Authentic Learning Environment through Pen Pal for Writing Anxiety

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Abstract

For English language learners, writing anxiety can be a significant hurdle that inhibits them from communicating effectively through written language. One potential solution for writing anxiety is establishing an authentic learning environment through online pen pal activity. This mixed method study aimed to investigate how an authentic learning environment through online pen pals by using slowly application contributed positively as the solution for EFL students' writing anxiety. Ninety non-English major students were given a three-week learning assignment encompassing engagement with online pen pals who speak English. Their anxiety condition was observed by using quantitative descriptive analysis, and their written reflective responses were analyzed by using thematic analysis to identify how authentic learning through pen pal contributes positively to overcoming students' writing anxiety. The finding clarifies that online pen pal activity through slowly-app successfully decreased students' writing anxiety. Online pen pals via Slowly App enable students to establish friendships and build effective conversations with English speakers in joyful learning nuance. As a result, those experiences provide the students with more assurance, validate their English proficiency, and reduce their writing apprehension. This study implies that fostering a pleasurable atmosphere and a real-world learning environment might help students cope with their writing anxiety.

Key words: Anxiety, Authentic, EFL, Pen Pal, Writing

Introduction

Similar to other countries in Asia, English in Indonesia is taught as a subject to be studied in schools and universities rather than a living language used in daily communication (Wu & Wu, 2008). Unfortunately, this condition has led to numerous students struggling to communicate with English speakers, even though they have studied the language for years (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020).

This situation is attributed to an educational approach focusing more on mastering English language structures over developing natural communication abilities (Onishchuk et al., 2020). Students are commonly subjected to English tests emphasizing language structures but rarely provide opportunities to practice communication in real-life contexts (Masduqi & Prihananto, 2021). The ramifications of the teaching approach become evident when students interact with English speakers in formal and informal settings. While they may comprehend the words used, they face difficulties grasping the appropriate use of language in the context of real communication.

Many studies reported that students' language barrier in English communication often leads to fear, anxiety, and apprehension in real communication (Daskan, 2023) (Giray et al., 2022) (Abdurahman & Rizqi, 2020) (Subekti, 2018) (Marwan, 2008). The students may lack confidence in conveying their thoughts, worrying errors or misinterpretation by their interlocutors. The fear of negative impressions from others can also impede students from communicating naturally and freely (Nurkamto et al., 2024). Students' anxiety hinders their English language progress. Therefore, it is pivotal to establish a supportive environment that provides constructive reinforcement, allowing students to feel more convenient and confident in communication.

To overcome these challenges, it is imperative to establish a more natural and authentic English learning environment for students. This can be achieved by introducing more chances to interact with English speakers, whether through a program of native speakers' visitation to the classroom or via online media and communication technologies (Chen & Hwang, 2022). The potential and benefits of authentic English language learning are enormous in enhancing student motivation. Within an authentic learning environment, students interact directly with native English speakers, facilitating a contextualized and natural English language experience (Jauregi et al., 2012) (Grant et al., 2014). It fosters heightened confidence in English proficiency and a deeper comprehension of real-communication nuances. Authentic learning also encourages students to be actively involved in learning because they perceive it as relevant to real-life contexts (Abdukhayotovna, 2022). By experiencing progress in their English language skills, students feel motivated to persist in learning and improve their skills. Consequently, the students are enthusiastic and dedicated to achieving their English language learning goals.

Regrettably, the limited availability of an authentic English learning environment in language classrooms in Indonesia poses a challenge. The lack of exposure to native English speakers and restrictions in accessing authentic learning materials reflecting the real-life English context hinder students from understanding skills in English naturally (Renandya et al., 2018). To address this issue, efforts are needed to increase the opportunity to interact with native English speakers and develop learning materials that are more aligned with real English communication.

One solution to promote an authentic learning environment is through online pen pals, allowing students to experience direct interaction with English speakers. Online pen pal facilitates real-time communication, enabling students to naturally engage in genuine communication, interchange cultural insights, and refine language competency (Sibagariang et al., 2020). By building connections with native speakers via online pen pals, students gain valuable exposure to natural language settings and cultural nuances. Moreover, pen-pal serves as an interactive platform that can enrich students' language learning experience beyond the conventional classroom nuance (Hughes & Mahalingappa, 2018).

One popular platform to accommodate online pen pal activity is the Slowly application. In Slowly Application, students exchange language with English speakers through written communication by sending letters. A unique feature of the Application is the stamp collection system, where students get excited about collecting stamps for several pen pal activities they undertake. It makes language learning enjoyable, stimulates continuous engagement, and promotes learning progress. By establishing connections through Slowly Application, students improve their English proficiency and expand global connections and cultural awareness, making it a functional tool for authentic language learning (Slowly Application, 2022).

Divergent prior studies have looked into the practice of online pen pals as a medium to construct authentic EFL learning. Lie and Yunus (2018) conducted a study examining the efficacy of implementing pen pal activities in second-language classrooms to improve writing skills in Malaysian primary schools. This mixed-method study obtained significant results revealing that the positive students' writing outcomes underscore the practice of pen pal through its ability to engage students in direct interaction with peers worldwide. Another study by Chen et al. (2007) explored English language development for EFL learners through pen pal as a tele-collaborative project involving native and non-native English speakers. Using an ethnographic method and thematic analysis, the researchers discovered a significant improvement in students' language competency and intercultural awareness through the task-based online pen pal activity. A further study was conducted by Alzahrany

(2021). Through a quasi-experimental design, the researchers revealed that pen pal writing positively impacts students' practice of meta-discourse markers and enhances vocabulary mastery and writing motivation.

However, studies on the practice of pen pals by using the Slowly application for authentic EFL learning still need to be completed. This study is expected to fill a gap in the literature regarding invigorating EFL writing activities through online pen pals by using slow media to decrease students' anxiety in English written communication. The results of this study are projected to contribute to the advancement of EFL teaching in the digital age by fostering an authentic learning environment. Hence, this study seeks to reveal four research problems as follows:

1. How is an authentic EFL learning environment established through online pen pal using the Slowly application?
2. How are students' emotional feelings in an authentic EFL learning environment through an online pen pal using the Slowly application?
3. What anxiety do students experience in an authentic EFL learning environment through an online pen pal using the Slowly application?
4. How does an online pen pal using a slow application contribute to minimizing EFL students' writing anxiety?

Literature review

This literature review explores the current knowledge, issues, findings, and related theoretical contributions to implementing an EFL authentic learning environment through online pen pal for writing anxiety solutions in Indonesia. This literature is compiled to provide a summary and critical overview of the research issue.

The Significance of Writing Skills for Real-Life Communication

Writing is a necessary language skill to improve learning quality (Sibagariang et al., 2020). Writing activity is a form of the thinking process to express someone's ideas, feelings, thoughts, opinions, and messages. In writing, students construct their knowledge and present it in the written information. Thus, writing is one of the productive skills in English language learning, and it must be skillfully mastered by the students to build effective written communication (Toba et al., 2019). Furthermore, Fareed et al. (2016) add that writing plays a vital role in language production since it is used globally to transfer information and knowledge.

To most people, writing is perceived as a language production less anxiety-provoking than oral one. Unlike speaking activity, writing is performed under the condition that someone has more time to think about what to write and how to write it (Cheng, 2004a). However, many students still need help to produce written communication in English. Several reasons underlie students' low confidence in writing, such as lack of vocabulary, grammatical understanding, lack of topics to write about, lack of text structure, and other reasons.

Moreover, students sometimes consider writing a tedious and less profitable activity in EFL learning (Hadfield Charles, as mentioned in (Sibagariang et al., 2020). This is because many teachers teach writing using a traditional system by explaining only the theories of writing. Only a few teachers provide real examples of writing and strategies for how to struggle with writing. As a result, students only know about the theories of doing good writing and still need help to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions in written form. Besides, Pitura and Berlinska-Kopeć (2018) add that writing activities are not authentic, so they could not arouse students' interest and motivation.

Overview of EFL Writing Anxiety

In EFL writing activities, some students perceive writing activities as enjoyable. However, the writing exercise would be a scary moment for students who find it

hard to put their ideas into written words. When students are in a problematic situation in writing, they might experience writing anxiety. Although anxiety and fear seemed similar, both are slightly different. Halgina and Whitbourne, as mentioned in Susila (2019), define the difference between those two: fear as a natural alarm response to a harmful situation. At the same time, anxiety is more about a future-oriented action toward the possibility that something unpleasant might occur. Writing anxiety exists because there is a lack of knowledge and understanding to accomplish a writing task, and students believe that writing is complex and complicated due to the standard of good writing (Clark, 2005).
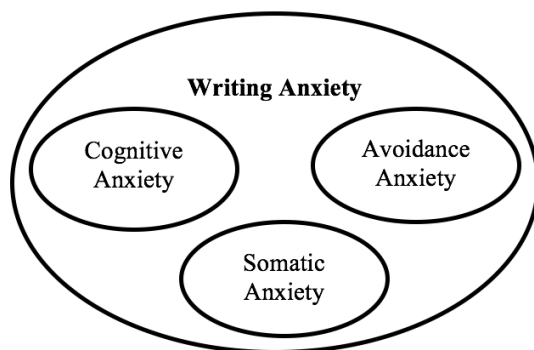

Figure 1: Types of Writing Anxiety.

Writing has been associated with three different forms of anxiety: (1) cognitive anxiety, (2) somatic anxiety, and (3) avoidance anxiety (Cheng, 2004b). Cognitive anxiety refers to a psychological action or activity in which the brain acquires information. Cheng (2004b) defines *cognitive anxiety* as a mental illness characterized by negative perception, performance preoccupation, and fear over the beliefs of others. The second definition of somatic anxiety, based on Rezaei & Jafari (2014), describes behavior, body language, and physical capabilities such as students' trembling, panicking, and sweating as they start to work on English writing composition. Next, when writing, students also sometimes exhibit avoidance anxiety. This occurrence happens when students avoid writing a language that is not their native mother tongue.

EFL Authentic Learning Environment in the Indonesian Context
In Indonesia, the English learning environment differs across locations and educational institutions. While several schools underscore language proficiency, others encounter challenges in accommodating constructive learning resources and qualified educators. English is often treated as a subject rather than a medium for communication, leading to a lack of communicative practice in the classroom(Wu & Wu, 2008). Access to authentic learning resources and exposure to real English communication are also limited, hampering language proficiency improvement. Nevertheless, efforts to enhance the quality of English learning environments through technology and exposure to natural English contexts are underway to improve language proficiency and prepare students for global communication (Yoshida, 2022).
One of the approaches to achieve that objective is by establishing authentic learning. Authentic learning in English foreign language learning is paramount for stimulating language skills, cultural awareness, and real-world communication proficiency.

Unlike conventional classroom approaches that emphasize solely language structures, authentic learning engages students in genuine language settings, allowing them to build interaction with English speakers, engage in authentic learning activities, and experience language naturally. This approach fosters engaging learning, stimulates critical thinking, and increases students' confidence and motivation in English communication (Grant et al., 2014).In addition, authentic learning promotes students' learning autonomy and self-directed learning as they can navigate their language learning journey (Abdukhayotovna, 2022).

Nonetheless, the practice of authentic EFL learning also poses certain obstacles. Access to authentic English learning resources may be limited. Moreover, establishing an authentic learning environment requires substantial preparation, adequate resources, and teacher training. Furthermore, assessing students' language development in an authentic learning environment can be challenging compared to the conventional assessment process (Shadiev et al., 2018). Regardless of these limitations, the advantages of authentic learning in EFL learning outweigh the challenges, making it a fundamental approach for language educators seeking to prepare language learners to be communicatively competent and culturally sensitive.

Potential Value of Online Pen Pal through Slowly Application for EFL Learning

In order to boost the students' competence to be better communicators in EFL classes, teachers must go beyond everything and leave the traditional teaching method. Teachers should make a change so that the learning process can be communicative and authentic internationally (Lie & Yunus, 2018). After that, the online learning method, commonly called online pen pal, can support the EFL teaching and arouse students' motivation to learn English (Yunus, 2018) (Hughes & Mahalingappa, 2018). One of the online applications for conducting online pen pal is Slowly application.

Slowly application is an online application that brings traditional pen pals to the hands of users through smartphones. It is not a typical networking or dating app. Still, it is created for people who yearn for meaningful conversation with people at a slow pace, depending on the distance of the receivers and senders (Slowly Application, 2022). The farther away the location of the receivers and senders is, the longer it will take to get a reply. It is an excellent application for EFL students to practice English with someone with the same passion.

Pen pal activity has been used for many years and for various purposes. It is also widely used in educational settings by multiple kinds of students with divergent language proficiency levels. Many studies report the advantages of using a pen pal for EFL learning. Pen pal activity provides EFL students with interactive learning so that writing tasks are not isolated (Pancawati, 2023) (Amartiwi, 2019). EFL students build social interaction with native English speakers and communicate in writing form to further develop their writing skills (Larrotta & Serrano, 2012).

Ass cited in Sibagariang et al. (2020, Garcia), claimed that pen pal activity sparks a genuine attraction to learning. Pen pal activity has proven to enhance students' desire to practice the English language. In addition, pen pals may encourage students to write humorously through the informal communication they build with native English speakers (Sibagariang et al., 2020). The interaction in pen pal activities builds greater confidence in the students. Many students find that the errors in the letters they write to their online pen pal do not affect their comprehension. The students can negotiate the language errors that appeared during the written communication to establish meaningful communication and even increase their confidence in communicating (Patton et al., 2017).

Pen pal activities construct a less tense atmosphere for the students to practice their English. Larrotta and Serrano (2012) statestate that their writing aims to producee

meaningful communication with their pen pal rather than achieving grades from their teachers to generate a convenient atmosphere in practicing English writing skills. Besides, the students' intense excitement for pen pal writing is receiving replies (Guth, as cited in Larrotta & Serrano, 2012). To receive responses from their online pen pal, the students must address questions to each other and utilize English language elements such as vocabulary, grammar, word order, and others. They put it in the authentic process of language learning.

Some students' improvement through pen pal activities emerges during language practice. Pen pal activity is more than just an English writing exercise. Students can gain many language functions from it, such as grammar, vocabulary, idioms, communicative expressions, and so on (Larrotta & Serrano, 2012). Not only language functions, but the students also obtain social skills and respect for cultural diversity during pen pal interaction (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009) (Lee, 2021). Accordingly, many studies have proven the positive impact of pen pal activities on English language learning. It promotes the students' individualized students' English learning and enhances engagement (Rachmayanti, 2013) (Lie & Yunus, 2018).

Methods
The research design is a mixed-method study. Mixed method design incorporates qualitative and quantitative strategies in a single project that may have either a qualitative or quantitative theoretical drive (Morse, 2003). This mixed-method study used two types of data: quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were used to portray the students' anxiety condition as described in the frequency. Meanwhile, the qualitative data was obtained from the thematic analysis to describe the types of students' anxiety and how slowly application contributes to overcoming students' writing anxiety.

Participants
The research participants of this study are 90 college students, 53 female students, and 37 male students. The age of the students ranges from 18-24 years old. They are university students from the non-English study program in Indonesia. They were attending General English class. General English is one of the compulsory subjects for students in the non-English study program. These EFL students were purposively selected to participate in this study. The researchers selected the participants since they took English classes during that period.

Source of Data
The source of data was *written reflective responses* of the 90 students who took General English class. Students composed the *written reflective responses* by being guided by several questions and accommodated by using the Google Forms platform. The researchers gave a set of guided questions that can be used to assist the students in reflecting on the learning activities that they have experienced. The questions were presented in close-ended and open-ended questions, which encouragedquestions, encouraging the students to express what they thought and feltfelt during the online pen pal activity by using an application. The responses from the research participants yielded research data sources in phrases, sentences, and expressions that belonged to the qualitative data. Then, their responses were taken as the data of this study.

Data Collection Procedure
The researchers employed open-ended questionnaires distributed to non-English study program students to collect the data. The questionnaires were administered during English class to gain a maximum response rate. The questionnaires were

shared with the research participants electronically through the English Class WhatsApp group, where the students were given the link to a Google Forms survey. This data collection method efficiently distributes and collects participants' responses.

The questionnaires comprised closed-ended and open-ended questions. Close-ended questions were presented in a yes-no format, while open-ended questions allowed the research participants to give more elaborative and nuanced answers. Combining the two question types thoroughly explains the participants' perspectives and experiences. Three guided questions were asked:

     1. Do the students feel anxious during writing activities through online pen pal using Slowly-app?

     2. How is the students' anxiety during writing activity through online pen pal using Slowly-application?

     3. To what extent does online pen pal using the Slowly-application minimize the students' writing anxiety?

Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers employed two types of analysis: quantitative descriptive analysis and thematic analysis. Quantitative data analysis was used to digest the students' anxiety condition that was yielded through close-ended questionnaires. Then, the researchers also utilized a thematic analysis to explore qualitative data from open-ended questionnaires about types of students' writing anxiety and to what extent online pen pals through slowly-application contributed positively to minimizing students' writing anxiety. Thematic analysis is the process of examining patterns or themes within qualitative data. Braun & Clarke (2006) state that it is the first qualitative method that should be learned since it provides core skills that will be beneficial for carrying out many other kinds of analysis. This research implements Braun & Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, which is a very useful framework for guiding researchers in analyzing qualitative data:

     1. Familiarization with the Data

     In this stage, researchers reviewed the data thoroughly by reading it repeatedly. Then, they analyzed the responses to thoroughly understand the participants' responses. Researchers organized the data in an Excel format to facilitate a systematic analysis.

     2. Generate Initial Codes

     Researchers analyzed each response and marked keywords or phrases by highlighting color. These codes were the initial data analysis units, presenting salient themes.

     3. Search for Themes

     Researchers classified data with similar codes to yield preliminary data themes. This stage required researchers to recognize patterns and connections in each piece of data. Then, they compiled the responses, which contained identical characteristics.

     4. Review Themes

     At this stage, researchers reviewed each category to ensure that the data in each category were accurately grouped. Participants' irrelevant and unclear responses were eliminated and excluded from the data analysis.

     5. Define Themes

     Researchers defined the names of the results of the identified themes that portrayed the essence of each category. The definition of the theme served as a clear framework for analyzing the data and examining its implications.

     6. Write-up

The thematic analysis results were then in a narrative description, elaborating on a detailed and comprehensive theme analysis. Researchers incorporated a theoretical framework that aligns with the data analysis to enhance validity.

Results and discussions
According to the research objectives and the thematic data analysis, the results of this study present the stages of establishing an EFL authentic learning environment, students' anxiety condition, types of students' writing anxiety, and the contribution of online pen pal activity in minimizing students' writing anxiety.

Stages of Establishing EFL Authentic Learning Environment
This part described the procedural stages of creating an authentic learning environment using online pen pal learning activities facilitated via the application platform. Students were given a three-week learning assignment encompassing engagement with online pen pals. Initial instructions from the lecturer entailed setting up the online pen pal application, namely "Slowly." After that, students were directed to begin communication by writing letters on various topics until they received replies from three English-speaking people. Notably, these English-speaking people were not required to be native English speakers but were expected to compose their letters in English to accommodate language practice for the students. After completing the task, students had to provide proof of their engagement by sending the lecturer screenshots of their pen pal interactions facilitated through Slowly-application. Additionally, students were encouraged to engage in reflective activities to explain the insights gleaned from their written interactions in the pen pal learning activities. An illustration of the procedural overview of the pen pal activity facilitated through the Slowly application was portrayed in the following figure.
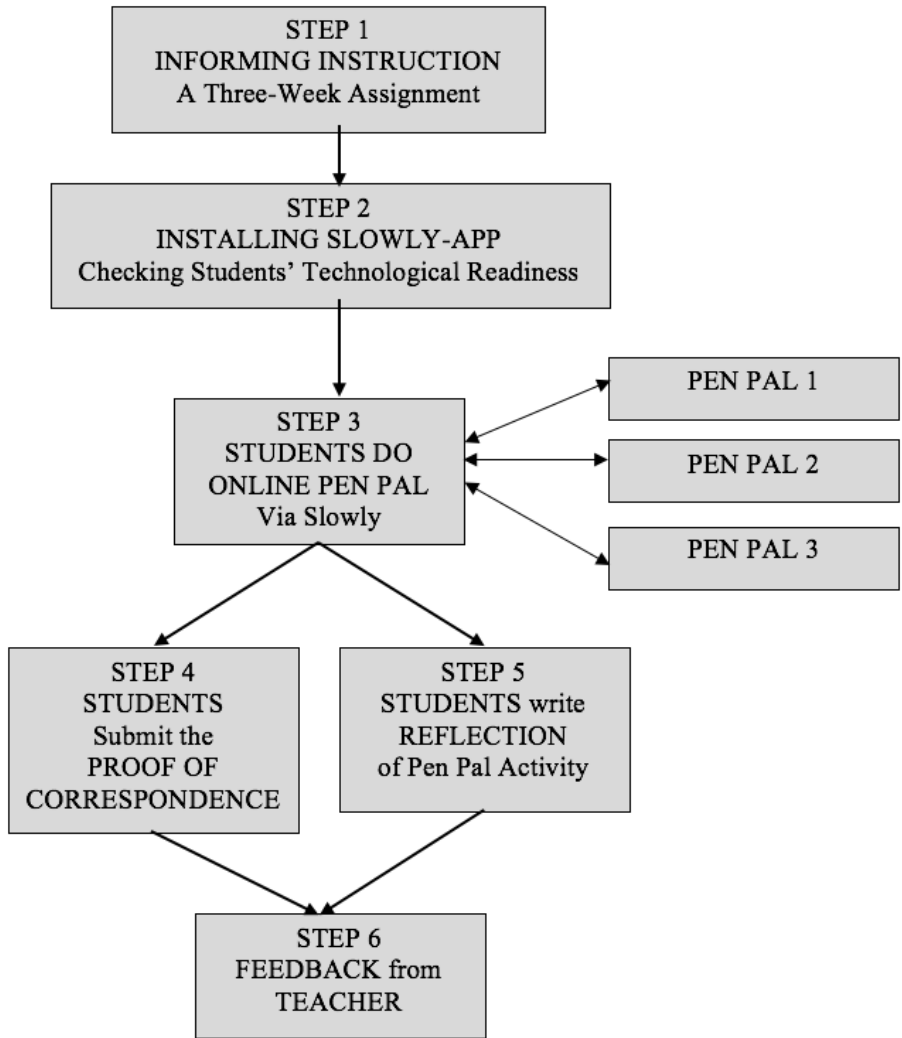
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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│            STEP 1               │
│     INFORMING INSTRUCTION       │
│      A Three-Week Assignment    │
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│            STEP 2               │
│     INSTALLING SLOWLY-APP       │
│ Checking Students' Technological Readiness │
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┌──────────────────────┐          ┌──────────────────┐
│       STEP 3         │─────────▶│    PEN PAL 1     │
│    STUDENTS DO       │◀─────────│                  │
│   ONLINE PEN PAL     │          └──────────────────┘
│     Via Slowly       │◀────────▶┌──────────────────┐
│                      │          │    PEN PAL 2     │
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└──────────────────────┘          │    PEN PAL 3     │
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┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐
│   STEP 4   │   │   STEP 5   │
│   STUDENTS   │   │   STUDENTS write   │
│   Submit the   │   │   REFLECTION   │
│   PROOF OF   │   │ of Pen Pal Activity │
│ CORRESPONDENCE   │   │   │
└──────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────┐
│   STEP 6   │
│   FEEDBACK from   │
│   TEACHER   │
└──────────────────────┘

Figure 2: Stages of Establishing Online Pen Pal as EFL Authentic Learning Environment
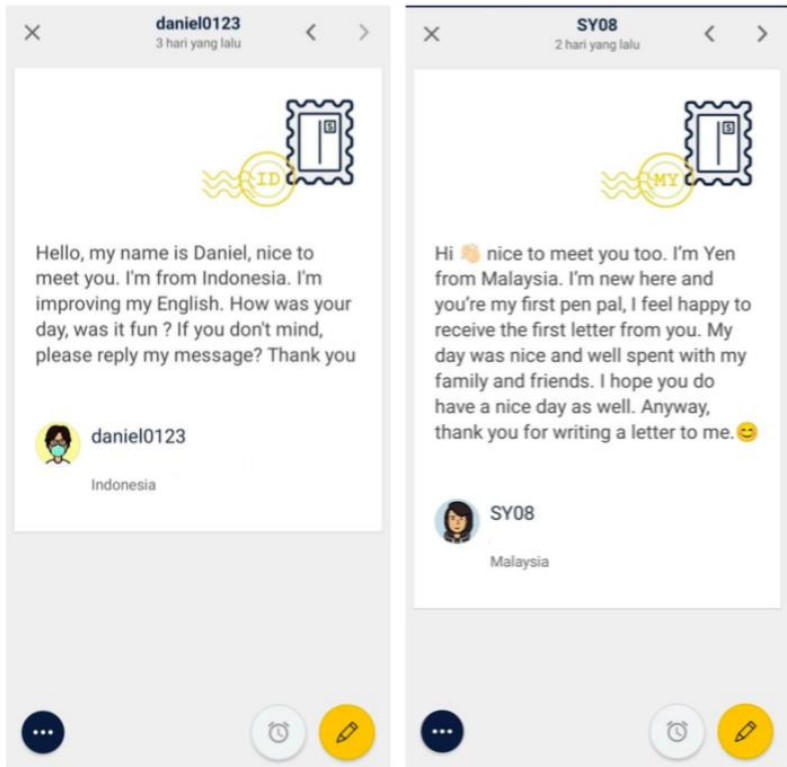
Figure 3: Screen Capture of Student's Online Pen Pal through Slowly Application

The online pen pal learning activity, meticulously arranged by the EFL lecturer, aims to cultivate a genuine enthusiasm for language learning within students, fostering a favorable atmosphere for leisurely exploration and mastery of English abilities. This activity encourages students to fully immerse themselves in a laid-back and congenial ambiance, which promotes in-depth interaction and more meaningful engagement with the language (Sibagariang et al., 2020). Through authentic interactions with their pen pals, students get the opportunity to practice linguistic concepts and build interpersonal communication skills in natural and non-threatening communication. Moreover, this learning environment allows students to negotiate the complexities of language acquisition in a way that is accessible and adjustable to the student's learning styles (Pancawati, 2023). Consequently, the objective of this pedagogical approach is to encourage the students to be lifelong learners who can self-improve, enhance their English skills, and engage in cultural exchange.

Students' Emotional Feeling during Pen Pal Activity
This section attempted to address the research question concerning students' anxiety levels during online pen pal activities facilitated by a slowly-application platform. Over three weeks, students got involved in the online pen pal writing activities. The research findings showed that a majority, constituting 63% of the student cohort,

reported perceiving negligible anxiety levels while building interaction in the online pen pal activity via the slowly-application platform. Conversely, a significant percentage, accounting for 37% of the student demographic, expressed anxiety while conducting writing interaction with English speakers in the online pen pal activity through the slowly-application.
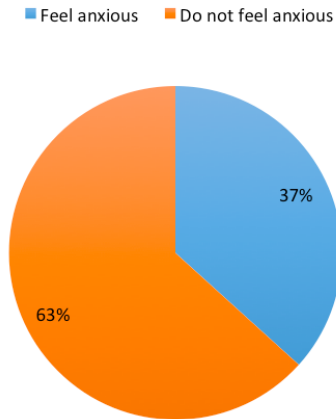

Figure 4: Students' Emotional Feeling during Online Pen Pal through Slowly Application

The results of this study revealed a notable phenomenon whereby some students derived a sense of intrinsic satisfaction from the act of writing, attributing their excitement to the exceptional opportunity it affords for articulating their feelings and thoughts through the medium of written communication. Students' perception of writing as an enjoyable activity highlights the profound influence that communication plays in the cognitive and emotional processes of language learning (Susila, 2019). Through writing letters, students are allowed to express themselves and present their ideas clearly and precisely but also engage in the form of self-expression that surpasses the limitations of spoken communication alone. Furthermore, the intrinsic appeal of writing stems from its capacity to encourage introspection and self-reflection, which helps students cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and their surroundings. As a result, the research found that 63% of the student cohort find writing an enjoyable activity, wherein the interplay between cognitive, affective, and sociocultural factors converge to shape students' personal preferences and learning paths.

In a percentage of 37% of students in the English class, it was evident that they faced challenges in effectively conveying their perspectives, rendering the writing a daunting and unenjoyably assignment. Writing activity engendered uneasiness and anxiety for these students, reflecting an underlying struggle to express their thoughts and ideas coherently and clearly. Students' aversion towards writing activities through online pen pals can be attributed to many factors, including but not limited to linguistic ability, self-confidence, and fear of judgment (Cheng, 2004b). The manifestation of anxiety and discomfort in response to writing tasks highlights the intricate relationship between language competency and affective dimensions of learning, wherein psychological barriers obstruct the development and application of communicative abilities.

Types of Students' Writing Anxiety

This section attempts to elaborate the response to the secondary research question concerning the manifestations of writing anxiety during the online pen pal activity enabled by the slowly-application platform. The research discovered that EFL students experienced neither somatic writing anxiety nor avoidance writing anxiety when they participated in an online pen pal activity via the Slowly application. Students perceived no physical discomfort related to writing and showed no behaviors indicating an avoidance of writing tasks. Consequently, the study reported that somatic and avoidance anxieties were absent in this research context. One overarching theme that emerged from the student-reported data is cognitive writing anxiety. Table 1 delineates four unique codes representing cognitive writing anxiety. The research findings indicate that EFL students' cognitive writing anxiety is complex. In particular, 20 responses emphasized concerns stemming from apprehensions about not being understood by English speakers due to grammatical and lexical constraints. Furthermore, 11 responses indicated anxieties regarding the potential offensiveness of messages within the letters. In addition, four responses expressed worries about the perceived dullness or boredom of discussion topics in the letters. Moreover, three responses revealed that time constraints in the writing process created several assumptions that made the students anxious.

Table 1. Cognitive writing anxiety.

Themes	Frequency
Worried due to the letter **CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD** by foreign people due to language issues	20
Worried to be considered as **BEING OFFENSIVE**	11
Worried to be considered as **BEING BORING**	4
Worried due to the **LONG PROCESS** of sending and receiving the letter	3

Cannot be Understood

The research results outline an anxiety among twenty students, which stems from their belief of being inadequate in navigating the difficulties of the English language, specifically in terms of grammatical nuance and vocabulary usage. Students had a tangible feeling of uncertainty and uneasiness during the writing process due to their language anxiety as they grappled with the challenge of accurately expressing ideas and conveying their intended meaning (Susila, 2019). It is supported by the students' responses as follows:

> "The thing that makes me afraid and nervous is if the recipient of the message doesn't understand what I write in English because my English grammar is still messy" (A1-2)

> "I am very worried about what I say, I am very afraid that I will write the wrong thing in terms of grammar and meaning of words" (A1-17)

> "I feel a little nervous. Because I feel that my use of English is not very proficient so it may be difficult for other people to understand." (A1-18)

Being Offensive

The other form of cognitive writing anxiety was the students' fear over the potentially offensive sentences in the letters during the pen pal activity. Eleven students perceived this anxiety, worrying that their pen pal acquaintances would

consider their jokes, conversational topics and other written expressions unpleasant and rude. The students' lack of cultural insights becomes the root of their anxiety.

The worry stemming from the fear that one might inadvertently offend underscores the intricate relationship between culture, language, and communication (Susila, 2019). Linguistic phrases contain nuanced meanings and cultural implications that those who are not culturally competent may be unable to comprehend. Learners' cognitive burden is raised when cultural insights fall short, contributing to their feelings of doubt and uncertainty during the writing process. This finding was strengthened by the students' responses as follows:

> "The reason for being worried is because there might be a wrong word that might make them offended and not want to reply to my chat." (A2-1)

> "I'm afraid the topic of my letter is hurtful" (A2-8)

> "I'm afraid that in writing my letter there will be something wrong that will offend that person's feelings." (A2-11)

Being Boring
The research findings highlighted another aspect of cognitive writing anxiety, as articulated by four students who expressed apprehension regarding the possibility of dullness of conversation themes within their pen-pal correspondence. These students were troubled by the fact that they would promote uninteresting and mundane communication with their pen pals, thereby threatening the exchange's lively, engaging and dynamic nature (Cheng, 2004b). Students' fear of boring conversation themes highlights the significance of topical diversity and content relevance knowledge in facilitating lively and engaging communication exchanges. Some students' responses confirmed the results:

> "I'm afraid the topic is boring" (A3-1)

> "I felt anxious because I didn't know what topics would be interesting to friends from abroad, worried that my letter would seem boring." (A3-2)

Long Process
The research findings shed light on an additional dimension of writing anxiety encountered by three students. This anxiety stems from the lengthy letter-sending and letter-receiving process through slowly application. These students indicated apprehension over the prolonged duration associated with sending and receiving letters, which triggered a series of assumptions that increased their anxiety levels. The prolonged intervals between sending and receiving letters fostered a fertile environment for the proliferation of assumptions, wherein students held anxieties concerning the perceived lack of responsiveness from their pen pals' friends (Cheng, 2004b). The absence of quick replies prompted feelings of abandonment and isolation, as students contended with the unsettling possibility of being overlooked or disregarded by their pen pal acquaintances. It is in line with a student's response articulating:

> "Afraid of not getting a reply, because it's a long wait for confirmation" (A4-3)

Contributions of Online Pen Pal Activity in Minimizing Students' Writing Anxiety
The fourth research question was the subject of this study section. The research findings revealed five strategies in which the online pen pal activity contributes to minimize students' writing anxiety. The research finding found that the online pen

pal platform, through the slowly application in particular, has a beneficial effect on lowering students' writing anxiety across five important areas. Firstly, as indicated by 37 students' responses, pen pal activity facilitates the establishment of friendships with English speakers, thereby alleviating students' writing anxiety. Secondly, the online pen pal activity provides students satisfaction when successfully establishing communication with foreigners, as evidenced by 22 responses. Thirdly, students gain linguistic knowledge and cultural insight through online pen pal activities, which serve as motivational and inspiring elements for writing, as indicated by 20 responses.

Furthermore, five responses emphasized the anonymity offered by the slowly application, including the absence of personal identifiers such as user's names, phone numbers and photographs, which contributes to decreased anxiety among students when writing the letters. Lastly, the flexibility in the time afforded by the online pen pal platform allows students to connect with their pen pal friends without feeling pressured and rushed, as reported by three responses. These five findings were in line with what had been mentioned Larrotta & Serrano (2012), that the writing activity of pen pal constructed a less tense atmosphere for the students in practicing and learning English.

Table 2. Online Pen Pal Contribution in minimizing students' writing anxiety

Themes	Frequency
MAKE FRIENDS with foreigners	37
SUCCESSFULLY COMMUNICATE well with foreigners	22
GAIN KNOWLEDGE from the writing activity	20
Maintain **PRIVACY**	5
More **FLEXIBLE IN TIME** during the writing process	3

Make Friends

The study's results unveiled a compelling understanding of the emotional dynamics of the pen pal activity, as articulated by thirty-seven students who perceived a tangible thrill and satisfaction obtained from creating friendships with foreigners. For these students, the opportunity to form a meaningful bond with English-speaking pen pals served a unique, genuine experience, and excitement (Stravers, 2022).

Furthermore, the emotional fulfillment students experience from interacting with English-speaking pen pals powerfully counterbalances the anxieties and fears associated with writing assignments. The sense of friendship and mutual understanding created by these connections inspires students with renewed confidence and self-assurance, decreasing the psychological barriers that obstruct effective written expression. Thus, the research findings demonstrate the transformative potential of intercultural friendships in alleviating students' writing anxiety and promoting a more pleasant and inclusive learning environment. It is confirmed by students' responses:

"Because I can find friends who have something in common" (S1-2)

"Can make lots of friends and turns out to be very kind and willing to share stories" (S1-7)

"I feel enjoy and excited in using this application. Because you can meet many people from abroad and become pen pals." (S1-10)

Successful Communication

As stated by twenty-two students, successful communication with foreigners through online pen pal activities significantly reduced students' anxiety in writing assignments. By having engaging interactions and realizing their skill to communicate in English effectively, students gain confidence in their writing abilities. This newfound confidence results from validating their language skills through successful interactions with English speakers. As a result, students feel more at ease when given writing assignments, promoting a favorable environment for language learning. This first-hand experience not only fosters a sense of achievement while also supporting language acquisition, bolstering students' motivation to further engage with the language (Yoshida, 2022). Some students' responses support this finding:

> "I'm very interested, because it's not just me who starts the conversation but many friends start the conversation." (S2-2)

> "Because I can communicate with people from abroad, it feels very exciting." (S2-9)

> "I like it because I can chat with other people very smoothly, they are very open." (S2-18)

Lesson Learned

The study reveals a notable finding observed among twenty students who admitted a heightened motivation to engage in writing tasks as a direct consequence of their involvement in the pen pal activity. These students articulated that their enthusiasm for written communication was increased by the invaluable insights gained from their correspondence with pen pals' friends who are English speakers. Thus, it enriches their comprehension of the English language and the diverse cultural contexts of the students' pen pal counterparts (Hunter et al., 2012). Beyond mere linguistic competency, students attested to the educational value of interpersonal interactions forged with their English-speaking pen-pal friends (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009). These exchanges served as learning environment for acquiring cultural competence and language mastery, fostering a greater understanding of the nuances and intricacies of intercultural communication. It is built up by the students' responses as follows:

> "I gained a lot of knowledge when communicating via Slowly-App, because I happened to send a lot of letters. apparently, I got a reply from them. it makes me happy" (S3-1)

> "I learned a lot of vocabulary from various countries" (S3-12)

> "I learned good grammar, slang, and my vocabulary also increased" (S3-16)

Anonymity as Privacy

The research findings revealed a significant discovery regarding the role of anonymity in minimizing writing anxiety within the context of the pen pal activity. For a number of students, as reflected in five students' responses, the absence of identifiable information such as full names, photos, and social media accounts generated a sense of privacy that facilitated a more convenient way of

communication with their pen pal counterparts. The anonymity afforded by the pen pal activities through slowly application acted as a protective shield against the fears and insecurities of public evaluation and judgment, thereby establishing a safe and non-threatening environment wherein students felt emboldened to speak of themselves freely and authentically. Students' responses support the research finding:

> "Because if you send a letter only verbally, you won't display photos and personal data that are private." (S4-2)

> "I like it because your personal data is safe" (S4-5)

Flexible in Time

The research findings unveiled a noteworthy pattern observed among three students who said they had no writing anxiety, which they attributed to the innate flexibility provided by the asynchronous nature of the peer-to-peer activity. These students expressed that having no time limits offered them a sense of freedom and control in managing their writing tasks, thereby reducing the mental strain of anxiety typically associated with time-sensitive assignments.

Central to alleviating writing anxiety was the students' capacity to use their flexibility of time to their advantage, providing them plenty of time for preparation, revision, and refinement of their written communication (Susila, 2019). As opposed to synchronous writing activities that impose rigid time limits, the asynchronous nature of the pen pal interaction afforded students the luxury of pacing themselves based on their individual needs and preferences, encouraging a more leisurely and deliberative approach to the writing composition. This result is strengthened by some students' responses:

> "I am quite comfortable using this application because there is a delay of several hours until I receive a reply to a message, so there is time to think about the next topic of conversation." (S5-1)

> "The reason I don't feel nervous when using the slow application is because the way of communicating is not direct (flexible time)" (S5-2)
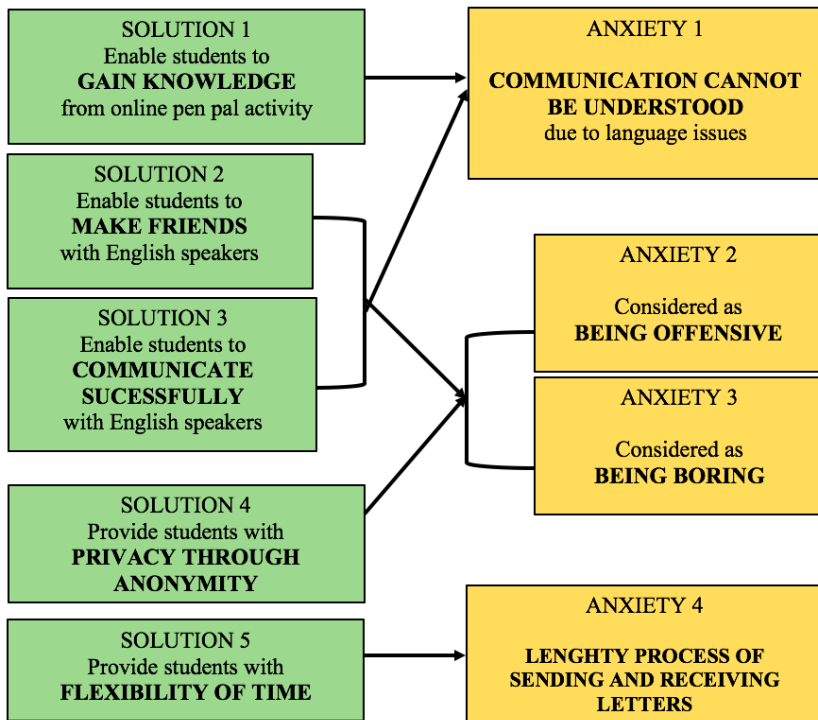
SOLUTION 1 Enable students to **GAIN KNOWLEDGE** from online pen pal activity	**ANXIETY 1** **COMMUNICATION CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD** due to language issues
SOLUTION 2 Enable students to **MAKE FRIENDS** with English speakers	**ANXIETY 2** Considered as **BEING OFFENSIVE**
SOLUTION 3 Enable students to **COMMUNICATE SUCESSFULLY** with English speakers	**ANXIETY 3** Considered as **BEING BORING**
SOLUTION 4 Provide students with **PRIVACY THROUGH ANONYMITY**	
SOLUTION 5 Provide students with **FLEXIBILITY OF TIME**	**ANXIETY 4** **LENGHTY PROCESS OF SENDING AND RECEIVING LETTERS**

Figure 5: Contributions of Pen Pal Via Slowly App to Minimize Students' Writing Anxiety

The pen pal activity via slowly-application provides the students with five positive contributions. The first is to provide students the opportunity to learn about language and culture in a way that encourages them to feel less anxious while writing by eliminating their worry about unclear communication. Afterward, the second and third contributions are that the online pen pal activity helps students make friends and communicate effectively, which serves as a confirmation of their anxiety that they can communicate successfully and without being judged as being offensive or boring by their pen pal, which is what the students are afraid of. Fourthly, students can exchange letters anonymously through an online pen pal via slowly-app, giving them the anonymity they need to overcome their anxiety of being judged as dull/ boring and insulting. Lastly, the fifth and final contribution decreases students' anxiety about the lengthy process of writing and receiving letters by making them understand the nature of online pen pals via slowly-app and its flexibility in terms of time.

The research results demonstrate the success of online pen pal activities in establishing a less anxious learning environment for writing activities. Nevertheless, the advantages of online pen pay extend beyond writing activities. It can be applied in various classroom settings and diverse educational contexts. In Psychology Class, online pen pal activities can foster emotional intelligence through insights into written communication's psychological and emotional elements. Educators may assist the students in investigating the emotional tone of their pen pal's message and create a deep analysis of how emotions may affect written communication. It can help students become more aware of others' feelings and develop emotional intelligence. In Business and Management classes, online pen pals can provide an

opportunity for students to build connections with individuals in global settings. Educators can motivate students to dig out career opportunities and professional networks through pen-pal interactions. This activity can stimulate students to have broader professional horizons. Students can explore historical occurrences, cultural values, and other history-related knowledge in history class by sharing communications on pen pal activities. Overall, online pen pal offers a diverse approach to enhancing learning in various classroom settings.

Nevertheless, some potential challenges might occur in online pen pal learning activities. Four potential challenges were captured in this research. The first challenge is students' lack of motivation. Several students may find it difficult to maintain motivation, especially if they are not interested in the language being learned during online pen pal activities. To overcome this problem, educators can establish engaging and relatable activities that align with students' interests. Moreover, educators can provide rewards and appreciation for students' participation to foster their motivation in the learning process via online pen pals. In addition, technical issues also may occur during online pen pal activities. The difficulties that include Internet connections, software problems, and smartphone failures may disrupt learning. Educators can handle it by ensuring students are ready and prepared for online pen pal activities before the learning begins. Besides, time management may also become a problem during online pen pal activity. Online pen pal activities might be time-consuming, and students may struggle to balance the time allocated to academic and personal activities. Educators can provide initial guidelines and explanations for the duration of online pen-pal interactions. Educators can also design the assignment in flexible time to enable students to work at their own pace without being in a hurry. Another potential challenge during online pen pal activity is minimum cultural sensitivity. In some communication settings, students may lack cultural sensitivity, which may drive them into misunderstanding and offensive communication. To solve those problems, educators may enhance cultural awareness through classroom discussion so that the students gain insights related to cultural etiquette and customs.

Conclusion

One main barrier to teaching and learning English is students' anxiety about writing language. The endeavor to establish an authentic learning environment through pen pal activities via Slowly App has a beneficial impact on students' anxiety related to writing. The researchers found three important findings. Firstly, a significant number of students stated they had no anxiety about the online pen pal activity using Slowly App. Secondly, students who reported experiencing anxiety mainly attributed it to cognitive writing anxiety, which relates to negative assumptions from their pen pals, such as being offensive and boring. Thirdly, one of the most notable benefits of online pen pal activity via slowly-app is the capacity for the students to make friends and build effective conversations in English. As a result, those experiences provide the students more assurance and validate their English proficiency in writing. Consequently, it decreases students' apprehension when writing English during online pen pal activities. This research contributes to the broader field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning by underscoring the innovative learning approaches to enhance students' engagement, motivation, and writing skills. The learner-centered environment through online pen pal serves as a culturally responsive EFL curriculum and creates a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Through authentic communication and collaboration, online pen pal activities can enhance significant skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and intercultural competence. Students' mastery of those skills may enhance learning outcomes in a broader EFL context.. The finding of this

research may fill a crucial gap in the literature by showing empirical evidence for the effectiveness of online pen pal activities in minimizing EFL writing anxiety. Previous research has significantly emphasized the advantages of pen pal activities for English language proficiency and culturally based communication. However, few have explicitly investigated the implication of online pen pals on students' psychological condition toward writing activities. By portraying the positive psychological impact of online pen pal programs, this study is a valuable tool for establishing a more inclusive and encouraging learning environment to foster positive learning habits towards language learning, particularly writing activity. Building upon the results of this research, future researchers can investigate the following areas further. The first area for further study can examine alternative online platforms without lengthy processes and with low-potential technical issues. This would provide more opportunities for more accessible and inclusive learning experiences for EFL students. The second area that can be developed more deeply is the enhancement of language evaluation instruments. This investigation serves as a more accurate assessment of student's learning progress and shows the areas for improvement. Moreover, these developed assessment instruments may align the learning process with broader language learning objectives. The third area for further studies is longitudinal studies. Carrying out longitudinal studies by exploring the long-term impact of online pen pal activities on students' motivation, interest, and writing anxiety would present a comprehensive framework of the online pen pal impact over time.

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