process and good performance (Boniface, Candria & Contento, 2008). However, anxiety is something natural that we all have in common, regardless of the way we perceive and respond to it. In the same vein, Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) noted that writing is a crucial skill which requires too much time. They argued that some students prefer teachers who are strict and require students to write accurately, while some students prefer to work with peers as well as their teachers to improve their writing skill.

Anxiety is a familiar emotion because it is part of everyone's life, especially in education settings. It is inevitable that how students feel affects their learning process. For example, although teachers postulate that there are students who have positive attitudes toward writing, some English teachers assert that students' negative attitudes toward writing negatively affects

their written production. For instance, in some of our courses, when teachers asked students to write, students were concerned with making mistakes and performed poorly. We believe teachers' reaction towards students' writing anxiety affects students' progress in writing. That is, if they keep blaming the students, students' anxiety might increase. However, according to our experience, some teachers with positive feedback and comments could help students to improve their writing skill dramatically.

Since anxiety is common among EFL learners, this qualitative report is concerned with the reported experiences of students with writing anxiety. Besides, research suggests that instructors should seek effective ways to ease anxiety that students might feel while learning and writing a language to support successful language learning experiences. Consequently, as we come to understand anxiety better, there is much that we can do as individual to take steps to reduce it and learn to appreciate our emotions without fear which will help us more. By focusing on the role of anxiety in writing performance among students of writing classes, we hope to provide some genuine understanding of anxiety and how it can be addressed to successfully support writers in our context.

Although there is a rich body of literature on writing anxiety, there is a gap in literature on this topic in the context of Afghanistan. Therefore, this qualitative study explores the reported experiences of Afghan English students regarding writing anxiety. On the hand, it seems that the topic of anxiety works as a serious/critical issue for some EFL students at schools and universities in Afghanistan, as the culture of writing is so low in Afghanistan. Thus, as published research on second language

writing anxiety in Afghanistan context is rare, there is an urgent need for further research to understand its nature and influences on EFL students' writing skill. This study is highly significant as it gives voice to Afghan English language learners and investigates their reported experiences with writing anxiety when writing a text. The study will also allow teachers to learn from students' perceptions regarding learning anxiety, and perhaps modify their teaching philosophy to address students' needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Anxiety

Anxiety can play a great role in giving negative or positive feeling for learning progress as well as writing achievements of students. There is a close relationship between the levels of anxiety and how students perform in their language learning as Horwitz (2001) found that language anxiety is something related to students' achievement, even anxiety can hide students' performance. He claimed this because there is significant negative relation between students who are anxious and their writing achievement. In the same vein, Ningsih and Kusumaningputri (2015) also noted that when the students score is low for their achievement in their writing classes they were affected negatively. This negative effect of writing anxiety may occur to many students, even those who have a low-level anxiety. Thus, anxiety can affect writing students and their performance, no matter if their level of anxiety is high or low.

Some researchers postulate that anxiety even exists among advanced adult students of foreign languages (see Ewald, 2007; Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009). For example,

Ewald (2007) and Marcos-Llinas and Garau (2009) pointed out that foreign language anxiety is common among advanced learners and it increases when their language and linguistic ability are not improved. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) discovered that students suffer from high levels of foreign language anxiety that is typical for intelligent students as well, because, they start to make great expectations of themselves and underestimate towards presenting. This shows that those students are over concerned about others' opinions and they will pay too great attention to errors that will damage their concentration on their lessons.

Lightbrown and Spada (2006) defined language anxiety as "Feelings of worry, nervousness, and stress that many students experience while learning a second language" (p. 61). According to this definition, it can be argued that learners who experience anxiety may feel stressed, and they might decide not to participate in their class discussions, or may not do their homework on time. Anxiety can be considered as one of the major factors of academic performance. For instance, Tanveer (2007) indicated that "Students' feeling of stress, anxiety and nervousness may impede their language learning and performance abilities" (p. 1). This implies that anxiety avoids us from doing language tasks correctly. According to the previous studies in language learning, anxiety has the fundamental role in language learning due to its negative relationship to learners' language learning performance (Atay & Kurt, 2006, p. 127). Consequently, the role of anxiety in learning can be clearly understood.

Writing Anxiety

As previously stated, anxiety itself is one of the important and controversial issues

ineducation, specially in writing learning. In *Advanced American English* Longman (2005), anxiety is defined as a feeling of being worried about something that may happen, or it is a feeling of desiring something very much, but being worried that you will not succeed. This anxiety can have great impact on writing skill as Karakaya (2011) defined anxiety as a critical and effective imagination and thought in language learning and writing process. But, these effects can be positive and negative. McLoad (1987) also defined writing anxiety as a type of anxiety related to some situations in which a person has difficulty during the writing process, (as cited in Bayat, 2014, p. 1134). According to Banga (2016), anxiety is something general and public for different irregularities that causes nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worrying.

Hassan (2001) also described writing anxiety as a general obstacle of writing activity in a context which is observed by the individuals who necessarily need some amount of writing skill for evaluation of that writing (as cited in Negari & Rezaabadi, 2012, p. 2). From this finding we can predict that writing anxiety is a considerable point in educational fields and language learning skills like writing. The results of Al-Sawalha, Salem, Chow and Foo's (2012) study showed that majority of the Jordanian EFL students experienced high level of writing anxiety. From the above-mentioned literature on writing anxiety in EFL context, it can, therefore, be argued that there are students who experience writing anxiety when composing a text.

Writing Anxiety in EFL Context

According to Rodríguez, Delgado and Colón (2009), being nervous, stressed or

anxious seem to be typical for EFL learners. However, it is not always the same. Writing anxiety is a considerable challenge that mostly happens when EFL students want to write something (Al-Ahmad, 2003). He pointed out that writing anxiety in EFL creates many challenges as it often negatively affects the learners' writings, so something should be done to reduce students' anxiety and stress. Likewise, Latif (2007) studied writing anxiety in foreign language contexts and discovered that Arab students were not able to write in English at schools and university levels because writing tasks and activities were less than what was needed. Besides, Erkan and Saban (2011) asserted that many of the Turkish EFL students in their study did not like to write at all since they had experienced writing anxiety.

On the other hand, Zhao et al. (2013) argued context directly affects the level of writing anxiety. They found out that anxiety was less common among those students who had visited the country in which the target language was spoken and written as the first language. To illustrate, Cheng et al. (1999) also investigated a study related to second language (L2) writing anxiety in relation to second language writing achievement. The result yielded that L2 anxiety and L2 writing anxiety can impact students negatively in different ways. Besides, he found that low level students were more anxious while writing compared to high level students. Lin, Chin and Ho, Shuan (2009) described that students' writing ability is very important because it can impact their future, particularly careers which require jobseekers to have high English communication skills. These scholars also found that when students were asked to write a formal text, they could not perform very well because they were anxious as they were limited with the

writing genre.

Learning strategies are considered to have a powerful effect on foreign language anxiety. Students who are confident about their learning strategies are likely not to experience high level of anxiety (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). However, according to Negari and Rezaabadi (2012), when we put students under low and high anxiety situations, they will try to perform better in high anxiety situations; they will care more about grammar and vocabulary choice and other skills while taking a writing test. Likewise, Rezaei and Jafari (2104) argued that EFL students face more problems during the writing process since they experience writing anxiety, such as fear of making mistakes, generating ideas, etc. Finally, they suggested that educational services should care about the needs that EFL learners have in educational field because Iranian students need to have a clear understanding of their writing to reduce the fear of being checked of writing ability and proficiency.

Sources of Writing Anxiety

Different factors contribute in causing writing anxiety among English language learners. Kara (2013), for instance, noted that the course materials which do not contain appropriate and adequate explanations and writing tasks can cause students to experience writing anxiety. Besides, Chin Lin (2009) claimed that academic or formal writing could cause anxiety because students mostly think that their freedom and creativity of writing might be limited. Writing anxiety affects students' motivation and their willingness to participate in writing courses (Martinez, Kock, and Cass, 2011). In the same vein, Özbay and Zorbaz (2011) argued that "Writing anxiety can be manifested emotionally as sadness, anger,

and fear; or physically as various cramps when a person is required to write" (p. 36). According to Bruning and Horn (2000) and Schweiker-Marra & Marra (2000), writing anxiety occurs because of language complexity in general and complexity of writing as a skill (As cited in Kara, 2013, p. 104).

Students' weak performance also may affect their writing and cause them to be anxious about their performance. As Tsai and Cheng (2004) explored, writing anxiety is related to students' poor performances in English writing exams and the writing that is needed for a job, (p. 101). The results of Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) suggested that the students felt less nervous in writing when the teacher announced that their papers will not be scored in contrast to the time when their papers were to be scored by the teacher. So, we can say that lower score of writing tasks can affect students' writing performance negatively. In Shang's (2012) study, students reported that their English writing anxiety was caused by their fear of making mistakes in language structures such as grammar and vocabulary (p. 60). In term of causes of writing anxiety, Abdul Latif (2007) indicated the following factors as the reasons for high English writing apprehension "Lack of linguistic knowledge, low foreign language self-esteem, poor history of writing achievement and perceived writing performance improvement, low English writing self-efficacy and instructional practice of English writing tutors" (p. 73).

Moreover, the findings of Rezaei, Jafari, and Younas (2014) showed that Iranian EFL students experienced high level of writing anxiety. Also, he reported that fear of teacher's negative feedback, low self-confidence in writing and poor language knowledge were reported as the main causes of second language writing anxiety (p. 7). All these

present the reasons of anxiety and concluded that anxiety is an unnatural phenomenon that will need to take some steps to decrease and avoid it. Generally, it can be argued that there are many different factors that cause writing anxiety.

The Impacts of Anxiety on Students' Writing

There are several factors which indicate that anxiety negatively affects students' writing. Many studies have described that students with higher anxiety received lower grades on essays, written exams, and their writing tests (Daly, 1985; Lee & Krashen, 1997). Boniface, Candria, Contento (2008), in their observation discovered and saw that the children who experienced high level of anxiety made more errors in dictation and spelling tasks. This result indicated that students who had stress made more spelling errors in dictation of words in comparison. On the other hand, Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) claimed that when students were experiencing higher level of anxiety, in their final exam their marks weren't just better in one part of their writing but it was good in all parts. The results of this study demonstrated that these students may be able to improve their concentration in general and their writing skill in particular. Thus, anxiety can affect students' writing performance positively and negatively.

The negative effects happen when students cannot overcome their writing anxiety. According to Ningsih and Kusumaningputri (2015), anxiety, even low-level anxiety, can negatively affect students' grades if they do not overcome it. This means that anxiety can function as a controller to avoid the error as well as mistake, if the students try to overcome and use from their anxiety and concern in a useful way they will accomplish a better result.

Writing anxiety is experienced through testing due to students' worry that they will perform poorly during an examination or they will fail after finishing their test, as the research revealed (e.g., Herwitt & Stephenson, 2011), "The quality of students' performance is poorer and they get worth grades than non-anxious examinees" (p. 9). Therefore, it can be argued that writing anxiety is a common challenge among EFL learners, which causes them to be worried throughout their learning process.

Students' Attitudes Toward Writing Anxiety

Some educational studies show that when anxiety affects students, they will show reaction toward it. For example, Yaman (2010) discovered that "as students' writing anxiety increased, their attitudes about Turkish courses changed negatively" (p. 271). Also, Uçgun (2011) found that the writing anxiety levels of the students differed in terms of the number of books they read, (p. 546). Kurt and Atay (2007) reported that students who received peer feedback significantly reduced their levels of writing anxiety, became more aware of their mistakes, used their peers' opinions to improve their essays, and looked to writing process from a different perspective, (as cited in Rodríguez, Delgado, & Colón, 2009, p. 24). This shows that having writing skills and techniques has positive effects on the writing anxiety. If the students use from each other's opinions and ideas, they can perform better and better and we think it will help them to decrease their writing anxiety.

According to Oğuzhan (2013), students express their ideas freely and feel less anxious when they write in the environments

where they can carry out their creative ideas without limitation. Finally, the students may show their reactions toward writing through nervous and unexpected attitudes. For example, Tsai and Cheng (2004) discovered that students with somatic (physical) anxiety show physiological reactions, such as unpleasant feelings, and nervousness, etc. to anxiety. However, there would be some students who have another presumption of writing and anxiety; for example, Alico (2016) discovered that for some of the students, writing is a lot of fun and they enjoy writing when they are writing down their ideas, they do not fear of being checked and evaluated and feel confident in their ability to clearly express their ideas in writing.

From these finding we can guess that the skill of writing is not an overall concern that we have in our daily classes. Also, there are some other aspects and factors that help students to reduce their level of anxiety in their writing performance. For example, Ezhdehakosh's and Zamanian (2013) pointed out that e-mail appears to have the potential effect to decrease students' anxiety in their writing tasks because it motivates them and rises their interests about their learning. This shows that when the students use online writing, they feel more comfortable and enjoy from their writing online than writing by their hand and this method can be helpful for decreasing writing anxiety.

Strategies for Overcoming Writing Anxiety

Writing is an important issue in which many people including professional writers like professors experience usual concerns about writing. During studying and taking writing courses, students might experience writing anxiety. Therefore, they

need to think about some ways that can help them remove or at least decrease that anxiety. Based on some scholars, there are some strategies that can help students prevent and decrease such anxiety from their academic performance. As Rezaei, Jafari, and Younas (2014) said, teachers should guide their students to minimize their writing errors. They said that through positive reinforcement writing anxiety can be lowered as well (p. 7). Thus, when students face writing anxiety in writing classes, the writing teacher ought to consider the students and take steps to prevent writing anxiety. Furthermore, Tsai and Cheng (2004) suggested that teachers should pay more attention to help and show their students a positive and realistic perception of their writing performance for the development of their writing skills; they should help students learn to face difficulties, even failures without losing confidence. As the result of these ideas, writing teachers are advised to assess students' writing performance according to the standards they use while assessing their students' writing performance.

In respect to that, teachers should know that some students may become highly anxious about second language writing, and this is associated with the class environment. For instance, Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) suggested that it is essential for teachers to look for effective ways to decrease writing anxiety in a way which does not make students so carefree that they do not concentrate on their tasks, especially in the case of L2 writing. Also, Alico (2016) made it clear that to make English writing successful, English teachers should explore first the writing anxiety of learners as well as their language learning motivation to serve as the measure for better teaching and learning of English composition writing. Besides, Alico said that

teachers are recommended to apply writing tasks frequently because it forces the students to participate in the learning process more. This can be another way to increase the students' writing performance and decrease their anxiety for further writing. Beside the mentioned strategies and ways of overcoming writing, we also will do this study to find out what the students will suggest as their recommendations for decreasing writing anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

The current research employs a qualitative research design to explore the perceived reported experiences of five Afghan English language majors regarding writing anxiety. Merriam (2009) argued that questions related to perceptions and reported experiences could be investigated only through qualitative research design. She specifically noted, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). Besides, Gay and Airasian (2000)

asserted that qualitative research design allows researchers to collect "holistic perspective which preserves the complexities of human behavior" (p. 56). The term qualitative research is also associated with arrangement of different methods, perspectives and approaches. For instance, Mason (2002) pointed out, "Qualitative method searches whatever it might certainly represent a unified set of techniques or philosophies, and indeed has grown out of a narrow range of intellectual and disciplinary traditions" (p. 53).

The participants for this research were five Afghan English language majors; three males and two females. Purposeful sampling was used for choosing the participants. The recruited participants for this study were all EFL learners at the English Department, Faculty of Language and Literature, Peace University (pseudonym). They all had the experience of taking at least one writing course in their program. The following table briefly demonstrates the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1
Participants and Demographic Information

Participants (Pseudonym)	Gender	Cohort	Age
Hamid	Male	Senior	About 22
Ali	Male	Senior	About 23
Zahra	Female	Senior	About 22
Sara	Female	Senior	About 22
Mohammad	Male	Senior	About 24

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants. That is, follow-up questions were asked during the interview to collect in-depth description about what is happening on the ground regarding students' writing anxiety. After conducting the interviews, the data were transcribed verbatim. With the research questions in mind, the transcripts were read several times to code the data. After coding the data, the codes were combined into some categories, and finally the categories were put into four major themes. In order to check the validity of the data, the findings were shared with the study participants to check whether they were accurate. Besides, another research-scholar was requested to conduct a complete review of our study and highlight the major strengths and weaknesses of our research. In the next section, we discuss and interpret the major themes in detail.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study attempted to explore the perceived reported experiences of the participants with writing anxiety. After coding the data, the codes were divided into the four following major topics: (a) Students' perceptions of writing anxiety (b) Why writing anxiety? (c) The impact of writing anxiety on students' writing, and (d) How to overcome writing anxiety?

Students' Perceptions of Writing Anxiety

All participants in this study have reported that writing is one of the pivotal skills of a language, which helps learners to share their ideas and communicate with others. For example, Sara, one of the participants stated, "writing is like talking with others." However, if students experience

anxiety before or during writing, the quality of their writing will be decreased. Atay and Kurt (2006) argued that anxiety has the fundamental role in language learning due to its negative relationship to learners' language learning performance.

Like many published research on anxiety, the participants in this study all reported that anxiety is something natural in language learning (See Ewald, 2007; Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009). They described writing anxiety as being worried and anxious when producing a written text. Similarly, Karakaya (2011) defined anxiety as a critical and effective imagination and thought in language learning and writing process. However, these effects can be positive and negative. Banga (2016) highlighted that anxiety is something general and public for different irregularities that causes nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worrying. Besides, Marcos-Llinas and Garau (2009) asserted that foreign language anxiety is common among advanced learners, and it increases when their language and linguistic ability is not improved.

However, according to the participants' perceived reported experiences, anxiety is something that stands against the improvement of language skills, especially writing. They all argued that anxiety negatively affects language learning, except Mohammad, who claimed that a little anxiety is good for students because it makes learners focus on their writing. In the same vein, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) found that second language learners suffer from high levels of foreign language anxiety that is typical for intelligent students as well because they start to make great expectations of themselves. This indicates that students are over-concerned with the opinion of others and will pay great attention to errors that will help them to be careful

while writing and the outcome of that is good for students.

The attitudes of students toward writing anxiety are different as our participants had different perspectives toward writing. They mostly had negative attitudes toward writing anxiety; for example, Zahra and Hamid reporting that they used to get anxious when experiencing anxiety in writing. Zahra specifically noted that writing anxiety undermines her productivity. She usually kept thinking about making mistakes or not writing correctly. She postulated that she used to hate writing because of experiencing anxiety – “I used to start crying just because of not being confident about my writing skill and believing that my writing is poor.”

One of our participants reported that he did not want to share his ideas and feelings in his writing because of feeling anxious. This finding provides conclusive supports for Oğuzhan’s (2013) argument about writing anxiety and students’ productivity. According to Oğuzhan (2013), when students are not experiencing anxiety, particularly in their writing, they invest more and show creativity in their work. Likewise, Tsai and Cheng (2004) discovered that the students who have somatic (physical) anxiety they show physiological reactions to anxiety, such as unpleasant feelings, and nervousness.

Attitudes of Mohammad and Sara toward writing anxiety were like those of other participants. They also resisted against writing anxiety even though to some extent they felt anxious about their writings. This indicates that there are some students who strive for overcoming writing anxiety. For example, Alico (2016) discovered that writing is a fun process for some students even though they experience anxiety.

It is enjoyable for them because writing allows them to express their ideas. They try not to think about being judged or evaluated by others; they trust their writing skill and treat writing as a way to express their emotions. Therefore, it can be argued that writing, although it can create anxiety among students, is perceived as a critical skill in language learning.

Reasons for Writing Anxiety

Published research on writing indicates that there are several factors affecting writing anxiety. For instance, Kara (2013) found that the coursebook may cause some students to fail as they do not provide numerous opportunities to practice the language. For instance, most textbooks lack sufficient explanations or exercises. They also do not provide students with chances to practice various stages of writing process, which cause students not to be prepared for the final product, resulting in experiencing writing anxiety.

The findings of this study yielded that there are some other reasons that follow Kara’s findings. The participants mostly noted that low proficiency in writing skill, inappropriate knowledge of grammatical structure and vocabulary have been the major reasons behind their writing anxiety. For some of them like Ali and Hamid, it had been difficult to choose a topic because they did not have enough information about the topics; they had difficulty generating ideas. The participants also reported that not having detailed knowledge of the rules and strategies for composing an academic text (e.g., an essay) had caused anxiety in them, which is corroborated by Kara (2013). Besides, writing anxiety occurs because of language complexity in general and complexity of writing as a skill (see Bruning & Horn, 2000; Schweiker-Marra

& Marra, 2000).

Another factor which contributes to writing anxiety, according to all our participants, is fear of making mistakes. They reported that being afraid of making mistakes made them reluctant to compose a text. The results of Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) suggested that when students were assured that their writing will not be scored, they performed better comparing to the exam situations. Likewise, Shang (2012) showed that fear of making grammatical and vocabulary mistakes were the major causes of writing anxiety among English learners. Although lack of ability of students' performance may also have effect on their writing, Sara, one of our participants, claimed that students who had low self-confident would be anxious about their writing process. Moreover, Tsai and Cheng (2004) asserted that writing anxiety is related to students' poor performances on English writing exams and writing that is needed for a job.

According to Abdul Latif (2007), the following factors are the reasons for high English writing apprehension: "Lack of linguistic knowledge, low foreign language self-esteem, poor history of writing achievement and perceived writing performance improvement, low English writing self-efficacy and instructional practice of English writing tutors" (p. 73). Also, the findings of Rezaei, Jafari, and Younas (2014) showed that fear of teacher's negative feedback, low self-confidence in writing and poor linguistic knowledge were reported as the main causes of second language writing anxiety. As an exception, two of our participants, Zahra and Sara, claimed the teacher's knowledge and qualification affected students' level of anxiety because if a teacher does not equip students with the required writing skills, they will

feel frustrated and worried about their writing as they lose the opportunity to learn writing techniques.

The Impact of Writing Anxiety on Students' Writing

All the participants, except Mohammad, argued that anxiety has had a negative effect on their writing skill. According to Mohammad, anxiety caused him to focus more on his writing skill and produce a text with fewer mistakes. On the other hand, one of the major findings of the current study is students' fear of losing scores because of anxiety, especially writing anxiety. This is corroborated by Herwitt and Stephenson (2011). According to these scholars "The students whose quality of performance is poorer and get worth grades than non-anxious examinees" (p. 9). In addition, Ningsih and Kusumaningputri (2015) found that even those students who have very low level of anxiety also received low scores if they are unable to bring changes in their anxiety. On the other hand, we found that except Ali, all the other participants reported that anxiety has caused them to be afraid of losing their scores because it had prevented them from expressing their ideas as they wanted.

The other effect that our participants mentioned due to anxiety was making mistakes when writing a text. This happened when they could not generate ideas or remember information. Boniface, Candria, Contento (2008) described that children who experienced high level of anxiety made more errors in dictation and spelling tasks. Besides, our participants reported that they have experienced anxiety during exams as well. Their reported experiences are like Negari and Rezaabadi's (2012) findings, which indicate that learners who had

participated in their study did not have high level of anxiety during their final exam. Likewise, Ningsih and Kusumaningputri (2015) argued that when students' writing scores were low, they become more anxious; that is, the result negatively affected their attitudes toward their writing. This negative effect of writing anxiety may occur to all students even for the learners who may have a very low anxiety. That is, Anxiety can function as a controller to avoid making error if students try to overcome and use from their anxiety as a tool to accomplish a task.

How to Overcome Writing Anxiety?

The participants in this study mostly have practiced different writing activities and vocabulary exercises to overcome their writing anxiety. They also reported that the number of writing courses helped them to learn more strategies for decreasing their anxiety level in writing courses.

Mohammad, one of the participants, mentioned extensive reading as a strategy he used to reduce his writing anxiety. He noted that reading various texts has helped him to learn more lexicons, collocations and sentence structures, resulting considering the words usages when composing something. In the same vein, Uçgun (2011) found that the writing anxiety levels of the students differed in terms of the number of books they read, (p. 546).

Sara and Zahra, two of our participants, claimed that a skilled and experienced writing teacher can significantly help students decrease their writing anxiety level and improve their self-confidence. This argument is corroborated by Rezaei, Jafari, and Younas' (2014) study, which indicated that teachers should guide their students to minimize their writing errors.

They asserted that "through positive reinforcement, writing anxiety can be lowered" as well (p. 7). Moreover, Tsai and Cheng (2004) suggested that the teacher should pay more attention to help and show their students a positive and realistic perception of their writing performance for the development of their writing skills; they should help students learn to face difficulties, even failures without losing confidence (p. 109). Besides, there is a need for an intelligent teacher who can help the students as it is supposed to. This had been useful for participants as well, as Sara and Zahra told that a good teacher who knows about writing will guide us on the right way as we need to understand and learn writing skill in language learning process. Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) suggested that it is essential for teachers to look for effective ways of decreasing writing anxiety in a way in which does not make students so carefree that they do not even concentrate on their tasks, especially in the case of their L2 writing.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the reported experiences of Afghan English learners with writing anxiety. It specifically investigated the challenges students perceived with writing anxiety and the strategies they employed for overcoming those challenges. Afghan students' recommendations towards ways for helping students with writing anxiety were described as well.

The current study has several implications for teaching, research and higher education. In the light of the findings of this research, English teachers in Afghanistan need to treat writing as a process and incorporate variety of in-class writing activities. They can use formative assessment to

decrease students' anxiety. This allows teachers to provide students with constructive feedback, help them with generating ideas, and utilize words and grammatical structures correctly. Moreover, there is a conspicuous lack of writing support centers (e.g., writing center, writing lab) in Afghan university settings. Afghan higher education authorities can establish writing support centers where students get free consultations on their writing. As the findings revealed, Afghan English students in writing courses do not receive regular feedback on their writing since large heterogeneous courses and workload prevent teachers from doing so. Thus, establishing writing studios, writing lab or centers can highly help students improve their writing in general and reduce their level of writing anxiety in particular.

Since this is a qualitative study, the results cannot be generalized to all Afghan English language teachers. Other researchers can conduct a quantitative study and collect data from a larger sample. Besides, teachers' perceptions and reported experiences are not explored in this study. Further research should be conducted to explore teachers' voices, their challenges and recommendations toward students' writing anxiety. Future research can also describe the effects of writing anxiety on students' mental and physical states. It is also needed to compare the level of anxiety male and female English learners experience in writing courses.

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Appendix A

Individual Interview Protocols

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. The purpose of this research is to investigate your perceived reported experience with writing anxiety. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. The structure of the interview is semi-structured; that is, follow-up questions might be asked during the interview based on your responses to the questions.

Section I: Background Questions

- How long have you been studying English?
- How many writing courses have you taken?

Section II: Reported experiences of EFL writing students regarding writing anxiety

- Do you like writing skill? How do you feel about your writing skill?
- How you ever face any challenges during the writing courses you have taken?
- Have you experienced anxiety or stress in your writing courses?
- What do you do when you have anxiety during your courses?
- What were the reasons or causes behind the anxiety you felt or experienced? Do you think those reasons are very important in writing skill? Why?
- What are the effects of writing anxiety on your writing or your daily life?
- What were the signs of your anxiety while you were writing in writing classes?
- Do you think the anxiety you experienced affected your writing?
- What strategies did you use to overcome to your anxiety in writing courses? Were they efficient and useful? Why?

Section III: Recommendations and of the writing students

- Are you interested in taking more writing courses? Why?
- Would you like to encourage other students to take writing courses?
- What are your suggestions and advice for those students who want to take writing courses in the future?
- Do you have any questions, comments or concerns regarding the topics we discussed?