Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics

Vol. 11(2), 2026
www.ijeltal.org
e-ISSN: 2527-8746; p-ISSN: 2527-6492

Emotional Roller Coaster: Phenomenological Lived Experiences of EFL Students' Emotional Reminiscence and Trajectory in Writing Class

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Received 04 June 2026 | Received in revised form 11 September 2026 | Accepted 07 October 2026

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
emotional experiences, emotional trajectory, foreign language writing, reflective journals, Indonesian EFL students

DOI:
http://dx.doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v11i2.2867

ABSTRACT

Indonesian EFL university students experiencing as well as regulating emotions in EFL writing tasks are the topic of this phenomenological study. Although language education traditionally highlights cognitive and linguistic aspects, the emotional struggle in EFL writing e.g., anxiety, frustration, and burnout, has received less attention, partly because this work might not translate in non-Western contexts and because cultural attitudes to emotion expression or emotion regulation might vary. Using reflective journals, which consisted of two stages, i.e., pre- or before writing and during or drafting process, seven Indonesian students from different academic levels reported negative emotional reactions at the beginning of writing, emotional fluctuation from negative to positive, positive to negative, negative to positive like an emotional roller coaster, and direct emotional alteration from negative to positive during the drafting process. Furthermore, there were efforts done by students to solve their negative emotional experiences indicated after the students expressed their emotional experiences. Therefore, this implies that further research on students' emotion regulation strategies has potential to be explored in the future. Sequential instructions, from the simple to complex task is recommended to by apply in the teaching and learning of writing since it will also have direct effect on the students' emotions.

How to cite:
Ariyanti, A., Amat, R., Nimasari, E. P. (2026). Emotional Roller Coaster: Phenomenological Lived Experiences of EFL Students' Emotional Reminiscence and Trajectory in Writing Class. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, Vol 11*(2), page 171-182.

1. Introduction

Writing in a foreign language is a recursive meaning-making activity that requires writers to coordinate linguistic knowledge, rhetorical choices, planning, text generation, and revision (Hayes, 2012; Hyland, 2019). Because these processes compete for attention and are performed through a less familiar language, L2 writing can also be emotionally demanding. Nevertheless, language education and much L2 writing research have historically privileged

cognition and observable linguistic performance over learners' affective experience (Swain, 2013; Byrd & Abrams, 2022). However, treating cognition and emotion as separate offers an incomplete account of how learners initiate, sustain, and evaluate writing.

Emotions are integral to academic activity because they shape attention, motivation, strategy use, persistence, and judgments of control. Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory proposes that achievement emotions arise largely from learners' appraisals of how much control they have over a task and how much value they attach to it. In language learning, anxiety and enjoyment may coexist rather than function as simple opposites, and their intensity can shift rapidly as task demands, interaction, and perceived competence change (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Boudreau et al., 2018). Emotion regulation is the processes through which individuals influence which emotions they experience and how they express or manage them. Therefore, it becomes an important part of successful engagement in language tasks (Gross, 2015; Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020).

Writing-specific research has shown that apprehension and anxiety may emerge when learners are uncertain about how to begin, doubt their linguistic resources, anticipate negative evaluation, or struggle to organize ideas (Daly & Miller, 1975; Cheng, 2004). At the same time, enjoyment, curiosity, relief, and confidence can develop as writers gain control over content and structure, receive useful support, or see their text taking shape (Tahmouresi & Papi, 2021; Byrd & Abrams, 2022). Feedback episodes and task sequencing are also emotionally consequential: teacher feedback can elicit both negative and positive academic emotions, while appropriately sequenced writing tasks can influence anxiety and enjoyment over time (Han & Hyland, 2019; Tabari et al., 2024). These findings suggest that emotion in writing is not a stable learner trait but a situated and temporally changing experience.

Despite growing interest in emotion in ELT, several gaps remain. Much of the available evidence is cross-sectional or variable-centered and therefore identifies general associations without showing how individual learners interpret emotional shifts as a writing task unfolds. Research has also tended to isolate particular emotions or instructional events rather than tracing the movement from anticipatory feelings before writing to emotions experienced while planning, drafting, and revising. Moreover, writing-related emotions can vary by skill, context, and learner history (Piniel & Albert, 2018), making first-person accounts especially important in EFL settings where students have limited opportunities to write in English outside formal coursework. This study addresses these gaps through a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry into Indonesian university students' lived emotional experiences in EFL writing. Reflective journals were used to elicit students' retrospective accounts of emotions, perceived triggers, and turning points across the writing process. This study focuses on below research questions:

1) How do EFL students retrospectively describe their emotional states before and during the writing process in reflective journals?
2) What emotional trajectories emerge across the writing process?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotions in ELT

Emotion has moved from the margins of second language research toward a view in which affect and cognition are understood as mutually constitutive. Swain (2013) argues that language learning cannot be adequately explained through cognitive processing alone, while

MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012) show how positive emotions can broaden attention and encourage exploratory engagement. This shift does not imply that negative emotions are uniformly harmful or positive emotions uniformly beneficial. Rather, emotions carry information about learners' goals, appraisals, and relationships with tasks, teachers, peers, and anticipated evaluation.

Control-value theory provides a useful account of these appraisals. According to Pekrun (2006), learners experience achievement emotions in relation to perceived control over an activity and the value assigned to it. Low control in a highly valued writing task may generate anxiety, uncertainty, frustration, or hopelessness; increasing control can be accompanied by relief, confidence, enjoyment, and satisfaction. The coexistence of anxiety and enjoyment in foreign language classrooms supports a multidimensional view of emotional experience (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Idiodynamic work further demonstrates that emotions can change over very short periods and that the same task event may be interpreted differently by different learners (Boudreau et al., 2018).

In L2 writing, emotional experience is closely linked to the recursive demands of planning, formulation, monitoring, and revision. Writing apprehension and L2 writing anxiety have long been associated with difficulty initiating a text, fear of evaluation, cognitive worry, and somatic tension (Daly & Miller, 1975; Cheng, 2004). More recent work has expanded the lens beyond anxiety. Tahmouresi & Papi (2021) found that writing enjoyment and anxiety were differently related to learners' future writing selves and achievement, while Byrd & Abrams (2022) emphasized pedagogies that acknowledge the full range of emotions involved in composing. Emotional reactions also emerge around feedback, where criticism may threaten competence, yet constructive interpretation can support development (Han & Hyland, 2019).

Emotions in writing are also task-sensitive. Tabari et al. (2024) demonstrated that task sequencing interacts with anxiety and enjoyment during L2 writing development, suggesting that instructional design can alter the emotional conditions under which learners compose. Learners may regulate these conditions by reframing the task, seeking help, pausing, changing the environment, or drawing on peer and teacher support (Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020). Because these processes unfold over time, research that reduces experience to a single score can obscure turning points and mixed states. A phenomenological focus on trajectories therefore complements variable-centered research by examining how learners themselves make sense of emotional movement through a writing event.

2.2 Reflective Writing

Reflective writing is a purposeful account in which learners revisit an experience, identify salient thoughts and feelings, interpret their significance, and connect them with possible future action. Learning journals externalize this process, giving writers a textual space to slow down, name experience, and reconsider assumptions (Moon, 2006). Reflection is not simply a chronological report of what happened; effective reflective writing moves between description, interpretation, evaluation, and reorientation (Ryan, 2011).

In language education, reflective journals can make otherwise private learning processes visible. By writing about planning, difficulty, feedback, strategy use, and emotion, learners may become more aware of how they regulate their own writing. Zhang et al. (2022) found

that repeated reflective-journal tasks documented a range of self-regulated writing strategies, including emotion regulation, effort regulation, planning, and self-evaluation, and suggested that journaling can support learners' awareness of these processes. For teachers, journals can also reveal when apparently linguistic problems are intertwined with uncertainty, fear of evaluation, boredom, or loss of control.

As a research instrument, reflective writing provides first-person, temporally organized accounts that are well suited to investigating lived experience. It enables participants to identify events they considered emotionally significant and to explain why a shift occurred in their own terms. At the same time, journals are retrospective constructions rather than transparent recordings of emotion. The depth of reflection depends on prompt design, timing, learners' language resources, and their understanding of what reflective writing requires (Dyment & O'Connell, 2011; Ryan, 2011). Guided prompts and repeated entries can reduce purely descriptive responses and help participants attend to change across stages.

In the present study, reflective journals served both pedagogical and phenomenological purposes. Three entries from each participant captured experiences associated with outlining or preparing to write, drafting, and revising/editing. For analysis, these entries were read as accounts of two broader temporal conditions, before sustained writing and during the evolving writing process. The journals were not treated as objective measures of emotion intensity; rather, they were interpreted as situated narratives through which students remembered, labeled, and made meaning of their emotional trajectories.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore how EFL students interpreted their lived emotional experiences during foreign language writing. Phenomenology is concerned with the meaning of experience as it is lived and remembered (Moustakas, 1994), while hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that such meaning is interpreted within participants' histories, language, and educational contexts (Lopez & Willis, 2004; van Manen, 2016). This orientation was appropriate because the study did not seek only to catalogue emotion labels; it examined how students understood emotional triggers, turning points, and changes across a writing event. The approach also allowed the researchers to interpret individual accounts in relation to the temporal and instructional context of EFL writing.

3.2 Participants

Participants were seven EFL students enrolled at a university in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. They represented different stages of undergraduate study, from the first through the seventh semester, and participated in EFL writing coursework from which they could provide first-person accounts of completing writing tasks. The small, information-rich sample supported close within-participant and cross-participant interpretation rather than statistical generalization. Each participant contributed three reflective-journal entries, producing a corpus of 21 entries. Participant identities were replaced with the labels Student 1 to Student 7 in the analysis and reporting.

3.3 Instruments

Guided reflective-journal prompts were used to elicit students' accounts at three points associated with the writing process: outlining or preparing to write, drafting, and revising/editing. The prompts asked participants to identify the emotions they experienced, describe events or appraisals that triggered those emotions, explain whether and how their feelings changed, and note what helped or hindered their continued writing. Although three entries were collected from each student, the analysis addressed two broader temporal conditions that were consistent with the research questions: emotions before sustained writing and emotions during the writing process, with drafting and revising/editing considered as successive moments within the latter condition.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The 21 journal entries were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis informed by the study's hermeneutic phenomenological orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Analysis began with repeated reading and memoing to become familiar with each participant's account. Initial codes captured emotion labels, perceived causes, appraisals of control and task difficulty, responses to emotion, and moments of change. Next, a chronological matrix was created for each participant to trace the sequence of emotions across the three entries. These within-case trajectories were then compared across participants to develop patterns concerning initial emotional states, turning points, and movement between negative and positive valence.

The developing themes were reviewed against the complete journal corpus and refined to preserve both shared patterns and distinctive cases. Emotion frequencies in Table 1 were used only as descriptive summaries of what participants mentioned, not as psychometric measurements, and the vertical positions in the emotional journey map represented relative qualitative valence rather than numerical scores. The final analysis integrated thematic interpretation, individual trajectories, and illustrative excerpts so that claims remained anchored in participants' own accounts.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement with the journal corpus, repeated movement between individual entries and cross-case themes, and peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative inquiry. An audit trail documented coding decisions, theme revisions, trajectory matrices, and analytic memos, while direct excerpts enabled readers to examine the relationship between the data and the interpretations (Nowell et al., 2017). Thick description of the participants, setting, collection procedures, and analytic process was used to support judgments about transferability (Shenton, 2004).

Researcher reflexivity was particularly important because the lead researcher taught EFL writing in the same institutional context. Rather than assuming prior knowledge could be completely suspended, reflexive bracketing was used to identify and question expectations arising from the teacher-researcher position (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Ongoing memos recorded assumptions, alternative interpretations, and decisions about how much weight to give emotion labels, contextual explanations, and apparent turning points. This process

helped keep the analysis focused on participants' meaning-making while acknowledging the interpretive role of the researchers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. "Emotional Roller Coaster" Experienced by Students through the Writing Process

During the process of writing, all students experienced individuals' trajectory of how their emotions directly changed from positive to negative, or more alter where they experienced negative emotions at the beginning of writing, then changing into positive ones; after that, the positive emotions changed into negative and back to positive emotional states. Below are excerpts from students' utterances explored how they feel about the whole writing process from the beginning where the students started writing and during or in the middle of their writing.

> *"During the writing process, I felt confused, sometimes frustrated. But there was a moment I started to enjoy the writing because I found my ideas in writing flowed." (Student 1)*
>
> *"I felt confused at first time of writing. There were some parts that I should stop for a moment to think, but overall, I felt convenient during writing." (Student 2)*

Student 1 added that she also felt anxious at the beginning, then in the middle of writing she felt calmer, and when her writing was almost finished, she felt confident. The change from negative to positive emotions happened when she found new ideas in writing or after she reread the instructions given by the lecturer. Finally, she found it was not as difficult as she thought. Student 2 also reminisced that her emotions during writing were changing from negative to positive, i.e., from confusion to being calmer and more confident about what she was writing. She highlighted that the alteration appeared when she started to understand what she should write and found her first sentence to start her writing. Likely, Students 3, 4, and 7 also reminisced about similar negative emotions at the beginning of writing, i.e., confusion, but changing in the middle of writing. As highlighted in the following excerpts:

> *"I felt confused how to begin my sentence for my writing. I felt my ideas were blocked. But during the process, that feeling changed and I was more focused on what I was writing" (Student 3)*
>
> *"I felt confused and uncertain about my writing at first. As the process of my writing, those negative emotions were faded." (Student 4)*
>
> *"During writing, sometimes I felt bored, confused, frustrated. But I started to feel confident when I found the main problem in my writing. I feel this when I started reading and searching more references. It made me feel that no matter how difficult my writing problem was, it would be resolved through the process." (Student 7)*

Other than confusion and anxiety at the beginning of writing, other participants also reminisce about frustration, i.e., Student 6 (Student 6 also felt nervous at the beginning) and 7 (Student 7 also experienced the feeling of boredom rather than just confusion and anxiety).

> *"While writing, I experienced frustration when I could not find the right words. But I was so excited when my outline already finalized and my writing draft started to be*

structured. I also felt nervous at the beginning, but feeling more confident at last because my ideas flowed" (Student 6)

"During writing, sometimes I felt bored, confused, frustrated. But I started to feel confident when I found the main problem in my writing. I feel this when I started reading and searching more references. It made me feel that no matter how difficult my writing problem was, it would be resolved through the process." (Student 7)

Lastly, feeling difficulty understanding instructions and writing materials became a reason why Student 5 experienced lack of understanding and less focus. However, he can mitigate his negative feelings because the lecturer gave him guidance on his writing. As he mentioned below:

"During the writing process, I felt lack of focus because I had difficulties in understanding the materials and the instructions. It was a challenge for me to complete the task, but I felt happy when I could complete my writing task. My problem resolved because of the guidance from the lecturer and supportive learning environment" (Student 5)

In order to provide a clear illustration, the graphic of students' emotional trajectories during the writing process below was made using an emotional journey map, where each participant has their own path so that their path of emotions can be recognized and not overlap. The emotional trajectory graphic was developed based on students' reflective accounts of two writing stages, i.e., before and during writing. First, emotional expressions and related psychological states were identified and coded. Second, the identified expressions were managed based on both stages. Within the during-writing stage, emotional transitions were reconstructed according to temporal indicators explicitly reported by the participants. Third, emotional expressions were selected for visualization based on their relevance to the experiences of supporting narrative evidence. The mapped trajectories were compared with the original reflective accounts to verify the consistency between the visualized emotional transitions.

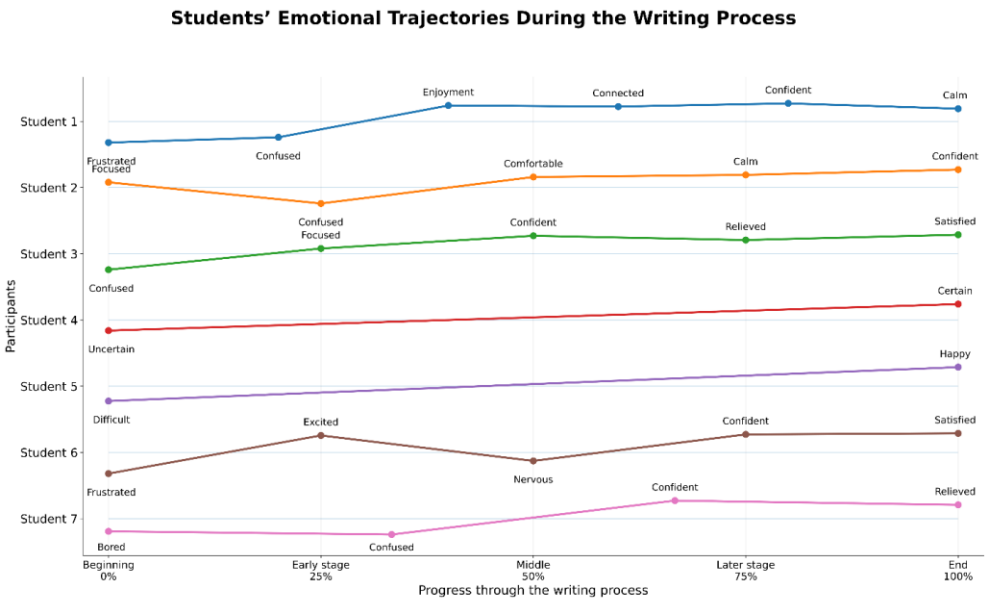


Figure 1. Students' Emotional Trajectories during the Writing Process

Figure 1 illustrates emotional trajectories qualitatively. The vertical positions do not represent exact psychometric scores, but relative emotional valence for visualization purposes. The figure demonstrates the dynamic and fluctuating emotional experiences reported by seven students from different levels, showing a general movement from negative emotions, e.g., feeling anxious, uncertain, feeling difficult, nervous, confused, bored, and depressed, to positive feelings, namely feeling confident, relieved, satisfied, enjoying, calm, happy, motivated, curious, and excited. The upper movement shows the emotional alteration from negative to positive ones. In another side, the lower movement indicates the appearance of negative emotions more than the positive ones. Specifically, Student 2 and Student 6 showed a vivid fluctuation where there were ups and downs in students' emotional states. Specifically, it shows how Student 2's emotions changed from being focused to confused, then became confident, relieved, and satisfied. The same context shows that Student 6's emotional states altered from frustrated to excited, then became nervous, and back to positive (confident and satisfied). In contrast, Student 4 and Student 5 represented direct alteration from negative to positive emotions, i.e., feeling uncertain to certain, and feeling difficult to feeling happy.

The fact that students began to write with uncertain, anxious, and confused emotions, then shifted to focused, confident, calm, and relieved, can be interpreted as dynamic emotional trajectories based on the theory of control-value theory (CVT) proposed by Pekrun (2006). It means that students might experience:

> Low perceived control → uncertainty, confusion, anxiety, and frustration

After the students' ideas developed, the structures of students' writing were clearer; later, after the students got help from lecturers to guide them to write, they experienced:

> *Increasing perceived control → focus, confidence, relief, calmness, and enjoyment*

The above patterns not only represent types of emotional states experienced by the students, but also show the alteration of students' emotional experiences throughout the writing process.

4.2 Dominated Reminiscence of Negative Emotions at the Beginning of Writing

The findings obviously showed that all students agreed to reminisce about negative emotions as they began to write. The following table represents the comparison of the frequency of students' emotional reminiscence between two conditions, i.e., before starting to write and during writing.

Table 1. Emotions Reminisced by Students through the Writing Process

Emotions before writing	Emotions during writing
Positive emotions: curious (3); feeling motivated (3)	Positive emotions: enjoy (1); feeling connected (1); calm (1); confident (5); being focused (2); comfortable (1); relief (2); satisfy (2); happy (1); excited (1)
Negative emotions: anxious (5); being afraid (2); feeling worry (2); confused (3); feeling difficult (3); uncertain (1); shy (1); hesitate (2); lack of confidence (1); stressed out (1)	Negative emotions: confused (5); frustrated (2); anxious (2); uncertain (1); feeling difficult (2); nervous (1); bored (1)

Table 1 above shows that when participants wanted to start their writing, all of them found themselves experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, worry, uncertainty,

shyness, hesitation, lack of confidence, and stress. In this case, former experts (Daly & Miller, 1975), with their classic concept, i.e., writing apprehension, confirmed that the participants' condition of experiencing emotions tend to be in negative emotions rather than the positive ones. The concept of writing apprehension by Daly & Miller (1975) pointed out five basic conditions of students before writing, i.e., do not know how to begin writing, afraid of producing improper writing, worried about lecturer's evaluation, doubt of one ability in writing, and feeling difficult to convey ideas and organize them in a text. Further theory that can strongly explain this phenomenon is control-value theory (CVT) from Pekrun (2006), which explains that students' emotions in academic conditions are influenced by two major aspects, i.e., perceived control, which means how far the students feel that they are able to do assignments, and perceived value, which means how important the assignments are for the students. Pekrun (2006) elaborated that at the beginning of academic writing, students might not have clear ideas, yet understand text structures, and are reluctant about whether their writing is proper enough. This condition triggers low perceived control, so it might trigger anxiety, uncertainty, frustration, and even hopelessness. When the writing starts to be structured, and students feel that they have control over their learning condition, those negative emotions change into relief, confidence, calmness, and enjoyment.

In order to specify and deepen the findings gained from the individual participants, the citations below show how the students felt when they wanted to start writing.

> *"Before starting to write, I experienced anxious and afraid of having low capability in writing. However, I was curious to try. This feeling occurred because I worried that the results of my writing still do not meet the criteria of a good writing." (Student 1)*

Student 1 convinced that those initial emotions made her need a longer time to start writing. She said that she pushed herself to start writing, and the time she found her writing rhythm, her motivation increased. Unlikely, Student 2 and Student 4 indicated different initial emotional, i.e., feeling confused.

> *"Before writing, I felt confuse where to start, even though the lecturer has already explained to me. This emotion appeared because I wanted to ensure my writing was clear and already followed the lecturer's instructions. Additionally, I had to understand first about the ideas I wanted to write." (Student 2)*

> *"I felt completely confused and uncertain in the beginning. I think because most of the time, I did not know how to structure and convey my ideas into English." (Student 4)*

Confusion is different from anxiety. In educational psychology literature proposed by Schubert et al. (2023), confusion is categorized as an epistemic emotion, i.e., an emotion that appears when someone faces uncertainty, complex information, or inappropriateness between prior knowledge and current instructions. Schubert et al. (2023) mentioned that students might face confusion when students have not understood the assignments, they have some ideas but fail to deliver them in their writing, feel reluctant towards structures of writing, face inappropriateness between their ideas and information they read, and do not know the next step in writing process.

Nevertheless, Student 2 strengthened her ideas that the confusion was not really a burden to her, even though she felt it before starting to write. It is because she realized that whatever her condition was, she needed to finish the writing assignments anyways. Differently,

Student 4 convinced that he can face all of his difficult time in learning English writing through a strong faith to God. It would run smoothly once he started to recognize what should be written. Furthermore, feeling difficult experienced by another student as the following excerpt:

> *"I felt difficult to start writing a sentence. In addition, I feel that the instructions from the lecturer were complex enough, so that it made me confused where to start. I was worried that my writing did noy meet the expectation of my lecturer." (Student 3)*

From the statement of Student 3 above, she noticed that she felt difficult to start the writing because the instructions given by the lecturer were complex. Tabari et al. (2024) stated that complexity and task sequence are related to emotions in writing. Students who accomplish writing in sequence, starting from the simplest to the most complex, show less writing anxiety and experience more enjoyment in writing. Supporting this, Tahmouresi & Papi (2021) strengthened the idea that students' success in writing is not merely depending on linguistics ability, but also on students' emotional experiences through the writing process, including writing anxiety and writing enjoyment. It is unique that even though Student 1, Student 2, and Student 3 experienced different types of negative emotions at the beginning of writing, they had similar reason of why those negative emotions appeared, i.e., the feeling of worried about the quality of their writing still did not meet the lecturer's expectations. It confirmed the findings from Tahmouresi & Papi (2021) that in L2 writing self, there might be a pressure felt by students that they have to achieve the target of a good writing and the students would avoid negative consequences if they cannot produce a proper piece of writing. As a result, Tahmouresi & Papi (2021) stressed that the "ought L2 writing self" positively predicts writing anxiety.

The feeling from the students that they have to meet the criteria of a good writing from the lecturer confirmed the theory of cognitive writing anxiety, where it relates to anxiety, expectation, and a concern towards how students' writing will be evaluated (Cheng, 2004). In another theory, Gkonou (2011) found that writing anxiety relates to self-derogation or negative evaluation toward self-ability also fear of negative evaluation from lecturers or peer friends. Gkonou (2011) highlighted that students will feel worried about their writing when they feel doubt regarding the quality of their writing, they feel that their writing is not good enough, and they anticipate negative evaluation from lecturers. Therefore, it is important for lecturers to pay attention not just to students' cognitive aspects, but also on how to make students feel comfortable in FL writing class, so that they do not get exposed to negative emotions like anxiety and burnout.

5. Conclusion

This phenomenological study shows that the emotional experience of EFL writing was not fixed but unfolded as a trajectory. Across the seven Indonesian university students, anticipatory emotions before writing were predominantly negative, especially anxiety, confusion, worry, uncertainty, and perceived difficulty. Meanwhile, emotions during writing often shifted toward focus, confidence, relief, enjoyment, or satisfaction as ideas emerged, instructions became clearer, texts gained structure, references were found, and lecturer support increased perceived control. Some participants moved relatively directly from negative to positive states, while others experienced repeated fluctuations, underscoring that anxiety and enjoyment may coexist and change at different points in the same writing

event. These findings support writing pedagogy that treats emotion as part of composing rather than as a learner weakness: teachers can provide clear and sequenced instructions, scaffold demanding tasks from simpler to more complex stages, offer timely guidance, and use brief reflective prompts to help students recognize emotional turning points. Because the study involved a small sample from one institution and relied on retrospective journal accounts, its findings are interpretive rather than statistically generalizable; future research could combine repeated reflective writing with real-time emotion ratings, interviews, classroom observation, or longitudinal designs to examine how emotional trajectories and regulation develop across tasks and contexts.

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