

EXPLORING PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' DEMOTIVATION IN ESSAY WRITING CLASS

Noor Muthi'ah¹, Luqman Baehaqi², Zaitun Qamariah³, Tawfiq Sarehmansor⁴

^{1,2,3} Universitas Islam Negeri Palangka Raya, Indonesia.

⁴ Diamond Human Resources Foundation, Thailand.

mutia2111120189@uin-palangkaraya.ac.id¹, luqman.baehaqi@uin-palangkaraya.ac.id², zaitun.qamariah@uin-palangkaraya.ac.id³, tawfiqain3199g@gmail.com⁴

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of demotivation in essay writing among pre-service English teachers at UIN Palangka Raya. Academic writing is often perceived as difficult by EFL learners due to limited vocabulary, weak grammar, and challenges in organizing ideas, which reduce students' confidence (Baehaqi, 2023). Moreover, even teachers tend to avoid academic writing because of insufficient knowledge and low confidence (Qamariah et al., 2023). Using a qualitative phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994), data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten students who had completed essay writing courses and analyzed through epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. The findings revealed seven themes of demotivation: language-related anxiety, unclear instruction and passive teaching style, loss of autonomy and relevance gap, time pressure and preparation gap, class format and timing issues, coping strategies, and supportive teaching as motivator. Both internal and external factors contributed to demotivation, yet students managed to cope through peer collaboration, self-regulation, and online resources, while supportive teaching emerged as a key factor in restoring motivation. This study contributes to the understanding of demotivation in EFL essay writing and underscores the importance of empathetic, autonomy-supportive, and process-oriented teaching practices in sustaining student engagement.

Keywords: **demotivation, essay writing, pre-service English teachers, phenomenology, EFL learning.**

INTRODUCTION

In second/foreign language learning (EFL), motivation is a key factor that determines the level of students' success in mastering the language effectively (Dörnyei, 1998). Although most students are aware of the importance of English language acquisition, their motivation levels often fluctuate and are influenced by various factors, including the teaching methods used by teachers (Dörnyei, 2001a). Demotivation in the EFL context refers to a decrease in students' motivation caused by certain negative influences, such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence, perceived difficulty in tasks, and unsupportive teaching approaches (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, essay writing skills are often considered one of the most challenging skills for students (Kikuchi, 2015). Many students struggle not only with language accuracy or organizing ideas, but also with maintaining motivation to complete writing assignments (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). In essay writing classes, students are often found to procrastinate, be reluctant to write, or show minimal effort in the revision process (Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Similar difficulties were also identified in a previous study, which reported that EFL students often experienced challenges in organizing ideas, lacked a sufficient vocabulary range, and struggled with grammatical competence. These issues frequently decreased students' confidence in producing academic writing (Baehaqi, 2023). Writing challenges are thus a widespread phenomenon, which also occur among teachers in academic contexts: *"The competence in writing scientific papers is undeniably very important today, as teachers are expected to be able to write and publish academic works in addition to teaching. However, in reality, quite a number of teachers have never written academic articles. This is due to many factors, one of which is their limited knowledge of research paper writing. Teachers who have the ability to write scientific papers are very few, even rare. Writing is still an activity that teachers tend to avoid, and this condition is very concerning"* (Qamariah et al., 2023). These findings highlight that both linguistic and affective difficulties can interact, creating conditions

that trigger demotivation in writing activities. These behavioral patterns are often a manifestation of demotivation, which is a condition of decreased enthusiasm and desire to learn due to various internal and external factors, such as fear of negative assessment, lack of writing skills, an unsupportive classroom atmosphere, or previous experiences of failure (Kikuchi, 2015). Demotivation in this context refers to a decrease in previously existing motivation due to certain negative influences (Dörnyei, 2001b). (Dörnyei, 2001a) explains that demotivation does not mean a total absence of motivation, but is a condition when initial motivation decreases due to certain detrimental factors. In the context of writing essays, demotivation can arise when students feel overwhelmed by academic writing rules, feel that lecturers' instructions are unclear, assignments are monotonous, or the feedback given is inadequate (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). In addition, according to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), a person's intrinsic motivation will decrease when three basic psychological needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness are not met in the learning process (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). This theory provides a framework for understanding the psychological processes that cause students to lose interest and involvement in academic writing activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000b). This study is based on several main theories that support Exploring Efl Learners' Demotivation in Essay Writing Class. First, Demotivation Theory from Zoltán Dörnyei. In his theory, (Dörnyei, 2001a) defines demotivation as a decrease in learning motivation due to certain negative influences, both from outside (such as teacher's teaching style, boring subject matter, bad class dynamics) and from within the students (such as low self-confidence or academic anxiety). Dörnyei emphasized that demotivation does not mean that students have no motivation at all, but that their motivation is disturbed or weakened by certain factors. This theory has been widely applied in language learning research, one of which is by (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009) in their study entitled "An analysis of demotivators in the EFL classroom". This study used a questionnaire to identify sources of demotivation among high school students in Japan. They found that factors such as boring assignments, uninteresting teaching methods, exam pressure, and low self-confidence were the main causes of decreased motivation to learn English. These findings confirm the relevance of Demotivation Theory in understanding the obstacles faced by EFL learners, and also provide a concrete picture that demotivation is complex and multidimensional.

Second, from the perspective of educational psychology, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by (Deci & Ryan, 2000b) explains that human motivation is greatly influenced by the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When learners feel they have no control over what and how they learn, feel incompetent in doing tasks, or feel they have no social connection with teachers and classmates, their intrinsic motivation decreases. In the context of an essay writing class, students who are not given space to express themselves, feel unable to write well, or do not feel supported by their environment are at risk of experiencing demotivation. This theory is applied in real terms in a study conducted by (Noels et al., 2000) entitled "Why are you learning a second language? Motivational orientations and self-determination theory". In the study, they examined the relationship between the type of motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) and the perception of autonomy in second language learning. The results showed that students who felt they had higher autonomy and felt competent in learning tended to have stronger and more sustainable motivation. This supports the SDT framework and reinforces the importance of a learning environment that supports students' psychological needs, especially in complex learning activities such as writing essays.

Third, the Affective Filter Hypothesis is one of the important concepts in the theory of second language acquisition proposed by (Krashen, 1982). This theory explains that affective conditions such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation play a major role in the language learning process. When a student has a high level of anxiety or low self-confidence, an "affective filter" will appear that blocks the optimal input of language. In the context of essay writing, students who are afraid of making mistakes or feel embarrassed about their writing skills may refuse to write, thus inhibiting the development of their skills. This theory has been applied in a study by (Sabti et al., 2024), who investigated the influence of writing anxiety components on the attitudes of EFL students in Iraq. This study found that cognitive anxiety, avoidance behavior, and somatic symptoms significantly influenced negative attitudes toward writing. These findings support the Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggesting that affective factors can hinder EFL students' writing ability.

These three theories provide a strong conceptual framework for understanding how and why EFL students may experience demotivation in essay writing classes. Demotivation Theory highlights the immediate causes of demotivation, SDT explains its psychological basis, while the Affective Filter Hypothesis shows how students' emotional responses to essay writing can limit language acquisition. By integrating the three, this study seeks to explore students' real experiences and provide conceptual and practical contributions to the development of more empathetic and effective writing learning strategies. In the environment of UIN Palangka Raya, essay writing skills in English are an important part of the learning curriculum of students of the English Language Education Study Program. However, the challenges in its implementation are still quite large. The lecturer in charge of the

Academic Writing course observed that some students showed a tendency to be passive, reluctant to develop ideas in writing, or even experienced a dead end when writing. This phenomenon cannot be separated from the low motivation and self-confidence felt by students in facing the task of writing essays in a foreign language. This is in line with the findings of a study conducted by (Wardani, 2016) at UIN Palangka Raya, which showed a significant relationship between learning motivation and writing learning strategies in EFL students. Students with low levels of motivation tend to use ineffective writing strategies, such as delaying writing, copying examples from the internet, or being reluctant to do independent revisions. The study also emphasized that weak learning strategies often reflect problematic affective and cognitive conditions in students, which in the context of this study can be identified as a form of demotivation. Thus, the results of the study strengthen the assumption that writing problems that occur in class are not only about linguistic abilities, but are also closely related to students' psychological and motivational conditions. So it is important to dig deeper into how the experience of demotivation is experienced by students in real terms in the process of learning to write essays on campus.

Although previous theories and studies have revealed several factors that cause demotivation in English language learning in general, studies that specifically highlight the experience of demotivation in essay writing classes at the college level, especially in EFL contexts such as Indonesia, are still limited (Kikuchi, 2015; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). In addition, most studies use a quantitative approach and rarely explore students' personal experiences in depth. In fact, demotivation is often personal and is greatly influenced by an individual's social, academic, and emotional background. This is consistent with previous findings showing that many EFL learners not only struggle with linguistic aspects of writing but also suffer from writing apprehension and low motivation, which significantly affect their confidence and engagement in academic writing (Baehaqi, 2023). Based on these conditions, this study is important to conduct in-depth exploration of the forms, causes, and experiences of demotivation experienced by EFL students in essay writing classes. The urgency of this study lies in its contribution in filling the literature gap and providing empirical understanding that can be used as a basis for lecturers and institutions to develop more effective, humanistic, and psychological needs-based writing learning strategies. The findings of this study are expected to not only provide an overview of the dynamics of demotivation in the local context, but also provide practical implications in creating a more supportive and motivating learning environment. Thus, this study can be a basis for designing pedagogical interventions that can reduce affective filters, increase self-confidence, and rebuild EFL students' motivation in writing essays.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writing is one of the most demanding skills for EFL learners. It requires mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and the ability to organize ideas logically. Previous studies show that students often perceive academic writing as a burden due to limited vocabulary, weak grammatical competence, and difficulties in structuring ideas, which consequently reduce their self-confidence (Baehaqi, 2023; Qamariah et al., 2023). These challenges frequently trigger writing anxiety and lead to lower levels of learning motivation. In the field of motivation, (Dörnyei, 2001) defines demotivation as the loss of motivation caused by internal or external factors. Common sources include monotonous teaching methods, irrelevant materials, and negative teacher-student relationships. (Chen, 2019) also highlighted that unclear instructions and passive teaching styles significantly contribute to students' lack of motivation. In relation to writing, demotivation is strongly linked to affective factors. (Krashen, 1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis emphasizes that anxiety, low self-confidence, and negative emotions hinder the process of language acquisition and writing performance.

Furthermore, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000b) explains that students' intrinsic motivation depends on the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are unmet, learners are more vulnerable to demotivation. This is consistent with (Ghaith, 2019) findings that an unsupportive classroom environment intensifies writing anxiety and reduces motivation. Several studies in Indonesia also highlight this issue. (Qamariah et al., 2023) found that even in-service teachers tend to avoid academic writing due to limited knowledge and lack of confidence. Similarly, (Baehaqi, 2023) revealed that Indonesian pre-service English teachers perceive academic essay writing as highly challenging due to their limited vocabulary, weak grammar, and difficulties in organizing ideas, which often result in writing anxiety and decreased motivation. Although studies on language learning motivation are abundant, research focusing specifically on demotivation in academic essay writing among Indonesian pre-service English teachers remains scarce. Most existing studies emphasize speaking or reading skills, while writing particularly students' lived experiences of demotivation has not been widely explored. Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap by investigating the factors contributing to demotivation in essay writing courses.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore pre-service English teachers' experiences of demotivation in essay writing classes. The phenomenological method was considered appropriate since it allows the researcher to capture participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The participants were ten pre-service English teachers at UIN Palangka Raya who had completed essay writing courses. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their prior experiences and willingness to share their reflections. To ensure ethical considerations, all participants gave informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to describe their demotivating experiences while allowing the researcher to probe further into emerging issues. Each interview lasted around 30–45 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using (Moustakas, 1994) phenomenological procedures, including epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analyzed following (Moustakas, 1994) phenomenological procedures, including epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Through this process, significant statements were identified, clustered into categories, and developed into thematic descriptions. The analysis revealed seven major themes that reflect the demotivating experiences of pre-service English teachers in essay writing classes. The study involved ten pre-service English teachers at UIN Palangka Raya who had completed essay writing courses. Their demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Participant

Participant code	Gender	Year of Study	Relevant Experience in Essay Writing
P1- Ahmad Basahil	Male	9 th Semester	Completed essay writing course
P2- Syahrul Mubaroq	Male	9 th Semester	Completed essay writing course
P3- Shifa Soraya lestari	Female	9 th Semester	Completed essay writing course
P4- Maulidina tri amanda	Female	9 th Semester	Completed essay writing course
P5- Siti nurrahmah	Female	9 th Semester	Completed essay writing course
P6- Arya eka	Male	7 th Semester	Completed essay writing course
P7- Dimas aulia arzaqi	Male	7 th Semester	Completed essay

				writing course
P8- Rahma ibtida saumi	Female	7 th Semester	Completed essay writing course	
P9- Hasbuna niqmah shalehah	Female	7 th Semester	Completed essay writing course	
P10- Dhea nuraisyah	Female	7 th Semester	Completed essay writing course	

The phenomenological analysis revealed seven major themes that reflected students' demotivation in essay writing. These themes, along with examples of participant statements, are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes of Demotivation in Essay Writing

Theme	Description	Example from Participants
Language-related anxiety	Fear of grammar mistakes, limited vocabulary, low confidence in expressing ideas	"I am always afraid of grammar errors, so I delay writing."
Unclear instruction & passive teaching	Lack of clarity in explanations, monotonous lecturing, minimal guidance	"The teacher just gave us tasks without showing how."
Loss of autonomy & relevance gap	Restricted topic choices, tasks felt irrelevant	"It's difficult to write about topics that don't interest me."
Time pressure & preparation gap	Sudden assignments, insufficient time for planning	"We were asked to write essays suddenly without time to prepare."
Class format & timing issues	Large class size, rigid schedule, limited feedback	"Too many students, so feedback feels lacking."
Coping strategies	Peer collaboration, self-regulation, use of online tools	"I often ask my friends or use grammar checkers."
Supportive teaching as motivator	Constructive feedback, encouragement, practical examples	"When the teacher gives real examples, I feel motivated again."

The phenomenological analysis revealed seven major themes that reflected students' demotivation in essay writing (see Table 2). Each theme is described below. The first theme was **language-related anxiety**, which reflected students' fear of grammatical mistakes, limited vocabulary, and low confidence in expressing ideas. This anxiety often caused hesitation and avoidance in starting writing tasks. One participant explained, "*I am always afraid of writing the wrong grammar, so I delay writing.*" (P3). The second theme was **unclear instruction and passive teaching style**. Students reported that lecturers sometimes gave tasks without sufficient explanation or guidance, relying mainly on lecturing. This made students confused about expectations in essay writing. As one participant stated, "*The teacher just gave us tasks without showing how to write step by step.*" (P6). The third theme was **loss of autonomy and relevance gap**, which occurred when students were assigned topics that felt irrelevant or uninteresting. They preferred writing about issues that connected with their own interests and daily lives. One participant shared, "*It's difficult to write about topics that don't interest me.*" (P2). The fourth theme was **time pressure and preparation gap**. Students felt overwhelmed when they received sudden assignments without enough time to prepare. This situation led them to perceive essay writing as a burdensome task. One participant admitted, "*We were asked to write essays suddenly without time to prepare.*" (P8).

The fifth theme was **class format and timing issues**, which involved large class sizes, rigid scheduling, and insufficient feedback. These conditions made students feel that their individual needs were overlooked. One

participant expressed, “*Too many students, so feedback feels lacking.*” (P4). Despite these demotivating factors, the sixth theme was **coping strategies**. Students tried to reduce demotivation through peer collaboration, self-regulation, and the use of online resources such as grammar checkers. For instance, one participant said, “*I often ask my friends or use grammar checkers.*” (P1). Finally, the seventh theme was **supportive teaching as motivator**. Constructive feedback, encouragement, and practical examples provided by lecturers helped to rebuild students' motivation and confidence. One participant explained, “*When the teacher gives real examples, I feel motivated again.*” (P7). Overall, these findings show that demotivation in essay writing is shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. However, supportive teaching practices played a key role in reducing anxiety and restoring students' motivation. The entire document should be in Calibri font. Type 3 fonts must not be used. Other font types may be used if needed for special purposes. To provide clarity on how the data were processed, an example of the coding procedure is presented in Table 3. This illustrates how significant statements from participants were transformed into meaning units and then clustered into broader themes. By showing this process, the connection between raw data and the identified themes becomes more transparent.

Table 3. Example of Coding Process

Participant	Significant Statement (Horizon)	Initial code	Theme
P1	“The topic was hard to understand... I lacked self-confidence... afraid my grammar would be wrong.”	Lack of topic mastery; Low self-confidence; Fear of grammar errors	Language-related anxiety
	“The lecturer was too passive... explained too quickly... examples were unclear.”	Passive teaching; Fast explanation	Unclear instruction / Passive teaching style
	“Took a short break... looked for inspiration on the internet... shared with friends.”	Short breaks; Use internet for inspiration; Peer discussion	Coping strategies: seeking external resources
P2	“The topic was decided by the lecturer... not from our own ideas... I am less lazy when I choose myself.”	Lack of topic choice	Loss of autonomy
	“The online learning method made me understand nothing... I played more.”	Online class difficulty	Class format issues (online)
	“I am more motivated when given verbal examples... explained transitional signals.”	Clear step-by-step example	Supportive teaching (clear modelling)

This example demonstrates that the themes reported in this study were firmly grounded in participants' voices. By linking significant statements to meaning units and final themes, the analysis ensured that the findings accurately reflect the lived experiences of the participants.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that pre-service English teachers experienced demotivation in essay writing due to various internal and external factors. Internally, students reported language-related anxiety, such as fear of making grammatical mistakes, limited vocabulary, and low confidence. These findings reflect Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasizes that negative emotions like anxiety and low self-confidence hinder language input and output. Externally, unclear instructions, passive teaching styles, and irrelevant assignments were major sources of demotivation. As students explained, they often felt confused when given essay tasks without sufficient guidance, or disengaged when the topics felt disconnected from their interests. These findings are consistent with Dörnyei's Demotivation Theory, which states that ineffective teaching practices, lack of clarity, and irrelevant content can diminish previously existing motivation. The theme of loss of autonomy and competence also emerged strongly. When students were restricted in choosing essay topics or perceived tasks as too difficult, they reported a decline in intrinsic motivation. This aligns with Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, which highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key psychological needs for sustaining motivation. In this study, the lack of autonomy in topic selection and insufficient support in writing development reduced students' willingness to engage.

In addition, time pressure, sudden assignments, large classes, and rigid schedules created further demotivation. These structural issues limited opportunities for feedback and preparation, confirming earlier studies in similar EFL contexts that classroom conditions and workload are critical in shaping students' motivation. Despite these challenges, students attempted several coping strategies, including peer collaboration, self-regulation, and the use of online tools. Importantly, the role of supportive teaching was highlighted as a factor that restored students' confidence and motivation. When teachers provided constructive feedback, practical examples, and encouragement, participants felt more engaged in writing. This reinforces Dörnyei's argument that motivational teaching strategies can counteract demotivation, and it illustrates the importance of addressing both internal and external factors in sustaining learners' motivation

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the demotivating factors experienced by pre-service English teachers in an essay writing class. The findings revealed that students' demotivation stemmed from four major sources: linguistic challenges, psychological barriers, insufficient instructional support, and environmental constraints. Linguistic challenges included limited vocabulary, difficulties in grammar use, and lack of coherence in structuring ideas, which often led to frustration and reduced motivation to continue writing. Psychological barriers, such as low self-confidence, writing anxiety, and fear of making mistakes, further weakened students' persistence in engaging with academic writing tasks. Moreover, inadequate instructional support, particularly in terms of feedback and classroom strategies, limited the opportunities for students to develop their writing competence. Environmental constraints, such as limited access to learning resources, time pressure, and negative peer comparisons, also contributed to the persistence of demotivation. These findings highlight that demotivation in writing is a multifaceted issue that cannot be addressed by focusing on a single factor. Instead, it requires a comprehensive approach involving both teachers and institutions. Teachers should provide continuous constructive feedback, adopt varied instructional strategies, and integrate motivational techniques to sustain students' engagement in writing. At the same time, institutions must ensure a supportive learning environment by improving facilities, providing access to writing resources, and encouraging collaborative peer learning. Such efforts are essential in preparing pre-service teachers to build not only their academic writing proficiency but also their resilience and confidence as future educators.

While this study provides valuable insights into the demotivating factors of essay writing, it also has certain limitations. The research was conducted within a single institution and focused on a specific group of pre-service English teachers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to involve a larger and more diverse population across different educational contexts. Moreover, further studies could explore the role of digital tools, writing workshops, and peer feedback platforms as potential strategies to reduce demotivation in academic writing. In conclusion, addressing demotivation in essay writing requires collaborative efforts among students, teachers, and institutions. By identifying the sources of demotivation and implementing targeted interventions, pre-service teachers can be better supported in their journey to develop academic writing skills, which are crucial not only for their academic success but also for their future professional roles as English language educators.

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