Emotional Dynamics and Regulation Strategies in EFL Writing Classrooms

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Abstract:

Recent research in second language acquisition has shown that learners' emotional dynamics such as anxiety, enjoyment, and frustration, and their use of emotion regulation strategies significantly influence engagement and performance in EFL writing classrooms. Thus, the current research aims at investigating EFL students' emotional dynamics and the emotion regulation strategies they apply when completing their writing tasks. This is a phenomenological study in which six university students were given an open-ended questionnaire. Subsequently, the data were analysed using a thematic analysis technique until the data were formed into themes and a conceptual framework illustrating the types of emotional dynamics they faced and what strategies of emotion regulation they commonly applied during the process of writing. The novel finding revealed after building themes was from the up and down or emotional fluctuation, e.g., anxious to enjoyment, fear to relax, shaped the students to have a mental of resilience as a learner. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the research were explained further.

Keywords: EFL writing, emotional dynamics, emotion regulation strategies, positive psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

The skill of writing in English is an essential proficiency that students should master, especially for those who major in English. In this case, higher education students who study English in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) face various challenges in composing a decent piece of writing, such as ideas blocking, grammatical structures, and nativeness (Tsiriotakis et al.,

2020). Additionally, to produce a proper writing in academic context, students need to follow a set of phases, i.e., planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Rahman et al., 2024). Furthermore, writing lecturers often give written feedback, most of which focuses on the errors students made in their writing (Cheng, 2007). The students should pass the process and follow the feedback from lecturers until they can submit the final draft of their writing.

Cognitive demands inherent in different stages of the writing process are closely intertwined with students' emotional experiences. For example, during the planning stage, learners often face difficulties in generating ideas and organizing content in a second language, which may trigger feelings of anxiety. This example shows that emotional experiences of students cannot be deserted as they influence students' performance. Unfortunately, in writing classes, students' emotional aspects are still neglected as lecturers pay attention to students' cognitive performance and demand them to have high scores. This in fact makes students easy to be exposed to unstable or up and down, both positive and negative emotional experiences, such as stress, burnout, bored, tired, unmotivated, happy, relax, motivated, etc. (Seligman, 2002, 2018). When students are exposed to negative emotions, they will be unmotivated and unwilling to take writing course (Martínez-Priego et al., 2024). In addition, the students' emotional experiences influence their performance in writing (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). EFL students tend to feel anxious in composing written texts and dealing with grammatical structures (Alamri et al., 2021). Students who experience low level of anxiety have better performance on writing rather than those who have high level of anxiety (Rohmah & Muslim, 2021). Thus, providing a room for boosting students' positive emotions, by teaching the students how to regulate their emotions, is crucial for writing lecturers.

There are various of previous studies which investigating on emotion regulation in English language teaching (ELT) and the learning processes, including in writing skill. The first previous study came from Heydarnejad (2025) who researched regarding the blended of self-evaluation and AI support can enhance students' cognitive and emotion regulation as well as motivation. Not only the use of AI integrated to self-evaluation, Zheng et al. (2023) proved that the use of Telegram can improve students' emotion regulation and reduce their anxiety. Other studies found that students' performance in writing are predicted by what emotions appeared and regulation strategies used by students (Andrés et al., 2017; Yue & Saad, 2025). Similarly, Yanping et al. (2025) used emotion regulation as a mediating role in examining the correlation between higher-order thinking and academic engagement. As a result, they found that higher-order thinking positively predict both academic engagement and emotion regulation strategies used by students in writing classes. Not only individual emotion regulation as previous studies mentioned previously, Zhang et al. (2022) tested peer regulation in FL writing and found that there was medium and positive correlation between peer and group regulation as well as students' enjoyment. Later, Zhang and colleagues continued their study in 2024, and their research revealed that there was a high level of enjoyment and group emotion regulation during online collaborative learning (Zhang & Gao, 2024).

Considering how important emotional aspects in students' development in writing skill, as well as there were still limited studies on positive psychology in ELT, including in FL writing, the researchers eager to fill this gap by exploring on EFL students' emotional experiences during the process of accomplishing their tasks in writing classes as well as their emotion regulation strategies they use during the process of writing. By focusing on this area in ELT, it is expected to contribute to the significant development of students' writing production as well as their maturity

in every condition during the process of finishing the writing assignments. Particularly, the research question proposed in this study is formulated as follows:

"What are the emotional dynamics and emotion regulation strategies exhibited by EFL students during the execution of writing assignments in writing classes?"

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative research with a phenomenological design. Phenomenology is a qualitative design which aims at exploring individuals living experiences towards certain phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the current research, the researcher explored EFL students' experiences regarding their emotional dynamics they faced as well as emotion regulation they used in writing classroom. In phenomenology, the range of subject suggested is relatively small, between 3 – 10 participants to gain deeper data findings (Creswell, 2007). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich and relevant data regarding emotional dynamics and regulation strategies that the students used during the writing class. Particularly in this research, there are six EFL students from one of the universities in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, who became the research participants. These inclusion criteria were determined by the participants who were currently enrolled in a writing course at the time of data collection, regularly engaged in classroom writing tasks, and were willing to participate in this research.

In order to explore students' experiences in writing class, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to the participants. The question demands students to tell as much detail as they can freely regarding their emotional dynamics and emotion regulation strategies in the writing class. The question is stated as follows:

> *"Please describe as honestly and richly as possible, your thoughts and feelings while engaging in writing activities in your English writing class, the emotional dynamics you experienced at different stages of the writing process, and the ways you regulated or managed those emotions to continue and complete your writing tasks."*

To analyse the data gained in this study, thematic analysis was used to capture any identified important aspects revealed during the analysis. The analysis consists of six phases, including selection of quotations, keywords, coding, themes, conceptualisation, and development of a conceptual model (Naeem et al., 2023). In this research, the findings focused on the shaping themes of EFL students' emotional dynamics and the regulation of emotions they use during the writing process until finally the framework is built.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Emotional dynamics and regulation strategies that EFL students report experiencing during the writing process

There are five major themes that consistently emerged: emotional fluctuation in the writing process, fear of linguistic inadequacy, procrastination as emotional avoidance, self-regulated emotion management, and growth through reflection and experience. These five themes are explained in detail with excerpts of students' utterances as follows:

4.1.1 Emotional fluctuation in the writing process

This theme reflects how students' emotions were not stable throughout writing but shifted constantly across different stages. In this case, students commonly moved through emotional phases which are before writing (anxiety, confusing, self-doubt), during writing (frustration, boredom, fear), after progress (relief, enjoyment, confidence). The triggering aspects which make the emotional shifts include understanding the task more clearly, finding ideas or vocabulary, and completing parts of their writing. For instance, when students described strong emotional shifts before and during writing, their emotions moved from confusion and anxiety to calmness and confidence as they progressed.

> *"Before writing, I usually feel very confused about where to start. Even though the instructions are already given, I keep thinking about whether I understand the task correctly, and that makes me anxious. When I finally start writing and get a clearer idea of what to do, I feel calmer. As I continue, my confidence slowly grows, especially when I finish one part of the writing." (FYN)*

> *"At the beginning, I feel confused and nervous because I am not sure what to write. After I understand the topic and the task better, my feelings change. I feel more relaxed and calm, and I can focus on writing. My emotions really depend on how well I understand what I am doing." (AP)*

> *"Sometimes my emotions change a lot during writing. At first, I feel nervous and unsure about my ideas. Then I feel okay when I write something, but I become nervous again when I doubt my ideas. My feelings go up and down depending on whether I feel confident about what I am writing." (G)*

> *Writing in a foreign language transcends mere syntax and vocabulary to a complex cognitive activity where it requires affective state of an emotional endeavour to influence writer level of engagement as well as the effort. Hence, it is significant to incorporate emotional literacy into the frameworks of pedagogy to deal this nature of foreign language (FL).*

4.1.2 Fear of linguistic inadequacy

Based on this theme, the students' language ability is influenced by a strong sense of insecurity. Worries about grammar, limitations of vocabulary, and the writing quality do not match the requirements are frequently expressed. This fear can be clarified into three ways, which are before writing (hesitation to start), during writing (overthinking sentence structure), and during revision (fear of discovering too many mistakes). The following excerpts reflect the strong fear.

> *"I am very often afraid that I will make many mistakes in my writing, When I think about grammar and vocabulary, I feel worried that I will write something wrong. This fear makes me hesitant, and I keep checking my sentences again and again because I don't want to make errors." (FYN)*

> *"I feel scared that my English is not good enough for writing, I worry that my grammar and vocabulary are wrong, and that makes me insecure. Even when I have ideas, I am afraid to express them because I think my language is still weak." (AP)*

> *"When I write in English, I feel afraid that my sentences will not be correct. I keep thinking about grammar mistakes, and that makes me uncomfortable. Sometimes I focus more on avoiding mistakes than on expressing my ideas." (W)*

This shows a deep internalisation of perfectionism and fear of judgement, which made students focus more on "not making mistakes" than on expressing ideas. It highlights how FL writing is experienced as a space of psychological vulnerability for students.

4.1.3 Procrastination as emotional avoidance

Rather than simple laziness, procrastination functioned as an emotional coping strategy. Particularly, students delayed writing by scrolling social media, sleeping, watching videos, and doing unrelated tasks. This avoidance behaviour was caused by anxiety, fear of failure, and overwhelm. In this case, procrastination, therefore, served as a short-term emotion regulation tool to reduce immediate stress, but increased time pressure later. Students admitted to using avoidance strategies when overwhelmed:

> *"When I feel confused and stressed about writing, I usually stop for a while. Instead of continuing, I take a break because I feel overwhelmed. Avoiding writing helps me feel less anxious at that moment, even though I know I still have to finish it later." (FYN)*

> *"Sometimes I distract myself so I don't have to think about writing. When I feel pressure or fear, I open social media or do something else. It helps me escape from the stress of writing, even though it doesn't really solve the problem." (G)*

> *"I often delay writing because I feel overwhelmed and scared to start. When the task feels too difficult, I postpone it. At that time, delaying feels easier than facing the writing task directly." (AP)*

These responses presented a behaviour of avoidance, which was seen as an escape from emotional discomfort instead of laziness. Therefore, the theme identified reflects emotional regulation difficulties rooted in time-management problems but not poor discipline.

4.1.4 Self-regulated emotion management

However, students actively developed strategies for emotion regulation apart from their emotional challenges. These emotional regulation strategies were both conscious and spontaneous which combine cognitive strategies (self-talk: "It's okay to make mistakes", reframing thoughts: "Drafts don't have to be perfect", and rereading instructions), behavioural strategies (taking breaks, dividing tasks into smaller parts, and seeking examples or references), and physical strategies (deep breathing, stretching, drinking water, and resting briefly). Based on the responses from all six students, they described the strategies to control their emotions as follows.

> *"When I feel panicked while writing, I try to be patient with myself. I tell myself not to panic and to stay calm. Talking to myself helps me control my emotions so I can continue writing." (N)*

> *"I speak to myself and remind myself to stay calm when I feel anxious. I try to control my emotions so I don't give up. This helps me feel more stable when writing." (VAM)*

> *"When I feel very stressed, I stop for a while and reread the instructions. I take a deep breath to calm myself. After that, I feel more relaxed and can continue writing more clearly." (FYN)*

Applying these strategies enabled the students to control and continue the writing while dealing with emotional distress. Thus, students consciously and spontaneously control their emotions in which showed the development of self-regulated learning skills.

4.1.5 Growth through reflection and experience

According to this theme, emotional struggles evolved through learning and experience, which emphasizes that emotional challenges were not static. Based on their responses, past failures, lecturers' constructive feedback, and frustrations within early writing are reflected in this theme. Through hurdling experiences, the students were trained to perceive mistakes as normal, reduce panic, and approach writing with maturity. Furthermore, students responded that their emotions were handled better as they reflected on the past negative experiences.

> *"Now, when I feel confused, I start by making an outline so I don't panic like before. From my past experiences, I learned that planning helps me feel more in control. This makes me calmer when writing." (W)*

> *"From my previous writing experiences, I learned that making mistakes is normal. Because of that, I don't feel as scared as before. I feel more relaxed and can focus better on writing." (AP)*

> *"After reflecting on my past mistakes, I feel more confident in writing. I understand that writing is a process, and that helps me manage my emotions better. I am more patient with myself now." (N)*

Systematic reflection provided students with the chance to develop emotional resilience in response to the emotional difficulties they encountered during their learning journey. With purposeful reflective writing, the students were able to process negative experiences (frustration, disappointment, or setbacks) as useful learning methods instead of as sources of discouragement or disengagement. Reflection is often an important tool in building resilience in the face of adversity, as this process of transforming adversity into opportunity shows us. Students who use writing as a way to reflect reflectively distance themselves, and begin to understand challenging events in a less emotionally reactive way. This theme, therefore, demonstrates that emotional resilience is not something that students are born with but rather something they can work on with structured, writing-based self-reflection. By consistently reflecting on their own experiences, especially the difficult ones, students become better able to modulate their mood, recast failure as a learning moment, and keep pushing despite problems. The specific act of writing itself gives a framework for the processing of these feelings, making abstract emotions more tangible and manageable, while also forming a tangible record of growth that students can go back and look at when dealing with new struggles. Below is the comprehensive conceptual framework diagram that presents the themes deduced in this research:
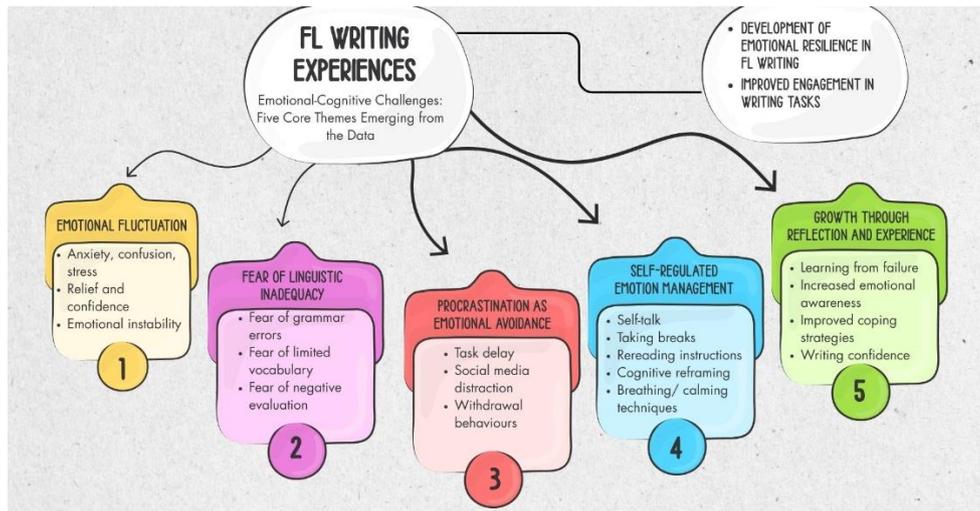
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Students' Emotional Experiences in Writing Class

According to this framework, it illustrates the complex emotional-cognitive dynamics evoked by FL writing by manifesting five interconnected themes, which are: emotional fluctuation, fear of linguistic inadequacy, procrastination as emotional avoidance, self-regulated emotion management, and growth through reflection. These major themes clarified the dynamic process of emotional resilience developed by the students as well as the increase of effective engagement in FL writing. To sum up, the table below reflects the summary of key findings gained from this research:

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings

Aspects	Key Findings
Emotional journey	Students experience dynamic emotional fluctuations throughout the writing process: anxiety/confusion - frustration/fear - relief/confidence
Emotional triggers	Understanding task requirements; finding ideas or vocabulary; completing parts of writing; low perceived control over language ability
Primary emotional challenges	Fear of linguistic inadequacy (grammar, vocabulary limitations); psychological vulnerability in FL writing; focus on avoiding mistakes rather than expressing ideas
Maladaptive coping	Procrastination functions as emotion-focused coping and emotional avoidance (scrolling social media, sleeping, watching videos) triggered by anxiety, fear of failure, and overwhelm
Adaptive regulation strategies	Cognitive: self-talk, reframing thoughts, rereading instructions; behavioral: taking breaks, dividing tasks, seeking examples; physical: deep breathing, stretching, drinking water, resting
Emotional development	Students develop emotional resilience through reflection on past failures, constructive feedback, and frustrations, leading to: perceiving mistakes as normal, reduced panic, and more mature approach to writing

It was discovered by the study that EFL students have an intense experience with emotions when writing which shifts from anxiety and confusion in the initial phases, to relief and confidence as the project continues. Mainly, students fear making grammar and vocabulary mistakes, and are

less concerned about the ideas being shared and more about avoiding errors, they focus on not having them. They employ unhelpful (whether procrastinating through seeking out social media or sleeping) and helpful (self-talk, stopping one's activity, taking deep breaths and breaking down tasks) strategies when they are overwhelmed. By revisiting previous learning by recounting their past experiences and getting feedback, students build emotional resilience and develop an understanding that making mistakes is natural in the learning process. The big takeaway: those emotional highs and lows are much more than just negative; they actually aid students in becoming mentally resilient and a more mature group as students.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on these findings, it presented that students' emotional experiences for FL writing were highly active where relief and confidence resulted from the shift of anxiety and confusion. It is evident with control-value theory of achievement emotions. This pattern strongly aligns with control-value theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2000, 2006; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010), in which learner's appraisal of control over a task and the value attached to it resulted in achievement emotions. The current data indicated that students felt low control due to heightened anxiety (e.g., unclear ideas, limited vocabulary) and they experience increased control with emotional relief (e.g., completing an outline or resolving a sentence). According to Lazarus's cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion which resulted in emotional fluctuation, it emphasises on ongoing appraisal of situational demands and personal coping resources that shapes emotion (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus et al., 2018). Therefore, emotional shifts occurred within different stages of writing since their writing appraisal continuously changed. These findings are paralleled by the idea that in FL writing pedagogy, emotion is not peripheral yet central.

In addition, the major theme identified in these findings was students' fear of grammatical and lexical inadequacy. This finding is consistent with second language anxiety research, particularly Horwitz and colleagues' concept of foreign language anxiety (FLA), which describes students' fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety in language learning contexts (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 2010; Horwitz et al., 1986).

Moreover, this fear can be theoretically explained using self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1993, 1997). Students demonstrated low perceived self-efficacy regarding their ability, which led to avoidance, over-monitoring of errors, and reduced fluency. When students doubt their capability to perform a task successfully, they tend to focus on avoiding failure rather than achieving success. In addition, L2 motivational self-system helps explain how strong "ought-to" self-guides (external expectations such as grades or teacher judgement) can increase anxiety and reduce intrinsic engagement in writing (Dornyei & Csizer's, 1998; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Regarding the finding of procrastination as emotional avoidance, the data reveal that procrastination functioned primarily as a form of emotion-focused coping, rather than simple laziness. The findings similarly associate with Steel's conceptualization of procrastination, which considers failure of self-regulatory control driven by short-term mood repair. Though students were aware of the adverse long-term consequences, they delayed their writing as a means of avoiding immediate discomfort. In line with the temporal motivation theory (Steel & Onig, 2006), this behaviour is categorised within the category of a single motivational framework which integrates expectancy, value, impulsiveness, and delay. The theory further describes that students

choose low-effort and immediately rewarding activities when their emotions are threatened, and temporally distant activities become less motivating (e.g., social media). In another view of a coping theory, the findings presented individuals seek to escape the emotional burden of a stressor rather than addressing the stressor directly is defined as avoidance-oriented coping (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus et al., 2018; Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

Moreover, principle of self-regulated learning (SRL) theory is presented when students used a variety of emotional regulation strategies. Zimmerman's cyclical model of SRL describes three phases which are forethought (planning), performance (strategy use), and self-reflection (Zimmerman, 2000, 2013; Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008). The students' use of outlining, strategic break, self-talk, and reflection fits well within these phases. In addition, these strategies can be classified using Gross's process model of emotion regulation, which distinguished between antecedent-focused strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal and planning, and response-focused strategies, such as suppression or physical withdrawal (Gross & John, 2003; McRae & Gross, 2020). The students more frequently used adaptive antecedent-focused strategies (e.g., rereading instructions, reframing negative thoughts), which are generally associated with better psychological and academic outcomes (McRae & Gross, 2020). It indicates that these findings reinforce the view that emotional competence is a component of academic literacy, particularly in FL writing.

Lasty, the final theme which are growth through reflection and experience reflects students' development of emotional resilience over time through reflective learning perspectives, particularly Schon's reflective practice framework, which emphasises learning as a process of reflection is and on action (Richardson, 1991). Through reflective engagement with prior writing difficulties, students were able to reinterpret negative emotional experiences and transform them into adaptive strategies for future tasks. The activity of reflection is not mere evaluation outcomes but rather seen as a mechanism for emotional sense-making and strategic adjustment.

Then, reflection is further supported by updated metacognitive theory, particularly Efklide's metacognitive and affective model of self-regulated learning, which integrates cognition, metacognition, and emotions as dynamically interacting systems. From this view, students' awareness of emotional state was increased (e.g., anxiety, frustration, confidence) and resulted in their subsequent writing task where it enabled effective regulation of affective and cognitive processes through writing strategies (Efklides, 2008, 2011). Based on this model, metacognition is recognised as the role of emotion-related metacognitive knowledge in guiding learners' future behaviour and self-regulation than solely as awareness of thinking.

Furthermore, the concept of growth mindset where students acknowledged errors and setbacks as learning opportunities rather than fixed ability indicators is Dweck's achievement of goal theory in which is similar to this development trajectory (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Hence, when students reflected on their writing failures, they showed a consistent shift toward adaptive emotional responses, increased persistence, and greater confidence in managing writing challenges.

The findings of this study are in line with Fauzan's argument that writing errors among Indonesian EFL learners are strongly shaped by both interlingual and intralingual factors, particularly when students compose expository texts in formal school settings (Fauzan et al., 2020). At the same time, the persistence of these errors also echoes earlier evidence that improving learners' written performance requires not only explicit grammar instruction but also

the strategic use of technology-enhanced teaching practices that can scaffold independent learning beyond the classroom (Fauzan & Pimada, 2018). Taken together, these studies suggest that a more integrated pedagogy, combining systematic error analysis with ICT-based learning environments, may help learners become more aware of their recurrent error patterns while also providing richer opportunities for practice and feedback in EFL writing.

Even though the findings and discussion in this research are in line with several existing theories, a collective novelty shaped is suggested that reflective practices foster not only cognitive development but also emotional resilience. This positions reflection as a critical component of emotionally informed FL pedagogy, particularly in supporting learners' adaptive emotional regulation during the writing process. Moreover, not only the novelty found, but this research also suggests some pedagogical implications. Firstly, teachers in the field of English language teaching (ELT), especially in writing classrooms at higher education levels, can enrich their knowledge regarding students' emotional experiences and teach students how to regulate their emotions, especially when it comes as a burden to students' psychological conditions and achievements. Lastly, the research implication is on the policy maker where the curriculum in higher education level should be integrated to at least several dimensions of positive psychology, e.g., emotion regulation, enjoyment, etc.

However, this research highlights several limitations, especially in the research focus and participants. In terms of research focus, further researchers who would like to investigate a similar topic can explore a broader research focus, instead of only emotional dynamics and emotion regulation strategies used by students in writing classrooms. Finally, future research can take more participants to have broader research findings' insights.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of the current research can be concluded to five big themes regarding EFL students' emotional dynamics and emotion regulation strategies: (1) emotional fluctuation, (2) fear of linguistic inadequacy, (3) procrastination as emotional avoidance, (4) self-regulated emotion management, and (5) growth through reflection and experience. These five shaped themes bring to a valuable novelty where the process of up and down that students experienced in writing class shaped their cognitive and maturity developments as well as resilience in doing all writing assignments. This fact should be underlined by writing lecturers so that they can assist and teach how the students can regulate their emotions so that the students can grow as a stronger learner in accomplishing all writing phases.

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