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## **Contradictions in Writing Anxiety: A Qualitative Case Study of Expansive Learning among Iranian EFL Learners**

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Received: 17 November, 2019

Accepted: 29 April, 2020

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study aimed at exploring the causes of writing anxiety from an expansive learning perspective. Given the centrality of writing for both EFL learners and teachers, writing anxiety was explored through a longitudinal study spanning two years with 25 EFL learners and teachers who participated by providing comments, diaries, and documents. The participants were also observed and interviewed following Mwanza's model as a guide. The obtained data in the whole process was constantly thematized by means of a qualitative software, NVIVO 10. The main themes on writing anxiety were extracted from teachers and learners by applying contradictions as a principle of expansive learning theory. To help learners become transformative agents of anxiety, an intervention process was carried out in the form of an online collaborative writing task. The findings recommend applying contradictions as an initial point for problem-solving and a driving impellent of activity which may lead to expansive learning. Besides, the dynamic and developmental process is expected to help learners expand and transform their writing anxiety. Contradictions may also become an initiation for future studies on language learning.

**Keywords:** Activity theory; Contradictions; EFL learners; Expansive learning; Writing anxiety

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Anxiety has always been reported as an obstacle in learning (Horwitz, 2001; Mohebbi, Azarnoosh, & Abdolmanafi Rokni, 2016) and writing anxiety (henceforth, WA) is not an exception. Being hotly debated since 1970 (Haddad, 2018; Horwitz, 2001), WA has been defined as the negative

feelings which disrupt part of the writing process. Recently, some studies have explored the causes of WA, several of which have been concerned with studying the possible association between this construct and foreign language learning contexts (Aljafen, 2013; Cheng, 2004; Haddad, 2018; Mohebbi et al., 2016).

Most studies on activity systems analysis (ASA) and expansive learning have been on clin-

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ical research (Engestrom, 2017; Sannino & Engestrom, 2017), or on professional context (Beighton, 2016). However, few studies have attempted to trace WA qualitatively applying expansive learning (henceforth, EL), transformations, or contradictions (Beighton, 2016; Engestrom, 2018; Gibbes & Carson, 2014; Sannino & Engestrom, 2017; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). To take a qualitative approach to the study of WA, Engestrom (1999) expansive learning (henceforth, EL) theory can be employed as a tool for constant analysis. Researching WA qualitatively entails exploring the concept by both descriptive and phenomenological and expansive, transformative and interventionist means in terms of contradictions (Engestrom, 2016). In fact, *transformative agency* is the participants' potentiality to make purposeful changes in activity (Engestrom, 2016). In expansive learning, it is believed that the participants can be the agents to intervene and change their own learning habits. Engestrom describes the tensions (i.e. contradictions) as the driving force of change in activity, and expansive cycles as possible forms of transformation (Engestrom, 2010). He coined the extended activity theory whereby learners can intervene in their own learning and cause transformations in their own learning. Hence, contradictions can help learners transform their activity and expand learning. Contrary to most qualitative studies, the findings of such qualitative studies are not just epistemological or descriptive (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), but an impetus for change in learning. The role of the formative interventions in a qualitative study like writing anxiety is related to the notion of transformative agency especially during complex situations where different causes are studied through various angles of the activity theory (henceforth, AT) (Engestrom, 2018).

Based on the activity systems analysis (henceforth, ASA), this study sought to explore the causes of WA among Iranian EFL learners and teachers, and subsequently tried to shed light on those contradictions which may alleviate WA. In doing so, instead of examining WA from a quan-

titative perspective which is linear, descriptive, or predictive, the issue was viewed from a constructive, expansive, and transformative vantage point featuring activity systems analysis and expansive learning theories (Engestrom, 2018).

The present study applied the extended activity and its main principle termed expansive learning theory developed by Engestrom (1999), based on Vygotsky's cultural historical activity theory. Moreover, to develop a more thorough insight into WA, features of activity systems analysis including contradictions, formative interventions, and transformations were taken into account with contradictions being the main tool for intervention and ultimate transformation. The study was geared towards answering the following research question:

How can the understanding of contradictions in writing anxiety among Iranian EFL learners result in EL?

Activity systems analysis in learning deals with continuous analysis, evaluation and transformation; it takes the whole learner into consideration and welcomes formative interventions (Engestrom, 2017; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Despite the importance of formative intervention in EL, Aljafen (2013) implicitly stated that most studies have not taken the anxious learners seriously into account. In other words, most qualitative studies simply deal with an in-depth description of the phenomenon without any attempt at solving problems which constitutes the starting point of expansive learning and ASA (Engestrom, 2017; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Consequently, the formative intervention describes the learner in activity, expands his understanding, and awaits transformations (Sannino & Engestrom, 2017). In other words, intervention is a "purposeful action by a human agent to create change" (Midgley, 2000, p. 113). Such a definition, Engestrom (2008) argues, displays the researchers as having no control over interventions suggesting that they should not expect linear results from their efforts. Engestrom (2018) further states that organized activity systems like

schools are replete with interventions from all sorts of external agents including "consultants, administrators, customers, competitors, partners, politicians and journalists" (p. 607). Besides, inside the activity system, practitioners and managers continually make their own interventions.

### Activity Theory (AT)

As a key figure in moving away from the dual concept of stimulus-response doctrine prevailing

the Russian behavioral psychology (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), Vygotsky developed the activity system whose focus was on the role of mediation and the actions during a process. To map Vygotsky's mediation theory to the study of learners' WA, the learner is the subject, alleviating the WA is the object, and the ecological analysis of the issue which includes the intervention is the tool or mediator (see Figure 1).

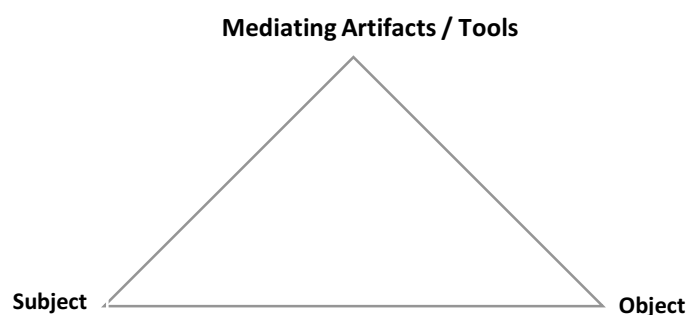


Figure 1. Vygotsky's (1987) basic mediation triangle adopted from (Cole, 1998)

Engestrom (1987) expanded (Vygotsky, 1978) activity system and introduced the extended activity system analysis to map the interaction between individuals or groups of individuals and the environment, and how they affect one another (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The scheme extends mediated action as a model of human activity

accounting for socio-cultural, socio-political, and educational settings (Engestrom, 2010). As can be seen in Figure 2, other elements including rules, the division of labor, and community were also considered, which might lead to transformations in dealing with WA.

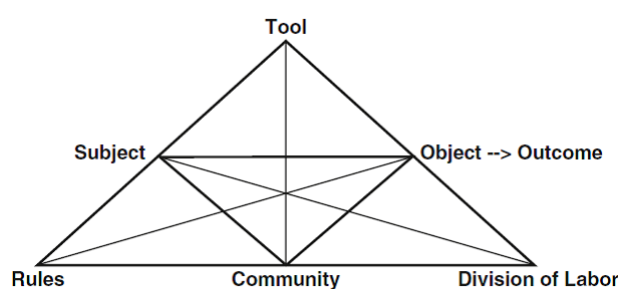


Figure 2. Engestrom (1987) extended activity systems analysis

In extended activity systems, (Engestrom, 2010, 2018) differentiates between the ecological activities, and collective-based intervention with the experimental research. In point of fact, the extended activity system is a kind of formative intervention where the contradictions are

welcome. The system is also completely different from traditional experimental linear research (Engestrom, 2010, 2018) where a pre-determined element is predicted to make such effects due to some other causes. Nelson (2002) believes that contradictions must be addressed and resolved

between all layers of education, because this enables students and teachers to develop and streamline the learning process. However, contrary to the traditional conviction that learning takes place through changes within a subject when s/he performs differently than before, in EL the transformation of the object is the desired goal in learning.

Accordingly, there are controversies with regard to the role and relations of subject/object, action/activity, as well as individual/community. Thus, EL is manifested as changes in the object of a collective activity leading to qualitative transformation of all the components of an activity system (Engestrom, 2016; Langemeyer, 2012).

The literature abounds with studies built on Engestrom's extended activity system analysis to investigate students' learning (Engestrom, 2018; Goodchild & Sriraman, 2012; Scanlon & Issroff, 2005; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Generally, these studies have unraveled the unpredictable and complex features of learning in diverse situations by applying the elements of AT and using qualitative methods. Therefore, applying similar procedure, the findings of the present study will hopefully assist learners become transformative agents in WA.

In a pioneering study on AT conducted in Iranian context, Barabadi and Razmjoo (2015) analyzed reform in public schools. The study was prompted by the top-down position taken by Iranian policy-makers regardless of English teachers' beliefs and instructional practices. The researchers, therefore, argued for the plausibility of contradictions as probable sources of transformation and improvement in a syllabus.

In a subsequent study using contradictions and principles of AT on English language reform in Iranian context, Barabadi and Razmjoo (2016) argued that "Iranian language teachers confronted a number of big challenges in implementing CLT, which was a drastic change compared to the previous traditional methods" (p. 56).

Similarly, related to anxiety in Iranian EFL context, Elahi and Taherian (2018) investigated classroom anxiety and foreign language enjoy-

ment through a mixed method research design. A number of 367 Iranian university students participated in the study and four participants took part in the qualitative phase. The results showed that while the participants' enjoyment (i.e. the sense of passion and engagement in different classroom activities) increased, their level of anxiety decreased. They further confirmed that "the absence of enjoyment does not necessarily indicate lack of anxiety and; similarly, the absence of anxiety does not indicate lack of enjoyment" (Elahi & Taherian, 2018 p 15).

Elahi, Rahmani, and Sorayyae (2016) analyzed teachers' style in light of AT. The corpus featured 48 semi-structured interviews, 96 journals, and 24 observations with 8 participating teachers. The findings indicated that teachers' styles are dynamic, context-bound, and dependent on variables of each classroom. In yet another research, Kasbi and Elahi (2017) examined speaking anxiety with an emphasis on the emerging patterns and dynamic systems in language learning. They found that participants showed similar patterns which necessitate attention from teachers' side in reducing anxiety and boosting confidence.

The description and epistemological perspective in all above cited studies are prominent. Although they helped deeper understanding of the problems at hand, they almost lack the central principles of EL which underscore the application of intervention and transformation (Engestrom, 2017, 2018). Thus, as the review of qualitative studies in Iranian educational context shows almost none involves intervention and transformation with the aim of helping learners cope with educational obstacles through contradictions.

To fill the gap, the current study used contradictions as a fundamental tenet of activity systems theory which is assumed to promote EL and consequently serve as the *transformative agency*, i.e., the potentiality of participants to make purposeful changes in their activity (Engestrom, 2016). Hence, understanding the causes of WA can help learners develop EL, or their ability to

change, transform and finally expand their understanding provided that formative interventions are used to enhance agency.

### Intervention

Cultural-historical activity theory has been originally an interventionist approach (Engestrom, 2010, 2018). Formative intervention methods have specifications in common, which make them distinct from the design-based research in the following ways: 1) they are based on design done by the learners; 2) the collective design effort is part of the EL including the group work or participatory analyses; and 3) formative interventions aim at generating solutions and are developed over a long period of time than being like transferable or scalable solutions (Sannino & Engestrom, 2017). Norman Long defines intervention as:

an on-going transformational process that is constantly re-shaped by internal organizational and political dynamic and by the specific conditions it encounters or creates, including the responses and strategies of local and regional groups who may struggle to define and defend their social spaces (2001, p. 27).

Such a definition refers to interaction among participants' present, past, and future (Engestrom, 2008, 2016), where subjects delve into their own past with connection to their present and future regarding WA (Engestrom, 2008, 2010). Thus, it may be posited that anxiety and the emerging tensions are not only hindrance but also motives for change and transformation. This way learners discover their problems and find solutions during interaction in collective unpredictable activities (Engestrom, 2017; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

All elements of activity systems influence each other dynamically and reciprocally to the extent that the system is continuously adapting, adjusting, and transforming between individuals and sociocultural elements, a process known as

expansive cycle. In this regard, Engestrom (2017) states that if contradictions expand and numerate, they may be transformed and result in changes in the activity system which consequently may lead to a new activity in case it is a long term, cyclical, and spiral process. The ultimate new activity is referred to as learning by expanding (Engestrom, 2017; Nelson, 2002). Nevertheless, Engestrom (Ameri-Golestan & Nezakat-Alhossaini) believes that the process is not individual; rather it is collective with all ASA elements at play. Consequently, elements like *rules*, *community*, and *division of labor* are accorded priority (see Figure 2).

### Principles of Activity Systems Analysis

Engestrom (1999) formulated five inseparable principles of AT, which "connect to various aspects of the entire activity" (Bates, 2008, p. 38). The first principle is *activity*, which states that the main unit of analysis in AT is the activity system (Engestrom, 1999). Activity system as the unit of study is a guide analysis, "object oriented" (Engestrom, 1999, p. 19), and culturally-mediated providing a non-reductionist perspective. It takes the individuals' actions and goals within the system(s) of a whole than an isolation (Engestrom, 2018).

The second principle is *multi-voicedness* referring to multiple perspectives, interests, and traditions in an activity system (Akkerman, Admiraal, Simons, & Niessen, 2006). The third principle is *historicity*: examining the history of activity systems helps understand their problems and potential (Engestrom, 2018). *Contradictions* as the fourth principle are tensions that can help understand innovation in activity systems. Contradictions are considered motive forces of development and change and provide an analytical tool to examine transformations (Engestrom, 1999). Studying an activity system involves a search for contradictions in the system. Mwanza (2011) notes that contradictions are the result of a dynamic and transformative context which may or may not resolve.

The final principle, *Expansive Learning*, "pro-

claims the possibility of expansive transformations in activity systems". EL is premised, as Engestrom notes, on the idea that "people and organizations are all the time learning something that is not stable, not even defined or understood ahead of time" (Engestrom, 1999, p. 137).

Based on the aforementioned principles, the study of WA, would entail an ecological analysis of the causes of WA, while at the same time, taking the expert teachers as well as the learners into account. As the next step, their contradictions should be studied so that learners may expand their learning and alleviate WA based on a collective activity. Engestrom (1999) elaborates on the phases of EL (see Figure 3):

**Questioning:** The first phase is that of questioning, criticizing, or rejecting some aspects of the accepted practice and existing wisdom.

**Analysis:** The second action is related to analyzing the situation. It evokes "why?" questions and illustrative principles. They might be "historical-genetic; it seeks to explain the situation by tracing its origins and evolution or it may be actual-empirical

which seeks to explain the situation by constructing a picture of its inner systemic relations" (Engestrom, 2010).

**Modeling:** modeling the newly discovered explanatory connection in some overtly visible and communicable medium.

**Examining:** examining the model, running, operating, and experimenting in order to wholly grip its dynamics, abilities, and limitations.

**Implementing:** by means of real-world applications, enrichments, and theoretical extensions.

**Reflecting & Evaluating:** reflecting on and evaluating the process and joining its results into a new steady method of practice.

The course of EL must be assumed as the construction of sequentially evolving contradictions (Langemeyer, 2012). The whole ideal-typical EL cycle is diagrammatically shown in Figure 3. The thicker arrows specify expanded space of and participation in the learning actions (Engestrom, 2010, 2018; Langemeyer, 2012).

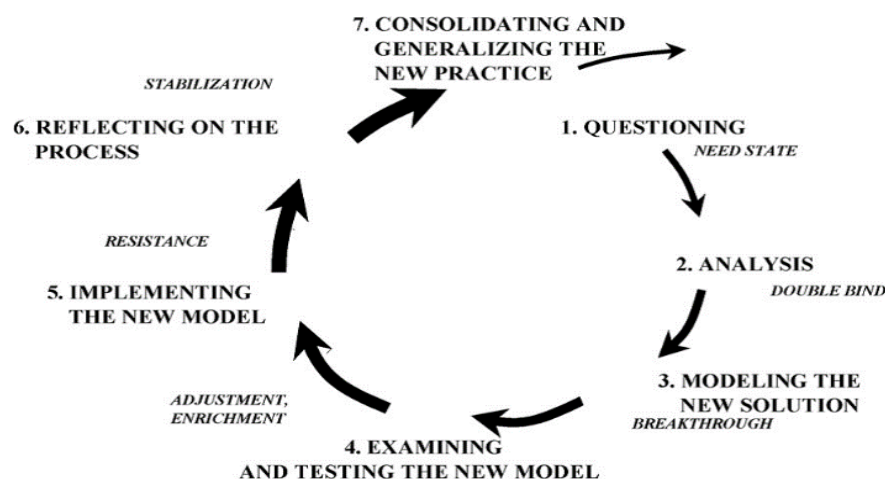


Figure 3. Steps in Expansive Learning (Engestrom, 2018)

Most studies deal with the descriptive aspect or causal relations (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) missing an expansive and interventionist aspect. To address this limitation, the current study fol

lows an ASA method to observe how intervention and transformation can occur through the realization of contradictions in WA.



## METHOD

### Participants

The target sample consisted of 12 prospective English teacher sophomore students from different provinces of Iran including Khorasan (North, South and Razavi), Sistan, Mazendaran, and Yazd, all of whom were studying TEFL at Farhangian University in Bojnourd, North Khorasan. Besides, 12 expert teachers from different provinces of Iran took part in the study. Saturation was the principal selection criteria but it did not dictate the whole process (Mason, 2010). Other factors were also taken into account including the heterogeneity of the population, the number of selection criteria, groups of special interest, multiple samples; types of data collection and available budget and resources (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2013). Nevertheless, for all qualitative researches fifteen is the minimum number (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

The study took place during the academic year of 2015-2017. The participants were aged 21 to 24 and their English language proficiency was intermediate to upper-intermediate (based on their English test scores during the three semesters and a sample IELTS exam).

The unit of analysis in activity systems analysis is the object-oriented activity itself (Engestrom). Therefore, examining individual behavior was the entryway for participants' activities (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Through this experience, activities critical to answering research questions can be identified.

The sampling started with the convenient form regarding the 25 learners and ended in "availability

sampling" (Leavy, 2014). In other words, the study began with the available participants (25 EFL learners) and then based on the aim of the study, the participants' willingness to cooperate, variation, diversity and saturation (Patton, 2001), certain individuals (12 EFL learners, 12 EFL teachers) who were more willing, more trustworthy, more reliable and better informants were selected. This selection process is referred to as negative case sampling (Creswell, 2009). To observe ethicality (Patton, 2001; Tracy, 2013), participants were asked to complete consent forms for voluntary participation.

The second group of volunteers was EFL teachers with a minimum of 20 years of teaching experience who held MA or PhD in TEFL. The teachers were interviewed based on Mwanza's (2011) model which is an Activity Oriented Design Method and presents a method for applying fundamental principles of activity theory to the phenomenon being investigated (Figure 2).

### Instruments

The data were collected using EL framework (Engestrom, 2017) and (Mwanza, 2002, 2011) model of Activity Oriented Design Method (henceforth, AODM) which presents tools to identify the essential elements of the activity and provides guidelines to help identify contradictions that exist in the activity being investigated. The methodological tools incorporated in AODM include the Eight-Step-Model (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*AODM's eight-step-model (Mwanza, 2011)*

Identify the...		Question to ask
<b>Step 1</b>	Activity	What sort of activity am I interested in?
<b>Step 2</b>	Objective	Why is this activity taking place?
<b>Step 3</b>	Subjects	Who is involved in carrying out this activity?
<b>Step 4</b>	Tools	By what means are subjects carrying out activities?
<b>Step 5</b>	Rules and regulations	Are there any cultural norms, rules, and regulating governing the performance of the activity?
<b>Step 6</b>	Division of labor	Who is responsible for what when carrying out this activity and how are the roles organized?
<b>Step 7</b>	Community	What is the environment in which the activity is carried out?
<b>Step 8</b>	Outcome	What is the desired outcome from this activity?

It also provides the technique of generating general research questions (see Table 2).

To triangulate the data and methods, questionnaires adopted from Cheng (2004) and Mwanza

(2011), structured interviews, reports, observations, email corresponding, google docs, and document analysis were applied in different phases of the study.

**Table 2.***AODM's technique of generating general research questions (Mwanza, 2011)*

Techniques of generating general research questions
1. What tools do the subject use to achieve their objective and how?
2. What rules affect the way the subjects achieve their objective and how?
3. How does the division of labor influence the way the subjects satisfy their objective?
4. How does the tool in use affect the way the community achieves the objective?
5. What rules affect the way the community satisfies their objective and how?
6. How does the division of labor affect the way the community achieves the objective?

### Data Collection Procedure

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985) naturalistic inquiry method, data were collected in three stages: first, to discover if EFL learners initially faced any WA, they were given a *second language writing anxiety inventory (SLWAI)* (Cheng, 2004). Based on learners' responses to the 20 statements in the inventory, they were found to be moderately to highly anxious. They were also interviewed according to Mwanza (2011) model. Additionally, their writing sessions were observed through observation as a focused participant observer (Angrosino, 2007). The document analysis of writing tasks was also done to probe into the causes of WA and a group chat in a messaging application was created for participants' collaboration and keeping memos.

As the second step, a group of 12 expert teachers were asked to comment on the causes of WA following a similar procedure of observation, keeping memos, comments as for EFL learners. The teachers were the certified British Council trainers who passed the ToT (Trainers of Teacher's courses). They were also the English teachers' coordinators in different provinces. In the final stage, a collaborative docs.google.com document was created for teachers to post their comments on WA.

To account for the changes in WA among the participants, the phases of EL were applied including questioning, analysis, modeling, examining, implementing, reflecting, and evaluation (Figure 3).

In the examination phase, the tensions and contradictions between the teachers' and learners' comments were studied. The shared outcome

exerted from the teachers' and learners' comments was the implementation of a collaborative writing task. This phase also served as an evaluation on deciding the best options to alleviate WA. This process is referred to as formative intervention (Engestrom, 2010, 2018).

### Data Analysis

The data including interviews, observations, document analyses, reports (memos), and communication in the social networks were collected and analyzed qualitatively through careful coding and recoding by Nvivo computer software package version 10. From the first stage of questioning to the last stage of evaluation, all the data related to documents, recordings, observations and interviews were fed into the constant analysis in Nvivo with the main extracted themes being reported in each stage.

## RESULTS

### Stage one: Questioning

The first phase started with raising the WA issue among EFL learners during a writing course on different themes, topics, and genre in Farhangian University. Out of 25 EFL learners, 12 learners were eager to know more about WA. However, in discussion meetings, they had vague ideas of the concept. Even when they were asked why they experienced writing anxiety, they simply related the issue to vocabulary, friends' reaction or lack of knowledge, for example:

"Due to my rather perpetual inclination towards learning vocabularies and reading books .... a student is .... incapable of continuing to write merely because he has troubles with his restricting small



vocabulary knowledge" (Learner 1, Journal, 15 March, 2016).

Thus, they were questioned on WA, and subsequently encouraged to search to find more about WA, apprehension, block etc., which could help them shape the second phase of EL. The participants liked to cooperate as they shared and analyzed their own WA issues.

### Stage Two: Analysis

In the second stage of EL, the learners delved into analyzing WA and slowly answered the why questions related to WA realizing that the problem might be historical-genetic, or actual-empirical. For instance, one participant commented, "...the students avoid writing as they are afraid of the peer pressure and the probable mis-

behavior by others" (Learner2, learners' interview, April 25, 2016). Some participants believed that anxiety is culture-bound: for instance one stated that he becomes anxious" ...even by my closest friends, you know it is a part of our culture! They always look for a weak point in the person instead of help[ing] that him/her" (Learner 2, journals, July 12, 2016).

### Stage Three: Modeling

After collecting data and coding reports and giving them further confirmation by the learners, the following model was reached (see Figure 4). It shows the complexity of WA, emphasizing on nonlinear relation of elements in a qualitative study. The participants are listed on the right and the extracted themes are presented on the left.

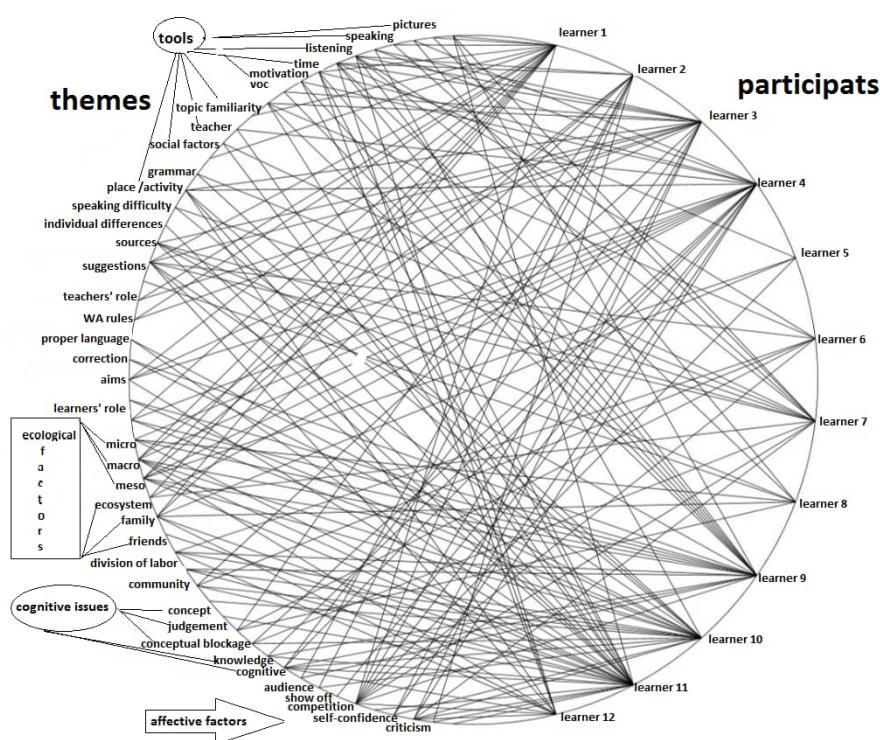


Figure 4. Extracted Themes on Learners' WA

The diagram depicts the complexity of learning environments. Besides the questioning and analysis of WA among learners, 12 expert EFL teachers were selected, interviewed, and observed based on Mwanza (2002) model (Tables 1 and 2), and asked to keep journals and report on WA.

Teachers reported more causes of WA than learners and extracted themes on WA included: Affective and cognitive issues, friends' reactions, lack of self-confidence, conceptual blockage, role of community, division of labor, aim of writing, error correction, rules and tools and activities.

For example, an expert teacher explained the power of correction and the role of teachers in conducting error correction in writing:

Correction requires its own teaching and needs its proper language. A teacher should not use language as a 'power tool' but a 'thinking-tool', which needs teaching at schools (Teacher 1, teachers' interview, July 24, 2016).

#### Stage Four: Examining

The next step was finding contradictions based on participants' comments on different aspects of ASA which were carefully coded using ASA model (Figure 4, 5). Figure 5 summarizes the joint activity systems of teachers and learners together with the shared object emerging out of their collective activities.

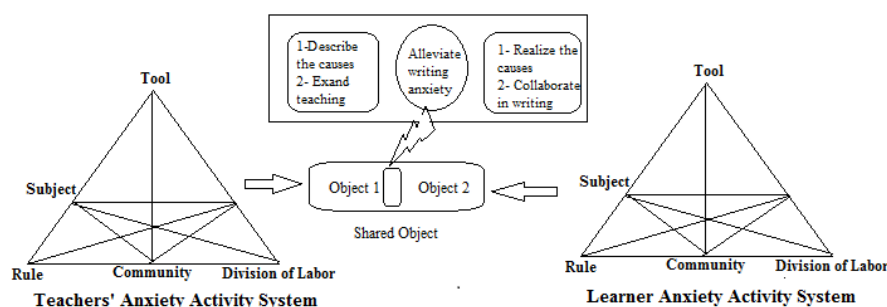


Figure 5. Joint writing anxiety activities (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010)

After pinpointing the contradictions, five types of tensions were sorted out. Some contradictions needed basic, cultural amendment and interventions at macro-systems while other contradictions could be categorized through pedagogical intervention (see Figure 6). For example, tension A was in disagreements on cognitive, social or affective issues of WA; such a tension necessitates awareness-raising both at teachers' and learners' side. Tension B was specifically dealt with in this study (see Figure 5) as it showed the contradictory comments between the

learners and the teachers on WA. One of the shared outcomes suggested by teachers and learners was doing collaborative writing tasks. To do so, learners were invited to do an online task on writing. Tension C related to teacher or peer correction which required more elaboration and further studies. Tensions D and E were also addressed in the present study; learners realized new approaches in writing and therein arrived at a better understanding of the writing outcome. This step was reached through the extracted themes in the examining stage.

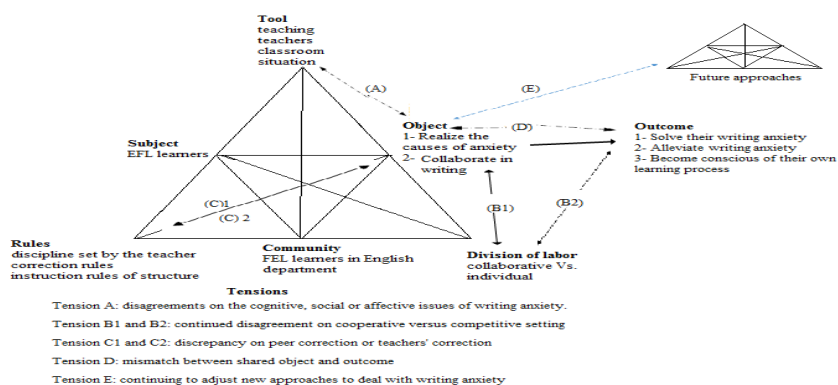


Figure 6. Tensions in learners' WA activity systems analysis (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010)

After determining contradictions in WA based on teachers' and EFL learners' comments, it was time to intervene and resolve some of the tensions. Therefore, in stage five, the EFL learners were provided with some opportunities to find solutions to the contradictions and solve the WA.

### Stage Five: Implementing

To resolve the tensions between learners' and teachers' activity systems, EFL learners participated in a real writing task discussing WA. To do so, some basic information on WA as well as teachers' comments was provided.

To this aim, a docs.google.com document was created and learners were invited to read and

comment on teachers' views and discuss each other's comments. They were asked to negotiate on a) factors relevant to their own WA, b) factors irrelevant to their WA, c) factors which were challenging and, d) how knowing such elements would help them reduce WA (Can awareness-raising on WA help them alleviate their anxiety?).

Figure 7 shows a sample of a students' collaborative writing task on which learners worked collaboratively for two months; they discussed, browsed different sources, and negotiated on the raised questions. Thereby, learners practically discussed various aspects of WA which were expressed by teachers and their peers.

The screenshot shows a Google Docs interface. The main document text includes:

These are the teachers' comments on learners' anxiety  
Please read the comments and put more comment on them.

- 1- Which factors apply to your own case? Explain. (200 words at least)
- 2- Which factors do you think are irrelevant? (200 words at least)
- 3- Note with which ones you disagree, the most? Why. (200 words at least)
- 4- To what extent, do you think knowing such elements can help you as a learner to cope with your writing problems? (200 words at least)

4.1. Causes of writing anxiety based on teachers' comments  
4.2.1. Affective issues

Ali a middle aged teacher from Zanjan stated that one of the main reasons of writing anxiety is related to error correction, the fear of being judged by others. He believed that being compared to others make the learners anxious. Hassan said that if teachers do not observe the self-confidence issue and do not correct through recasting and other corrective strategies, students might become anxious. Mary believed that it is not acceptable to compare learners and make them anxious. Ali commented that the learners become "unwillingness to communicate through the writing medium, the issues are mostly cognitive than just affective or social. In a sense the cognitive deficiency turns into affective problem in learners". To solve the problem Hasan commented that writing is a demanding activity, therefore, a student at intermediate level needs to be trained on how to write. Sometimes she does not know how to start. Narges also said that "...to criticize the writings by other learners is anxiety raising. The youth hate to be criticized and do not like anybody to remind their mistakes". Saeikh believed that anxiety is more among ladies than men. They don't like to be compared, judged or even evaluated. He commented that learners at

The comment thread on the right includes:

- Hasan (12:35 AM Jun 19): good evening everyone an interesting thing I've found while i was surfing the net and that is the "Expressive writing".....
- Mohammad Sajadi (7:02 PM Jun 26): I totally amazed of what you share Hasan in my earlier comments that I posted here I talked about kind of writing that
- hossein molias... (11:31 PM Jul 6): this is comment from massoud kurd When you become aware of your own weaknesses, the way you react to it
- Hamsayoon Kh... (2:37 PM Jun 11): I do concure strongly with the experiences expressed by the instructors related to writing anxiety. But the point is that none of the factors mentioned in the article are solely the main reason for the anxiety raise in writing, but they are actually in a meaningful interencement which

Figure 7. Sample online collaborative task

### Stage Six: Reflecting and Evaluating

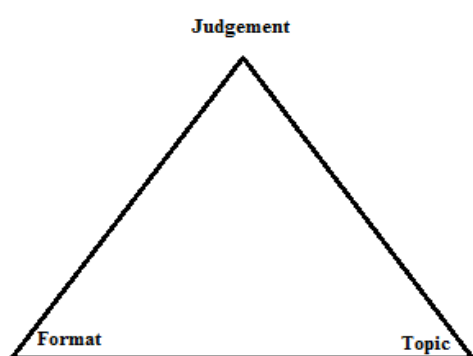
The final stage involved reflection and evaluation of collaborative writing assignment with special focus on WA. Therefore, as an outcome for EL, learners' comments were coded and categorized. Initially, learners agreed that some extent of WA is helpful, but the excessive amount can become a hindrance. They referred to the following

factors as the main causes of WA:

- Lack of adequate specific/general info
- Comparing learners
- Teachers' negative attitudes
- Teachers' high expectations
- Accuracy-based instruction
- Unpreparedness
- Topic unfamiliarity
- Affective factors

- Negative feedback
- Grammar
- Conceptual blockage
- Peer correction

Moreover, one of the anxious learners believed that the writing courses do not take the learners' preparation into consideration which can cause WA. Another EFL learner drew WA diagram (see Figure 8) and explained that topic, format, and judgment were the three most important anxiety-raising elements.



*Figure 8. Causes of writing anxiety based on learners' themes*

Conceptual blockage was another issue causing WA on which many learners agreed.

Negotiation was initiated in written form through online collaborative activity, based on identified tensions. It was realized that individual actions, contrasts, and contradictions are important collective activities (Engestrom, 2016). It should be noted that contrasts and actions are individual, whereas contradictions and activities are collective (Engestrom, 2018). It was not expected that highly anxious EFL learners would reflect and evaluate their own writing process unless they were encouraged within a collaborative online task where their authority was not threatened.

Furthermore, learners expanded their WA awareness by reflecting on writing correction. They agreed that writings must be corrected "...if not, they won't learn how to write again" (Learner 4, July, 2017). They also felt that no text correction and grading are meaningless.

The other learner confirmed teachers' company in every writing process. They commented that correction alone doesn't make the person anxious and focused on process assessment than product-based evaluation.

Results from the collaborative task on WA revealed that learners are the best judges of their writing problems. Compared to their initial comments before commencing the collaborative writing task and their final reports, they suggested solutions, realized their own causes of anxiety, and expanded their learning. To cite an example, one learner believed that writing should receive the same focus as speaking and writing needs to be instructed similar to oral tasks. Besides, one focused on the role of instruction:

"I think if we leave students alone with weaknesses in writing or negative feelings about their ability to comment on a specific topic, it may linger in their state of anxiety" (Learner 6, July, 2017).

Reiterating previous comments, other learners believed that error correction does not necessarily result in WA, but teachers' reaction can make a difference. It was also found that assigning time to talk about WA can be useful to raise awareness. The writing process needs teachers' rapport; when learners feel they are not alone receiving encouragement during actions, they gradually overcome anxiety.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, activity systems analysis and contradiction as its main principle were examined in an attempt to help Iranian EFL learners expand their learning on WA and support them become transformative agents of writing habits. Generally, due to the limited number of innovative studies on ASA and EL in TEFL/TESOL, the findings of the study may help researchers to focus on collective activities, contradictions and forgotten side-effects in research.

Examining different elements of ASA revealed that although there may be a pattern in predicting the causes of WA, most often the

causes are more complicated than expected. In the stage of implementation, EFL learners performed the collaborative online writing task and supported each other on alleviating WA. The EL model on WA allowed for creativity and interaction arising from tensions and contradictions between and within the ASA. Besides, the activity systems analysis is ecological in the sense that it involves all the stakeholders in solving WA. It moved from isolation to collaboration in the design and implementation. The EL has emanated from all the available sources encompassing the conversations in the google doc environment, observations and chats on the social network and by all the subjects participating collaboratively. Therefore, contradictions played a pivotal role in the model since it helped learners expand their understanding and enabled them to implement the new model. In addition, contradictions made it possible for the learners to reflect on the process of WA. It could have not been easily achieved if the learners had had no access to teachers' comments. Hence, the whole process induced the learners to move from an unstable, resistance state to a stabilized, reflective condition and this way become transformative agents. Finally, based on EL theory, similar process can be consolidated and generalized. The whole process was in line with Engestrom's (1987) ASA model and therefore elicited learners' and teachers' answers to the research question posed at the outset of the study regarding the causes of writing anxiety.

Although this study was on a collaborative writing task, it aligns with Ameri-Golestan and Neza-kat-Alhossaini (2017) study, who found that collaborative task planning is more effective and learners become self-agents of transformative learning through ASA. However, contrary to Langermeyer (2012) who stated tensions as obstruction, Engestrom (2010) rightly pointed out that they can be the useful starting point for transformations as it was in the case of WA in the current study.

The outcomes of the present study depicted collective problem-solving as one of the contradictions at play in WA, an option which turned out to be seldom practiced in EFL realm. Even

so, it is necessary to monitor participation and cooperation in WA, and to evaluate tasks and give support. Finally, the results are consistent with the findings of earlier studies by Rezaei, Jafari, and Younas (2014) and Atay and Kurt (2006), who emphasized on instructional, affective and cognitive role of teaching to eliminate writing anxiety.

Finally, it should be noted that agency was considered as the most important outcome of expansive learning defined as participants' capability and determination to form their activity systems. However, one of the major challenges for the EL in WA is the empirical conceptualization of new forms of agency involved in expansive processes (Engestrom, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

As a complicated and challenging process, writing in an L2 involves an array of sub-skills and methods. Initially, a question was asked on how ASA may help learners alleviate WA. To do so, we needed a tool to measure their WA and further concepts of AT, extended AT, WA, EL, contradictions, formative intervention, and collaborative online writing were all used to reach some transformation. The first themes on WA were extracted from learners' interviews, documents and observations. Later, it was thought that some experts may air more improving comments. Therefore, the expert teachers were invited to participate. The teachers' comments and extracted themes were all presented to the students in a collaborative online activity.

The extracted themes in each phase were tested in the next stage till the final evaluation stage. All the themes were double coded and validated; they were also checked against trustfulness and accuracy by presenting them to the same learners for double checking. The whole process of questioning through evaluation was referred to as EL, which aims at intervening in WA; however, finding a solution equals meeting new contradictions and the changing process is contradictory itself, creating endless transformation loops which is the goal of learning.



When placing writing anxiety within the theoretical frame of EL, it is concluded that the elements of activity system can support teachers to design effective writing tasks which can result in proper teaching development. As an outgrowth of tension, the collaborative online writing task encouraged process writing by promoting collaboration. As we need to explore WA, qualitative research design is well-fitted with the research questions based on themes extracted from activity systems analysis. Grounded on EL theory and ASA model, the design and the process of this research can be consolidated and generalized to

other similar contexts. The limitation to the study was unpredictability of the situation itself when performing the qualitative study. Sometimes the participants were not easily available through any forms of social network or whatsoever. However, the biggest challenge for future studies in WA and language related skills comes from the advent of tenets of EL in a community used to quantitative and individualized methods of researching in TEFL and TESOL. It seems that most of the TEFL field can be subject to different aspects of EL, including CALL, language skills, training sessions, assessment, and humanization in EFL.



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