

Exploring Writing Self-Efficacy among Malaysian Tertiary English Learners

*¹Izlin Mohamad Ghazali, ²Mohd Hafriz Abdul Hamid, ¹Mafarhanatul Akmal Ahmad Kamal, ³Mohd Fadhli Shah Khaidzir, ¹Nurul Nadiah Dewi Faizul Ganapathy

¹Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

²Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan

³Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Despite being exposed to the language for more than ten years, writing is one of the key challenges for Malaysian English language learners. This is largely due to the influence of their first language and lack of confidence or appropriate platforms to use English effectively. This study examines whether writing self-efficacy influences writing performance across three dimensions: ideation, convention, and self-regulation. The Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale (SEWS) developed by Bruning et al. (2012) was employed to assess these dimensions in a sample of 448 participants from a local tertiary institution in Malaysia. A quantitative approach was used, with an 18-item questionnaire distributed to participants, and the data analysed using SPSS for descriptive analysis. The findings reveal that among the three dimensions of writing self-efficacy, writing convention had the highest average mean score of 3.75, followed by self-regulation at 3.35, and ideation at 3.34. These results suggest that, despite commonly being considered weak in English writing, the participants demonstrated higher confidence in their linguistic abilities, particularly in spelling and sentence completion. The study underscores the need for future research to explore the relationship between each dimension of writing self-efficacy and learners' writing performance in greater depth. This could help identify more effective strategies to promote English writing skills among learners.

Keywords: Malaysian language learners, writing self-efficacy, writing convention, writing self-regulation, writing ideation

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian students are among the many learners of English as their Second Language (ESL). Malaysian ESL students would typically experience at least 10 years of English language teaching from primary school to secondary school in all the four skills of language, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. At the tertiary level, most subjects would be taught in English (Mehat & Ismail, 2021). In regard to expected proficiency of tertiary ESL learners at this level, the Malaysian Education Blueprint has targeted undergraduate students to be at B2 grade, a standard set by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This goal is expected to be achieved between 2013 and 2025. Currently, this has culminated in the expectation that tertiary Malaysian ESL students should be able to express their understanding on various subject matters, depending on their diploma and degree studies, according to CEFR standards set.

In any language learning, writing is one of the productive skills that ESL learners would find the most challenging, as it combines the writer's conscious control over the use of accurate vocabulary and grammar structure, as well as addressing the topic given. When it comes to writing among ESL tertiary learners, Mehat

and Ismail (2021) stated that writing can be particularly challenging for them, with one contributing factor being the interference from their first language (L1). This finding is based on their study on the errors made by a group of ESL tertiary learners' academic writing samples. This shows some ESL learners at this level are not all proficient users who can use English in their writing competently.

This has led to questions being raised on whether writing self-efficacy could have influenced writing performance or not. In her study, Woodrow (2011) established self-efficacy as the mediator between writing performance and anxiety. However, Jalaluddin (2012) reported a weak relationship between self-efficacy and writing skills performance that pointed out that low self-efficacy writers performed better than high self-efficacy writers. In a separate study that looked into the analysis of performance scores in a 10-week-long integrated course, Zhou et. al. (2020) found the score was moderately correlated with self-efficacy for writing. Overall, these findings showed attempts to understand the impact of writing self-efficacy on writing performance but not the dimensions of it, especially among Malaysian ESL tertiary learners.

Thus, this establishes a gap to study ESL tertiary learners' writing self-efficacy from all the three factors listed by Bruning et. al. (2012), which are ideation, convention, and self-regulation. Understanding the dimension of writing self-efficacy among Malaysian ESL tertiary learners can lead to looking at the relationship between their writing self-efficacy and other aspects of writing, namely, writing performance and writing anxiety.

Problem Statement

Malaysian ESL tertiary learners would usually enrol in English courses that demand them to produce good-quality academic writing based on specific tasks for the assessment. The volume of tasks would vary and some of them involve individual as well as collaborative writing. Naturally, having a high writing self-efficacy could be significant in aiding the learners to manoeuvre multiple writing tasks at hand. These writing tasks would usually assume that the students are able to generate their own ideas, apply appropriate writing conventions, and manage self-regulations in completing each writing task.

However, Pandian and Baboo (2013) discovered questionable employability among local graduates. This has become a growing concern to the Ministry of Education as it highlighted their inability to use the English language according to the standards expected by industries. With regards to self-efficacy on English productive skills in Malaysian ESL setting, Idrus and Salleh (2008) found that Malaysian ESL tertiary students had high self-efficacy in speaking ability on all the three dimensions (ability, activity perception, and aspiration). On the other hand, writing self-efficacy among Malaysian University English Test (MUET) candidates was found to be directly affecting their writing performance in the writing paper (Shanmugam et. al., 2024).

Therefore, this study intends to explore the students' writing self-efficacy by employing the influential Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale (SEWS) developed by Bruning et. al. (2012) in three factor-dimensional outcomes.

1. To investigate the Malaysian ESL learners' level of self-efficacy in ideation
2. To investigate the Malaysian ESL learners' level of self-efficacy in writing conventions
3. To investigate the Malaysian ESL learners' level of self-efficacy in self-regulations

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-efficacy was first coined by Bandura (1977), as he explained this concept under social cognitive theory. It was defined as a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a specific situation (Bandura, 1977). He later emphasised that self-efficacy must be measured according to a specific domain (Bandura, 2006). Hence, in an academic context, self-efficacy can also be termed as one's belief in their capability to perform academic tasks. Besides, to further understand the concept, Bandura (1977) has listed four main constructs that formed one's perceived self-efficacy, which are mastery experience, vicarious performance, social persuasion, and physiological feedback. With the presence of these aspects, learners with high self-efficacy are usually expected to be able to use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies while persevering longer when facing

difficulties as compared to those with low self-efficacy (Pajares, 2009).

Studies have looked into self-efficacy in language learning by focusing on skills such as reading self-efficacy, listening self-efficacy, writing self-efficacy, and speaking self-efficacy. In order to measure, scales were also developed to enable researchers to measure the language learners' level of perceived self-efficacy. For example, Kim et. al. (2021) and Wang (2004) studied English Language Self-Efficacy using the Questionnaire of English Self-Efficacy (QESE) scale with 32 items that was developed by Wang (2004). In a Malaysian ESL setting, to measure MUET candidates' writing self-efficacy, Sanmugam et. al. (2024) used the L2 Writer Self-Efficacy Scale (L2WSS) developed by Teng et. al. (2018). This instrument listed 20 items to evaluate the candidates' self-regulatory efficacy, linguistic self-efficacy, and performance self-efficacy.

Other than that, there were also a few studies on exploring various self-efficacy scales developed over the years, including the Writing Self-Efficacy Instrument (WSEI) (Shell et al., 1989), the Writing Self-Efficacy Scale (WSES) (Pajares, 2007), and Self-Efficacy in Writing (SEW) (Goodman & Cirka, 2009). Interestingly, Sehlström et. al. (2023) have found Self-Efficacy for Writing by Bruning et. al. (2012) as an influential instrument to be used in their study as the scale that underlined three non-hierarchical factors, which are ideation, convention, and self-regulation strategies, in their scale.

Ideation as the factor influencing WSE

According to Bruning et. al. (2012), self-efficacy in ideation refers to the writers' belief in their ability to develop and refine concepts, principles, and reasoning, which is important to achieve the writing task fulfilment. The connection between ideation and writing self-efficacy discusses the learner's individual's belief in their existing ability to accomplish writing tasks to great effect. Tsao (2021) also stated that self-efficacy for ideation is essential in encouraging the EFL students to engage with their teachers and peer-written corrective feedback. He also elaborated that the ability to generate ideas for writing is also influenced by the students' self-efficacy for self-regulations. However, despite the aim for accuracy within the reins of grammatical precision, it is more important to achieve comprehension than striving for error-free work (Savage & Yeh, 2019), heightening the importance of getting a clearer idea across first.

Ideation comes from an uninterrupted process and goes on to extract stimuli from the individual's surroundings and existing information from long-term memory to create new thoughts (Heffernan, 2014), which are thoughts stored within working memory. These thoughts expire when new thoughts are recorded in long-term memory. This process of thoughts that originate from working memory into written media is explored through the translation process in the Hayes and Flower (1980) writing model, though it does depend on available cognitive resources to translate thought and facilitate the transaction of the transcription from the memory into written media. Past studies have shown that there are a myriad of factors that enhance the quality of ideation, such as active procrastinating (Chu & Choi, 2005) or even something as fundamental as basic instilled values within learners (Tep et. al., 2021), among others.

Conventions as the factor influencing WSE

Meanwhile, Bruning et. al (2012) also stated that writing conventions focus on a writer's linguistic abilities, as writers choose appropriate words fitting to the task, syntactic structures, and discourse patterns to convey their ideas. Particularly for novice or struggling writers, learning to write effectively poses a significant challenge. In both composition tasks and expressive writing, students need to coordinate higher-level skills such as formulating goals, planning, organising, evaluating audience needs and perspectives, revising, self-regulation and attention control, as well as lower-level skills such as spelling, capitalization, punctuation and other conventions (Baker, Gersten, & Graham, 2003; Gersten & Baker, 2001; Graham & Harris, 1989a; Graham, 1999; Harris, Graham, Mason, 2003). Moreover, it is a process with great intricacy and complexity that requires both "low-level skills such as spelling, capitalisation, punctuation, and other conventions" (Anastasiou & Michail, 2013, p. 53) and high-level skills such as self-regulation and self-efficacy (Bruning et al., 2013).

Self-regulations in writing as the factor influencing WSE

Finally, the third dimension, which is self-efficacy for writing, pertains to a writer's ability to coordinate

themselves and their emotions as they deal with cognitive and linguistic aspects of the entire writing process (Bruning et al., 2012). With reference to this construct, SRL writing strategies can be defined as a set of English writing strategies that learners employ to effectively improve their writing performance with explicit intentions. In other words, SRL writing strategies refer to learners' approaches to regulating their writing behaviour and ideas in the process of selecting writing methods and performing writing tasks (Wang, 2023). Consistent with Teng and Huang (2019), individual differences can also influence student writers' self-regulatory strategies in writing. Besides that, skilled self-regulators approach their writing tasks with a clear sense of purpose, meticulously setting specific learning goals that serve as guideposts for their desired writing outcomes (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000).

Therefore, students' self-monitoring and self-evaluation of their writing achievement, for example, can influence their actual writing self-efficacy (Bruning et al., 2013). Self-regulated writers are likely to employ multiple SRL writing strategies (Glaser & Brunstein, 2007). In an L2 writing context, SRL is a multidimensional construct that typically involves cognitive and metacognitive strategies, social behaviour strategies, and motivational regulation strategies (Teng & Zhang, 2016). Although L2 writing self-efficacy and SRL writing strategies contribute significantly to students' writing proficiency, it was also found that EFL students have moderate levels of self-efficacy with infrequent use of writing self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies in the course of writing (Sun & Wang, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach to explore students' writing self-efficacy using the Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale (SEWS) developed by Bruning et al. (2012), focusing on three dimensions: ideation, writing conventions, and self-regulation. The use of quantitative data analysis ensures strong validity in investigating specific phenomena (Chua, 2020), making it essential for this study. Lakens (2022) argued that using a large sample size provides more accurate and reliable estimates of the effect size because it reduces variability and uncertainty. He further stated that a 95% confidence interval with a 5% margin of error represents the true value of the population while considering the error rate. With a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the required sample size from a total population of 55,000 new students (Berita RTM, 2024) is 382 participants. Therefore, the number of participants for this study, set at 448, is considered appropriate.

The participants were selected using convenience sampling, as it was practical to collect the data. A standardised questionnaire was shared through an online platform to ensure accessibility. The questionnaire, adapted from Bruning et al. (2013), was based on the Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale model, which includes the three non-hierarchical factors: ideation, writing conventions, and self-regulation. It consisted of five parts with 18 questions, including two demographic questions, five questions on writing ideation, five on writing conventions, and six on self-regulation. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' was used to measure internal consistency. The data were statistically analysed using SPSS for descriptive statistics.

To assess the reliability of the questionnaire items, Cronbach's alpha was used to determine how consistently the items produced similar scores, indicating the proportion of variance attributable to true differences among participants (Forero, 2024). It is also a common measure of reliability (Kumar, 2024). Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating better reliability, while lower values suggest potential issues with item consistency (Mohamad Adam et al., 2024). The Cronbach's alpha value for this study was .916, indicating excellent and well-established internal consistency, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.916	16

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION (1500)

This study aimed to explore the three dimensions of writing self-efficacy, namely ideation, conventions, and self-regulation, based on the Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale (SEWS) developed by Bruning et al. (2012) among Malaysian ESL learners in their tertiary education.

Table 1 Demographic Backgrounds

Items	Frequency (448)	Percentage (448)
Gender		
Male	129	28.80
Female	319	71.20
Academic Disciplines		
Science and Technology	197	44.00
Business Administration	58	12.90
Social Science and Humanities	193	43.10

Table 1 presents the demographic data of the 448 participants. The majority were female, with 319 participants (71.20%), while male participants comprised 129 individuals (28.80%). Regarding academic disciplines, the highest percentage was in Science and Technology, with 197 participants (44.00%). This was followed closely by Social Sciences and Humanities, with 193 participants (43.10%). Business Administration had the fewest participants, with 58 individuals (12.90%). The findings indicate that, based on the purposive sampling used in this study, the participation rates for Science and Technology as well as Social Sciences and Humanities were similar, while Business Administration had the lowest representation.

Table 2 Malaysian ESL learners' level of writing ideation

Items	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
WI2	I can put my ideas into writing.	3.48	0.738
WI1	I can think of many ideas for my writing.	3.41	0.702
WI5	I know exactly where to place my ideas in my writing.	3.36	0.776
WI4	I can think a lot of original ideas.	3.26	0.774
WI3	I can think of many words to describe my ideas.	3.18	0.761
	Overall	3.34	0.750

Table 2 presents the levels of learners' self-efficacy in writing ideation. Among the five items, WI2 scored the highest mean of 3.48 (SD = 0.738), indicating that learners feel relatively more confident about expressing their ideas in written form compared to other aspects of ideation. WI1 had the second-highest score, with a mean of 3.41 (SD = 0.702), showing that students also feel somewhat confident in generating multiple ideas. WI5 followed with a mean of 3.36 (SD = 0.776), indicating slightly lower but still moderate confidence in organising ideas. WI4 and WI3 had relatively lower mean scores of 3.26 (SD = 0.774) and 3.18 (SD = 0.761), respectively, suggesting that learners may struggle with generating original ideas and finding the right words to describe them. The overall mean score for writing ideation, 3.34 (SD = 0.750), implies that learners generally

feel moderately confident in their ability to generate and organise ideas in writing, though they may still encounter difficulties in idea generation and vocabulary use.

Table 3 Malaysian ESL learners' level of writing conventions

Items	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
WC1	I can spell my words correctly.	4.01	0.701
WC2	I can write complete sentences.	4.00	0.751
WC3	I can punctuate my sentences correctly.	3.71	0.811
WC5	I can begin my paragraphs in the right spots.	3.60	0.805
WC4	I can write grammatically correct sentences.	3.42	0.804
	Overall	3.75	0.774

Table 3 depicts the learners' level of self-efficacy in writing conventions. WC1 scored the highest mean of 4.01 (SD = 0.701), followed closely by WC2 at 4.00 (SD = 0.751), suggesting that learners are most confident in their spelling skills and their ability to write complete sentences. However, it is noteworthy that learners may feel less confident in using correct punctuation, as indicated by the lower mean score for WC3 at 3.71 (SD = 0.811), showing a noticeable gap from the previous items. WC5 scored slightly lower, with a mean of 3.60 (SD = 0.805), suggesting moderate confidence in structuring paragraphs. Lastly, WC4 had the lowest mean score of 3.42 (SD = 0.804), indicating that grammatical accuracy is the most challenging area for self-efficacy in writing conventions, as learners seem to be less confident in this skill. The overall mean score for writing conventions is 3.75 (SD = 0.774), which suggests that while learners have moderate to high levels of self-efficacy in writing conventions, particularly in spelling and sentence completion, they still find it difficult to consistently apply correct grammatical rules.

Table 4 Malaysian ESL learners' level of writing self-regulation

Items	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
WSR5	I can think of my writing goals before I write.	3.55	0.776
WSR1	I can focus on my writing for at least one hour.	3.45	0.894
WSR4	I can control my frustrations when I write.	3.36	0.826
WSR2	I can avoid distractions while I write.	3.28	0.909
WSR3	I can start writing assignments quickly.	3.23	0.784
WSR6	I can keep writing even when it's difficult.	3.21	0.843
	Overall	3.35	0.839

Table 4 illustrates the learners' level of self-efficacy in self-regulation in relation to goal setting, focus, emotional control, distraction, and persistence. The highest mean score was achieved by Item WSR5 at 3.55 (SD = 0.811), indicating that learners are relatively confident in their ability to establish writing goals. Subsequently, WSR1 demonstrated a mean score of 3.45 (SD = 0.894), suggesting that learners are moderately confident in their ability to maintain concentration during writing tasks. The average score of 3.36 (SD = 0.826) on the WSR4 indicates a slightly reduced level of confidence in managing emotions while writing. WSR2 indicates that learners may encounter challenges in managing distractions, as the mean score is slightly

below average at 3.28 (SD = 0.909). The lowest scores for both WSR3 and WSR6 were nearly identical, at 3.23 (SD = 0.784) and 3.21 (SD = 0.843), respectively. This indicates that learners encounter difficulty initiating and maintaining writing in difficult writing situations. The overall finding for writing self-regulation is at a moderate level, with an overall mean score of 3.35 (SD = 0.839). This suggests that, despite the fact that these learners are relatively confident in setting their writing goals and maintaining their focus while writing, they appear to have difficulty managing their focus, distractions, and attention to continue writing.

Table 5 Malaysian ESL learners' writing self-efficacy

Items	Category	Mean	Std. Deviation
WC	Writing Convention	3.75	0.774
WSR	Writing Self-Regulation	3.35	0.839
WI	Writing Ideation	3.34	0.750
	Overall	3.35	0.839

The overall writing self-efficacy of Malaysian ESL learners is presented in Table 5, which is divided into three primary categories: writing conventions (WC), writing self-regulation (WSR), and writing ideation (WI). Writing conventions achieved the highest mean score of 3.75 (SD = 0.774) among these categories, suggesting that learners are most confident in their capacity to apply writing norms, including spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The learners' moderate confidence in these areas is indicated by their mean scores of 3.35 (SD = 0.839) for writing self-regulation and 3.34 (SD = 0.750) for writing ideation. This implies that, although they are capable of setting objectives, managing emotions, and generating ideas to a certain extent, these aspects are not as robust as their abilities in writing conventions. The Malaysian ESL learners' levels of confidence in their writing abilities are generally moderate, as evidenced by the aggregate mean score of 3.35 (SD = 0.839) for writing self-efficacy. Their improved performance in writing conventions indicates that they are more at ease with the technical aspects of writing, while they may require additional assistance to enhance their self-regulation and ideation abilities.

It is interesting to note that these students believe in their ability to write by applying writing conventions rather than focusing solely on self-regulation and idea generation. Savage and Yeh (2019) emphasised that conveying meaning should be the main focus of writing rather than prioritising grammatically correct sentences. Similarly, Tsoi (2021) argued that although students should aim for error-free writing, their confidence in generating ideas can be enhanced by believing in their ability to write, which may help them produce more ideas and write more effectively. However, Mehat and Ismail (2021) pointed out that writing can be particularly challenging for students due to interference from their first language (L1). This aligns with Bruning et al. (2012), who noted that writing conventions reflect a writer's linguistic abilities, as writers must choose appropriate words, syntactic structures, and discourse patterns to convey their ideas effectively. These challenges can be significant, especially for novice or struggling writers. Interestingly, the participants' self-reported mean score of 3.75 (SD = 0.774) suggests a strong belief in their ability to succeed in writing, in line with Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to perform well in a specific situation.

CONCLUSION

In the context of writing, self-efficacy can influence writers' effort, time allocation, and overall motivation to complete tasks. The findings of the present study are noteworthy, as they challenge the common belief that Malaysian students struggle significantly with English due to their proficiency level and first language (L1) interference. The results indicate that their writing self-efficacy regarding writing conventions is higher than in the areas of self-regulation and idea generation. However, the average mean score is below 4.0, suggesting that while students feel confident in certain aspects, such as spelling and writing complete sentences, they remain less confident in areas like correct punctuation, paragraph structuring, and grammar accuracy. This lack of

confidence in specific writing conventions may impact their ability to generate creative ideas and achieve self-regulation goals related to focus, emotional control, managing distractions, and persistence. The fear of making grammatical errors may hinder their willingness to write in English frequently.

Therefore, future research should (1) explore how writing self-efficacy influences students' writing performance, particularly in the Malaysian context and (2) investigate the relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing outcomes to provide a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to students' writing challenges. This could inform the development of updated and effective strategies to improve students' writing skills and overall academic performance.

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