

# EFL Education Journal

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**Exploring Students' Perceptions of English that Trigger Psychological Problems in Paragraph Writing**

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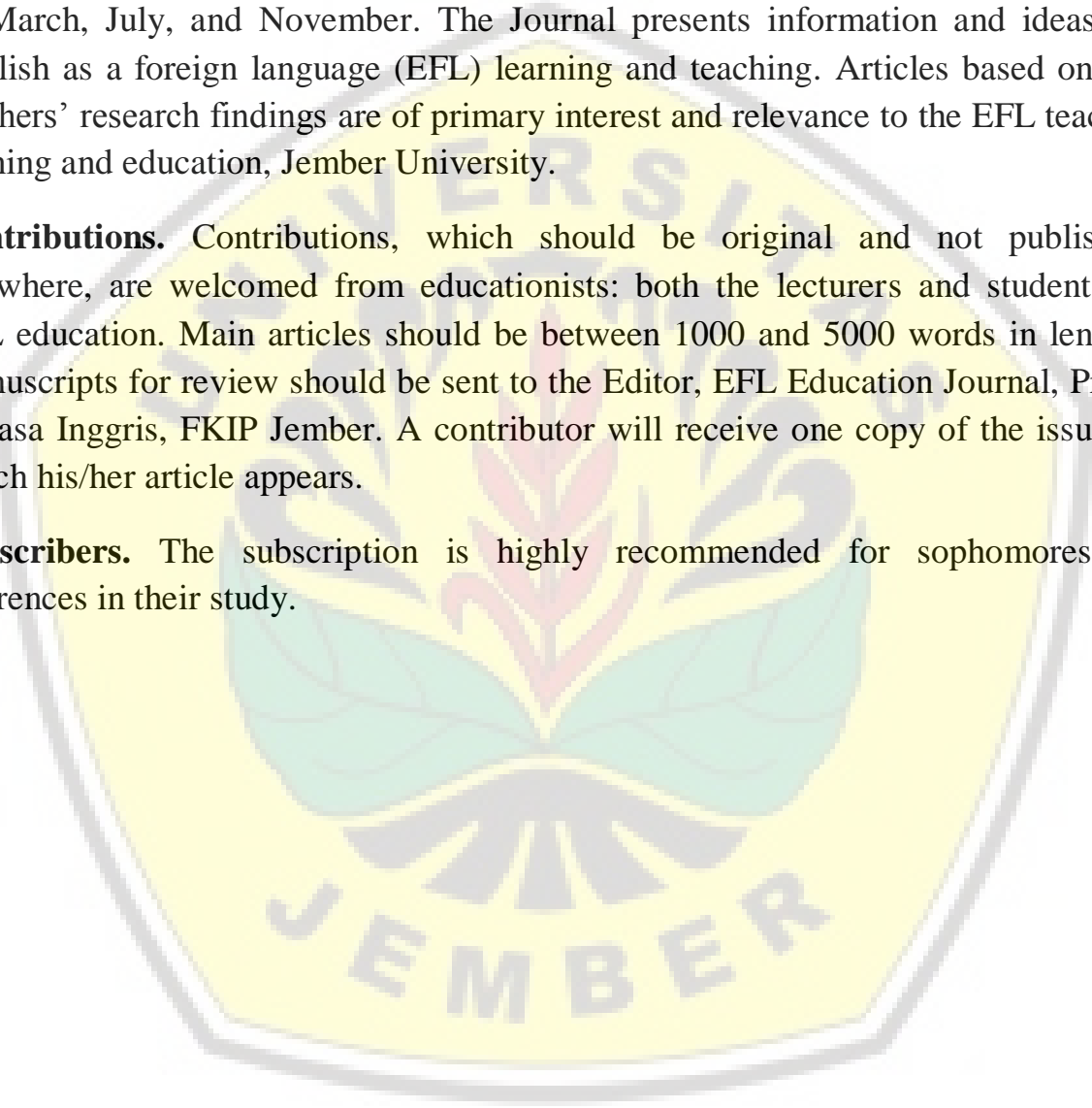
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## Exploring Students' Perceptions of English that Trigger Psychological Problems in Paragraph Writing

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**Abstract:** This research intended to explore students' perceptions towards English that triggered psychological problems while they were doing English paragraph writing activity. The research design was qualitative. The research participants (n=12) were the students of junior high school. The results show that only 3 students said English is easy, 3 students said English is medium, 6 students said English is difficult. They experienced difficulties in comprehending English tenses because of lack of reading practice, English grammar, and of vocabulary mastery. Thus, the students' perceptions yields the fact that they were in; doubt (9 students), anxiety (9 students), shyness (6 students), current mood (3 students), discouragement (6 students), lack of interest (4 students), lack of motivation (5 students).

**Keywords:** Students' Perceptions, Psychological problems, Writing

### I. Introduction

Writing is a complex skill which requires knowledge and critical thinking as well as the strategy of writing. It can be more complex when we try to write in another language, for example English. It must be a bit hard to express ideas and thoughts in the written form using English. English and Indonesian certainly have different rules either linguistically or culturally that we should understand first before we start writing. Unfortunately, people tend to write in English following the rules of Indonesian language instead of English. Therefore, the result of their writing is not satisfying in the sense of English. The fact shows that it takes time and needs process to produce a good writing. We cannot judge a writing work by the final outcome only, because writing is not as a product but as a process. In the process of

writing in English, Indonesian students usually face various problems caused by some factors such as linguistic factor, cultural factor, and psychological factor. Moreover, the objective of this research is exploring the psychological factors. It deals with the students' feelings, interest, motivation towards English. The researcher tried to dig deeper information about what on students' mind actually while they are writing in English.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework on Psychological factors**

Psychological factor is the mental factor which drives human being to synchronize the brains with the physical actions (BBC: 2014). It refers to human beings' thoughts, feelings, inner stimulation which affect human beings' attitudes and behaviors or physical actions towards something. We can claim psychological factor as the internal factor human beings that affect their attitude which also deals with human beings' thoughts and feelings.

Psychology itself is defined as the field of scientific study that discusses about behavior and mental processes (Feist & Rossenberg, 2009: 28). Psychology deals with the nature of human experience and behavior, the hows and whys of what we do, think, and feel (Gleitman, Gross, and Reisberg, 2010: xix). There are 7 subjects of psychology according to Feist & Rosenberg (2009: 29). Those are cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, behavioral psychology, biological psychology, personality psychology, social psychology, and educational psychology. Moreover, this research only focuses on the cognitive psychology which covers about how, what, and why in human beings' life. It deals with cognitive linguistics which covers about how language is formed and produced.

## 2.2 Conceptual Review on writing

Writing is one of the productive skill aside from speaking skill. As it is explained by Strauss (in Hartley, at al 1962:66), “writing might, that is to say, be regarded as a form of artificial memory, whose development should be accompanied by a deeper knowledge of the past, and therefore, by a greater ability to organize the present and the future”. It is just like what Harmer (2004: 3) says dealing with writing, once students write, they have to include their understanding and comprehension to express their ideas through written form about everything had happened, in order to make a well-organized work of writing.

From the explanations given by the experts above, we can come to a conclusion that writing skill is a productive skill which involves our deep understanding about the things being talked. Writing is not about producing words and sentences through written form to communicate, but also it includes our knowledge which requires us to think critically due to reach the target of creating a well-organized work of writing.

There are several kinds of writing activity in English such as essay writing and academic writing. Moreover, this research only focuses on the smaller form of writing that is paragraph writing. As it is stated in the web of *Writing Tutorial Services Indiana University* (2014), paragraph is a series of sentences which are coherently organized and tied one another. Paragraph is actually the foundation of all kinds of writing.

In the process of writing using English, students might make interference. Interference can be regarded as the phenomenon of automatically transferring any level of first language towards a new target language (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen,

1982). Interference itself is often claimed as learning transfer. James (2007) stated that there two types of interference, positive and negative interference. In learning language, it is normal that people make some mistakes or errors. We can assume that error refers to the negative interference. Ellis (1965) stated that practice a lot might much influence in triggering positive of negative interference while learning new language. This means when people often do some practices in producing new language, they will trigger more positive interference. In contrast, when people just do a little practice they will gain negative interference as the consequence.

Interference relates to human beings' awareness in learning English. Association of Language Awareness (ALA: 2012) states, “language awareness is the explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching, and language use”. While, according to Ronald Charter (2003:64), language awareness is the development of a person’s sensitivity towards the form of a language and its functions. Someone’s sensitivity will be continually increasing along with the learning process of language that someone is undergoing through. We can regard language awareness as the insight provisions of language to communicate in certain situations properly

We can come to a conclusion that, language awareness is often related to a person’s conscious perception towards the function of a language in use. This means that how deep a person’s comprehension of a language, it measures that person’s awareness towards that language.

### **2.3. Review of Previous Research on Writing**

The researcher was first inspired to undertake this psychological research by the previous psychological research done by Mulya (2014). However, it is different



from the research that the researcher did. The difference is that the research done by Mulya (2014) was about speaking skill while the researcher's is about writing skill. The psychological factors hampering students in English speaking activity based on Mulya's research were students' anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistake, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation. The details are shown in the tables below

Factors	Number of Students	Percentage
Anxiety	4 Students	10,00%
Shyness	7 Students	17,50%
Fear of Mistake	17 Students	42,50%
Lack of Confidence	9 Students	22,50%
Lack of Motivation	3 Students	7,50%

The researcher did not find the psychological research in writing skill. Therefore, the researcher tried to focus on analyzing the students' difficulties psychologically while they were writing in English. In order to know what things that hampered the students psychologically in English paragraph writing activity.

## The Study

### 3.1 Research Context

The context of this research was EFL (English as a foreign language) paragraph writing classes at a junior high school (SMPN 3 Jember). It is one of the Indonesian junior high schools that implement the 2013 curriculum or K13 Curriculum. The targeted school is located in the city where the people do not speak and write English in their daily activities. Besides, the students do not speak English in their daily activities outside their classrooms. They write in English only for learning purposes.

## **3.2 Research Design**

The research design was qualitative design to analyze the results of the study that are presented in descriptive data (Mackey & Gass, 2005:162). The researcher's reason of using qualitative research design was because the researcher wanted to gain natural and accurate data from the students.

The purposive method was applied in this research due to the specific characteristics or specific reason that the target area of research has (Schreiber, 2011:85). While, the sampling technique applied was theoretical sampling. theoretical sampling is the process of the research data collection for building up a theory or a concept whereby a researcher simultaneously collects, processes the data, and decides what should be done next for developing the concept (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:45). Theoretical sampling involves identifying and selecting the participants based on certain criteria that the researcher considered. The researcher's belief is the starting point to undergo theoretical sampling. Indeed, this kind of sampling helped the researcher to choose the research participants who could give informative and representative data.

## **3.3 Research Participants**

The research participants were the eighth grade students of the targeted school. There are 8 classes of the eighth grade level of students there. Nevertheless, since this kind of research requires deep information about the thing being researched, the researcher chose 1 class only from 8 classes.

The process of selecting the research participants was still continuing. the number of students as the key informants selected was determined. The total number of students in 8A class was 36 students. There was a selection phase whereby 32

students were eliminated to get 12 students whom the researcher considered as the most appropriately efficient participants based on the result of their questionnaire at the beginning of data collection.

### **3.4. Research Data**

There were 3 different kinds of the main data collection methods to collect the main data such as questionnaire, in-depth interview, and observation. Beside, there was also one complementary methods used as the means to get the validity of the data, writing instruction.

There were some strings of coherently continuous procedures did to gain the data by using the four methods above. It was started from applying the questionnaire method at the beginning of collecting data. The questionnaire were distributed to the whole of class 8A consisting of 36 students in the classroom as the first step of selecting the research participants. It was done to gain the initial data about the students' perceptions about English and its writing activity. All of the 36 students were asked to answer all the questions provided in the questionnaire based on their real situation. From the students' answers in the questionnaires, the researcher sorted and determined which students the researcher believed that they would be involved then in the interview session to dig more information. As the result of sorting the students through the questionnaire, it was gained 12 students selected as the research participants.

The next step was involving the students into the interview session. In the interview session, each student was given a writing instruction to be done, and the students were simultaneously interviewed. Writing instruction used in this research was a kind of writing task with a topic about describing their favorite things. This method

was done out of the classroom while English subject was running in the class 8A. After getting permission form the English teacher to have 12 students to do interview session, the researcher invited the research participants one by one to leave the class for a while. Each research participant was asked to do the writing task while they were being interviewed. The crucial thing which should be pointed is that this writing task was used only as the means to get the students could answers the questions given by the researcher as natural as possible while being interviewed. Indeed, interviewing them while they were writing might distract their concentration to write. Moreover, it was not a big deal since the researcher did not take any score from the students writing task. The writing task used was just a kind of the bridge that facilitate the researcher to get information wanted dealing with their actual thoughts while they were writing. It was actually a kind of gateway for the researcher to get the natural data from the created the natural situation.

The process of giving writing instruction to the 12 research participants was coherently simultaneous with the process of interviewing them. The researcher talked warmly and informally to the research participants while the process of interview to make a kind of natural and comfortable atmosphere wanted to get natural data. When a research participants who was writing task given looked concerned or showed negative attitude towards English, it means that the participant does not like English. The researcher took action to start interviewing and digging information when that kind of phenomenon happened. While the process of interview was running, the researcher recorded all the students' responses while being interviewed. The recording helped the researcher to transcribe the students' responses. It also helped the researcher to avoid any missing information. After transcribing the result of the students' interview, then the researcher transcribed and then the data were analyzed.

The last method applied in this research was observation. The observation process was actually done simultaneously while the research participants were writing and the process of interview was running. Indeed, there were simultaneously 4 data collection process running at the same time. Those all methods were important to this research in facilitating the researcher to gain the data wanted. Those 4 data collection method continually coherent connected one to another. In the process of observation, the researcher paid attention more to the interviewees' expressions and body movements while they were writing in English. The researcher did this kind of observation in order to comprehend their gestures while they were writing in English. Then, the researcher clarified each student's result of in-depth interview and the emerging gestures of each student while he/she was writing in English. Therefore, the results of interview and observations were prominently and mostly used in this research, then those data were analyzed.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The data analysis method used in this research was adapted from Lodico et al., (2006:301). These are some processing stages of analyzing data in qualitative research.

#### ***3.5.1 Preparing and Organizing the Data (Rearranging the data)***

In this stage, the researcher rearranged all pieces of the data that had been collected from the earliest data to the latest data to check the completeness of the data. (Lodico et al., 2006:301-302).

#### ***3.5.2 Reviewing and Exploring the Data***

In this stage, the researcher read and examined data to gain an overall sense of what results had been collected (Lodico et al., 2006:304).

#### ***3.5.3 Coding Data into Categories***

Coding is the process of identifying and labeling different segments of the data describing related phenomena underlying the concept (Lodico et al., 2006:305). In this process, the researcher divided all of the data into several psychological categories.

### ***3.5.4 Constructing Descriptions***

The researcher wrote detail descriptions of the people, places, and events in the study to get rich and deep descriptions of the experiences, perspectives, and physical settings represented in the data (Lodico et. Al: 2006:307). The descriptions come from the coded data.

### ***3.5.5 Building Themes and Testing Hypotheses***

The researcher combined several codes to build big themes which provide the thick descriptions (Lodico et al., 2006:307).

### ***3.5.6 Reporting and Interpreting Data (Final Analysis)***

The final step in qualitative data analysis is the actual writing of the research report, including the researcher's interpretations of what the data mean (Lodico et al., 2006:311). The report form of qualitative research is in narrative form, The narrative may be organized using any several different formats which are summarized.

## **4. Research Findings and Discussion**

The research participants' perceptions about English were coded perceptions gained from the various answers gained from the 12 participants involved. The research participants' psychological problems were coded into 7 coded problems. Those coded problems were gained from the various answers the researcher gained from the 12 participants involved.

There were 3 participants stated that English is an easy subject. They said so because they consider that English is an interesting and exciting subject. Their

reasons of saying so were various. One student said that she likes English because she wants to study abroad someday. As it was said by her in the interview session, “...saya pengen gitu kuliah di luar negeri, bu.”. Her utterance shows that it motivates her to learn more about English and practice her English so she likes English. While, the other two participants said that English has become familiar for them since they were child. The fact that these students like English since they were in childhood can be seen through their answers in the interview session. The researcher asked about their opinion about English subject by saying “*Menurut kamu Bahasa Inggris itu pelajaran yang kayak gimana sih?*”. These were the answers of the two students, “*Lebih ke gampang, bu. Soalnya udah kebiasa sama Bahasa Inggris.*” and “*Suka bu, soalnya dari kecil udah dididik soal Bahasa Inggris, udah dari TK terbiasa sama Bahasa Inggris*”. The researcher got exactly the same point from their answers which explain that they like studying English, even when they told it in different ways. This group of participants hardly ever find problem while they are learning English and writing in English because they enjoy learning English.

The other 3 participants stated that English is not easy but it is not difficult as well. It can be regarded that the difficulty level of English according to them is in medium level. They said that English is ordinarily medium. We can clearly see that fact through their answers dealing with their opinion towards English in the interview session. The answer that the researcher got was “*Mmm..yaa biasa aja gitu bu tengah-tengah. Gak sulit tapi gak gampang juga bu*”. These participants said that they some times find some difficulties while learning and writing in English but the problems are not too difficult and not too challenging so that they can solve the problems quite easily.

The 6 remaining participants stated that English is a kind of difficult subject. They also said that English is confusing and inconsistent. The fact dealing with their opinion about English is a difficult subject due to the confusion it brings can be clearly seen through their various answer in the interview session. For example, “*Susah, bu*”, “*Iya bu membingungkan*”, “*Susah bu pemahamannya*”, “*...bagian rumus-rumusnya yang banyak itu bu bingung*”. They stated that English is confusing because of the various patterns and many rules that English has. The research participants oftentimes get confused of which tense or which rule they should apply in their writing. The other also said “*..Bahasa Inggris kan dibalik-balik itu loh bu, kan banyak dibalik-balik sih. Terus aku bingung gitu bu kenapa harus dibalik. Bikin bingung akhirnya aku jadi males*”. They also often get confused of how to construct English sentences in structurally and grammatically correct. The English words arrangement is totally different from Indonesian language. It makes them oftentimes do not know how to start writing in English. For example the Indonesian phrase “Raja dunia” can be translated into two different English forms such as “The king of world” and “The world king”. From those examples we can see the difference quite clearly. At the first form of English phrase, the word “King” is located in the front after the preposition “the”, while at the second form of English phrase, the word “King” is located in the end of phrase. It is a kind of reversed words arrangement. Besides being unable to start writing, they also get confused of what words they should use to write due to the limited vocabulary meaning they master. Overall, the difficulties that confuse students the most are all about English patterns, varied structural rules, and English vocabulary meaning.

The research participants stated that varied form of English verbs confuse them in choosing appropriate verb to use in their writing, especially when they are writing



in past tense form. In the rule of regular verbs, they did not know that all pure verbs are added by suffix “-ed” for their second and third form of verbs. For example the pure verb “examine” becomes “examined” for both the second and the third form, the pure verb “delete” becomes “deleted”, and many others. Meanwhile, there are some verbs categorized into irregular verb. Irregular verbs are group of English verbs which have their own rule in changing the pure verbs into the past forms. Those are totally different from regular ones which all verbs are generalized by the same suffix “-ed”. The example of irregular verbs is the verb “write” which its second verb form is “wrote”, and its third verb form is “written”. We can see that the difference is on the suffix of each version uses.

Moreover, based on the interpretation results of the data gained from the research participants, no matter how difficult English is, for those students who have positive perception about English do not be unmotivated to learn English. They will do any effort to reduce any interference might happen to their writing. This shows that they have high level of language awareness so they try hard to perform their English writing optimally. In contrast, for those who have negative perception about English, they become unmotivated to continue learning English. There might be many language interferences happen in their writing because of language awareness low level they have. Therefore, from those phenomena we can know that the students' perception much impact their attitude towards English.

In the results of research participants' questionnaires, the researcher could not find appropriate answer dealing with this issue. The valid data dealing with this issue were gained through the interview session with the 12 selected participants. The answers dealing with their difficulties in paragraph writing English activity gained from the interview sessions were various. For example, “*..kesulitannya tuh misalnya*

*kayak struktur teksnya gitu bu, kayak misal kita itu pengen ngomong sesuatu di tulisan kita tapi gak tau nulisnya harus gimana gitu bu, terus juga gak tau artinya gitu bu” and “..sulit di bagian ngatur sama nyusun kata-kata sama kalimatnya gitu bu gak ngerti”*. Those kinds of answers show that they get difficulty about English structure so that they often get confused to write. Some other answers explain that they often get difficulty dealing with English verbs in certain tense pattern. It can be seen through their answers in responding the question, “..Sulitnya milih verb-nya kalau di past tense” and “..kalau misalnya past tense gitu bu bingung verb-nya yang mana”. Fortunately, their points are actually almost the same even their answers were delivered in different words. Thus, from those all varied answers, the researcher created some categories which code and represent brief points of their variously long answers.

The students who stated English is difficult because of its complex structure must have psychological problems while they were writing using English. The ones who could solve those linguistics difficulties were the ones who had positive perception towards English so the psychological problems could be minimized. However, the linguistics difficulties are actually possible to solve by doing a lot of practise so that they can improve their writing English skill.

From the categorized psychological problems hampering students in paragraph English activity which is shown in the table 4.2, we can know that those problems relate one another. Those psychological problems are the impacts of the students’ linguistics difficulties. Most of participants often feel in doubt while they are writing using English. It is just like some participants told their doubts while the researcher asked about their feelings when they were writing in English, “*Kalau pas disuruh nulis pake Bahasa Inggris gitu suka ragu-ragu bu. Takut yang ini*

*salah misalnya gitu bu*". It is just one of many cuts of students' answers about their doubt. They often feel in doubt to deliver their ideas into written form because they are afraid of making mistake in their writing, especially for those who feel that they lack of knowledge about English.

While, for the second psychological problem coded is anxiety. It actually relates to the first factor, doubt. Once the students are anxious while they are writing in English, they will automatically become doubt to write. Thus, consequently it will affect their physical performance on his or her writing. They stated that they are anxious about getting low score for their writing. It was just like a participant said this clearly "*Takutnya sih karna kepikiran nanti nilainya gitu bu*". While, some participants expressed their answers in these ways dealing with the reason of their anxiety, "*Nanti kalau ibu liat tulisan saya terus ternyata ada yang salah saya malu bu, takutnya bu Septa ketawa gitu*", "*..takut salah gitu bu kan malu kalau salah bu*", and "*Takut bu, takut dikata-katain gitu bu. kan kalau salah gitu bu terus akhirnya diketawain sama yang lain*", and many others. Those answers show that they are often anxious about being laughed by other people if they make any error in their writing so that they frequently feel in doubt to write using English. Anxiety makes students feel in doubt to start writing in English. Most of students are afraid of making mistake. They oftentimes think that once they make mistake, other people must laugh at them. They just do not want to be shy in front of the others.

Once students have bad first impression towards English, they become discouraged both to learn and to write. It is just like what some participants said "*Sering sulit mahamin gurunya sih bu arahnya kemana gitu*", "*Gak paham gitu bu akhirnya males buat ngerjain*", and "*Guru itu juga mempengaruhi semuanya seh, bu*". They said that they did not understand what their teacher meant by what they had to do,

They were not motivated because they lack of interest towards English and its paragraph writing activity. Therefore, the teacher should is to build good communication with the students so that they will feel motivated and comfortable to join the class.

Beside the psychological problems that hamper students in paragraph English activity, there are other factors that they also mentioned in the interview session. Those other factors are current classroom situation or environmental condition and the topic of writing that students should write. Some of them said that classroom situation oftentimes makes them lazy to finish their writing, they prefer to play around with their friends rather than to start writing instead. It can be seen through a student's answer "*Kalau saya yang bikin males itu bu karna ketagihan main sama temen-temen, jadi akhirnya saya males buat ngerjain bu*". While other kinds of answers dealing with environmental factor are expressed through these various ways by some two students, "*Kayak pas lagi materinya susah terus kelasnya rame gitu bikin tambah susah, saya jadi males bu*" and "*Kalau di kelas itu bu, kalau misal kelas rame gitu bu saya susah buat paham jadinya males*", and many others. They need conducive situation while they are writing or learning. Consequently, they become lazy and unmotivated in continuing their writing to finish their work.

It was found that the most prominent psychological problems are doubt and anxiety. Most students said that they feel in doubt to write using English so they become anxious and tend to be afraid of making mistake in their writing. While, the second prominent psychological problems hampering the research participants were shyness and discouraged. They said that they are afraid of being laughed and mocked by the others once they make mistake in their writing. They lack of confidence. While for the term "discouraged" comes from their uncomfortable

feeling about their dissatisfaction towards the teacher who cannot give what the students need to learn. The third prominent psychological problem mostly hampering the research participants was that they lack of motivation to write because of their limit interest towards English. Besides, the students' current mood might also affect them in the process of finishing their writing. Even there was just a little of the research participants who argued that their current mood influences them in their writing English activity. Furthermore, the environmental situation and the topic given for their writing sometimes also influence the students in their paragraph writing English activity as well.

As it has been explained by the researcher, those psychological factors coded actually tie one another. This means that one psychological problem can cause other psychological problems. For example, once a student is not interested in English, the student becomes unmotivated to learn English. Beside that, the linguistic difficulties that the research participants have also trigger psychological problems. The other most influential thing affect the students' attitude towards English was their perception on English. It means that once the students like English, their positive perception will bring their positive attitude towards English. Their positive perceptions will help them to solve the linguistics problems they have because they will try hard to learn more about English so they will try to improve their writing. Therefore, the psychological problems they have can be reduced. Based on that hypothesis, we can come to a conclusion that students' perceptions towards English much affect their writing performance.

## 5. Conclusion

The result shows that most of the students' perceptions negatively influence their writing performance. The students' difficulties were coded into 8 themes; being

confused in getting started, being unable to use appropriately correct tense, being confused of choosing appropriate words, being confused of words arrangement, being confused of the structure text, being stuck to write, being unable to translate some English vocabularies, and being confused of delivering ideas. While, the causes were coded into 5 themes; lack of comprehension about English tenses, lack of reading practice, lack of knowledge about English correct structure, limited imagination, and lack of vocabulary mastery.

In other words, their language difficulties were mostly triggered by some psychological problems including the students' negative perceptions. The students' psychological problems were coded into 7 themes; doubt, anxiety, shyness, current mood, discouraged, lack of interest, and lack of motivation. The data show that 10 of 12 research participants experienced more than one psychological problem when they were writing in English. The prominent psychological problems hampering them were doubt, anxiety, shyness and discouragement.

Therefore, future researchers have to continue this research to find out her prominent problem hampering students in paragraph writing. It is also expected for the English teacher that the results of this research can be beneficial data as guidance in determining appropriate English learning materials and methods particularly in improving students' writing skill.

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