

The Correlation between EFL Undergraduate Students' Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Essay Writing and Writing Performance

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ABSTRACT

Despite established links between self-efficacy and EFL writing performance, research on Indonesian EFL freshmen remains scarce. Prior research has not extensively examined this relationship among Indonesian EFL freshmen. This study examines the relationship between writing performance and self-efficacy among 45 freshmen majoring in English education at a university in Surabaya, Indonesia. Utilizing a quantitative correlational design, the study found a Spearman's rho correlation of 0.069, indicating a weak, non-significant relationship between writing self-efficacy and actual writing performance. In some instances, an inverse relationship was observed, where students with higher self-efficacy reported lower writing performance, and vice versa. These findings challenge the common assumption that higher self-efficacy consistently leads to better writing performance in EFL contexts. The research emphasizes the need for a more holistic approach to assessment by combining self-efficacy measures with objective performance evaluations. Further research is recommended to explore other internal and external factors that may influence the relationship between self-efficacy and writing performance among EFL undergraduates.

ABSTRAK

Meskipun ada hubungan antara efikasi diri dan kinerja menulis EFL, penelitian terhadap mahasiswa baru EFL di Indonesia masih jarang. Penelitian sebelumnya belum meneliti secara mendalam hubungan ini di kalangan mahasiswa baru EFL Indonesia. Penelitian ini menguji hubungan antara kinerja menulis dan efikasi diri pada 45 mahasiswa baru jurusan pendidikan bahasa Inggris di sebuah universitas di Surabaya, Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan desain korelasional kuantitatif, penelitian ini menemukan korelasi rho Spearman sebesar 0,069, yang menunjukkan hubungan yang lemah dan tidak signifikan antara efikasi diri menulis dan kinerja menulis sebenarnya. Dalam beberapa kasus, hubungan terbalik diamati, dimana siswa dengan efikasi diri yang lebih tinggi melaporkan kinerja menulis yang lebih rendah, dan sebaliknya. Temuan ini menantang asumsi umum bahwa efikasi diri yang lebih tinggi secara konsisten menghasilkan kinerja menulis yang

KEYWORDS

Self-efficacy, writing performance, freshmen students

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efikasi diri, performa menulis, mahasiswa tahun pertama

lebih baik dalam konteks EFL. Penelitian ini menekankan perlunya pendekatan penilaian yang lebih holistik dengan menggabungkan ukuran efikasi diri dengan evaluasi kinerja yang obyektif. Penelitian lebih lanjut disarankan untuk mengeksplorasi faktor internal dan eksternal lain yang mungkin mempengaruhi hubungan antara efikasi diri dan kinerja menulis di kalangan mahasiswa EFL.

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INTRODUCTION

Self-efficacy, a concept introduced by Bandura (1997), refers to an individual's belief in their ability to carry out actions necessary to achieve specific goals. In educational contexts, especially within language learning, self-efficacy influences students' motivation, learning strategies, and academic success. When applied to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing, self-efficacy plays a critical role in shaping how learners approach writing tasks. Students who possess strong writing self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to tackle writing challenges with confidence, persist in the face of difficulty, and develop a sense of ownership over their learning. They tend to believe in their capacity to organize ideas, select appropriate language, and revise their work effectively (Sumarsono & Mbato, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022).

In contrast, students with low writing self-efficacy often exhibit writing anxiety, avoidance behaviors, and a lack of engagement with writing tasks (Sabti, Rashid, et al., 2019). Such students may perceive writing in English as overwhelming, especially when required to meet academic standards that demand critical thinking, coherence, and grammatical accuracy. These cognitive and emotional reactions can directly impact the quality of their written work and their overall performance in writing-based assignments.

The importance of writing in EFL undergraduate education cannot be overstated. Writing is not only a medium for academic expression but also a tool for developing analytical reasoning and communication skills that are vital for future professional success. According to Besral et al. (2021), undergraduate students must master the ability to communicate their ideas clearly and logically in written English in order to meet academic expectations and compete in an increasingly globalized job market. Writing is a fundamental skill that supports success across disciplines and plays a key role in knowledge creation and dissemination.

Over the past several years, research on EFL writing has grown significantly, with numerous studies examining instructional approaches (Asari & Maruf, 2022; Dafouz, 2020), the integration of digital tools and platforms (Jirayu Kongsuebchart, 2018; Naghdipour, 2022), and the impact of peer and teacher feedback (Kusumaningrum et al., 2019; Uymaz, 2019). While these studies have provided valuable pedagogical insights, fewer investigations have focused on internal psychological factors—particularly writing self-efficacy—and their impact on students' actual writing performance.

A number of studies (e.g., Jalaluddin et al., 2015; Soleimani et al., 2020) have highlighted that writing self-efficacy can be a strong predictor of performance, suggesting that students who feel more capable of managing writing tasks tend to perform better. However, many of these studies have examined diverse student populations, ranging from second-year students to postgraduates, without isolating the freshmen population. As a result, the specific dynamics that characterize freshmen's writing self-efficacy remain underexplored.

Freshmen face unique academic challenges. They must navigate new expectations, adjust to different teaching styles, and develop more independent learning strategies. Transitioning from high school to university often involves a steep learning curve, particularly in writing courses that demand critical engagement and structured argumentation (Ulkersoy et al., 2019). These changes can affect students' confidence, especially in contexts where writing is assessed rigorously. When studies include a broad range of students without distinguishing the freshmen experience, the distinct struggles and learning patterns of first-year students may be obscured.

Thus, although a growing body of research has examined the connection between self-efficacy and writing performance, there remains a clear gap in the literature regarding how this relationship manifests among EFL freshmen in Indonesia. Prior research has not extensively examined this relationship among Indonesian EFL freshmen, who are navigating a critical transitional period in their academic journey. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring writing self-efficacy specifically in first-year EFL undergraduate students.

In addition to addressing the research gap, this study seeks to better understand whether high levels of self-efficacy reliably correspond with better writing performance, or whether other factors may mediate this relationship. Some recent studies have found inconsistencies in the correlation between self-efficacy and writing outcomes, suggesting that overconfidence or other cognitive biases may influence students' perceptions and behaviors (Chen, J., 2019; Setyowati et al., 2024). This raises important questions about how educators can accurately assess and support student development in writing courses.

To respond to these gaps and questions, the present study focuses on two main objectives. First, it aims to assess the level of self-efficacy in essay writing among EFL freshmen in a university in Surabaya, Indonesia. Second, it seeks to explore the correlation between their self-efficacy beliefs and their actual writing performance in an academic writing course. By narrowing the scope to a specific academic level and cultural context, this study aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of EFL writing pedagogy. The findings are expected to inform instructional strategies, particularly those aimed at boosting students' confidence and performance during their foundational year.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between EFL freshmen's writing self-efficacy and their writing performance. A correlational approach was chosen because it allowed for the objective measurement of the association between the two variables without manipulating them or assigning participants to control or experimental groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Punch, 2013).

The study was conducted in the Department of English Education at the State University of Surabaya (UNESA), which holds an A accreditation status, indicating a high standard of academic quality. The total population consisted of 230 first-year students enrolled in the

Expository and Analytical Writing course—a compulsory writing class for freshmen. From this population, 45 students were selected using a convenience sampling technique, based on accessibility and willingness to participate. The selection involved students from two intact classes, and participation was voluntary.

Data were collected through two primary instruments: a writing self-efficacy questionnaire and students' essay scores. The self-efficacy instrument used was the L2 Writer Self-Efficacy Scale (L2WSS), developed and validated by Teng et al., (2018). This instrument consists of 20 items distributed across three domains: linguistic self-efficacy, self-regulatory self-efficacy, and performance self-efficacy. The scale employed a 7-point Likert response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The L2WSS has been widely used in prior studies and has demonstrated strong internal consistency. In this study, the questionnaire was used without modification, relying on its previously validated structure and construct reliability.

To measure writing performance, the researchers collected the essay scores assigned by the course lecturer. Each student wrote an individual essay as part of their course assessment, which had already been graded using a standardized rubric. The lecturer's scores served as an authentic measure of actual writing performance.

In analyzing the data, descriptive statistics were first used to assess mean scores and categorize students into high, medium, and low levels of self-efficacy. Before conducting the correlation test, data normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, appropriate for small sample sizes ($n < 50$). The results indicated a non-normal distribution of the data. Therefore, Spearman's rho correlation was chosen to examine the relationship between students' writing self-efficacy and their writing performance. The strength and direction of the correlation were interpreted using the correlation coefficient and p-values, with a significance level set at 0.05. All analyses were conducted using SPSS statistical software.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The first research question from this study aimed to find out students' levels of writing self-efficacy. In order to answer the first research question, the data from the L2 Writer Self-Efficacy Scale (L2WSS) was then descriptively analyzed through the sum and average of the data using SPSS. It was found that the overall mean of students' writing self-efficacy score in L2WSS was 5.11 ($SD=0.72$) where a student who performed the lowest writing self-efficacy was at 3.5 while the highest one at 7.0.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of writing self-efficacy

N	Valid	45
	Missing	0
Mean		5.112

Standard Deviation		.7210
Minimum		3.5
Maximum		7.0
Percentiles	33.33333333	4.767
	66.66666667	5.450

Based on the self-efficacy elements of the L2WSS questionnaire, self-regulatory self-efficacy had the highest mean score ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.87$), followed by linguistic self-efficacy ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 0.81$), and performance self-efficacy as the lowest ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.94$). This suggests that students felt most confident in managing their writing processes (e.g., planning, organizing) but were less confident in producing writing that meets academic performance standards.

Table 2. Elements of writing self-efficacy

Elements of writing self-efficacy	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Linguistic self-efficacy	45	2.86	7.00	5.1365	.80637
Self-regulatory self-efficacy	45	3.33	7.00	5.2333	.86777
Performance self-efficacy	45	2.86	7.00	4.9841	.93689
Valid N (likewise)	45				

Furthermore, the researcher divided the overall 45 students into three different categories using tertile division technique based on the percentile distribution of the data. A tertile division technique was used to classify participants into three groups: low, medium, and high writing self-efficacy. Results showed that the number of students in three different levels of self-efficacy in writing. There were 15 students (33.3%) reported to have a low self-efficacy in writing, 17 students (37.8%) in the medium writing self-efficacy level which made up the biggest percentage from the entire sample, and 13 students (28.9%) in the highest level of writing self-efficacy. Based on these reports, it was concluded that most of the EFL

undergraduate students participating in this research still considered themselves in the medium and low writing self-efficacy levels.

Table 3. Writing self-efficacy levels

Levels of writing self-efficacy	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low self-efficacy	15	33.3	33.3	33.3
Medium self-efficacy	17	37.8	37.8	71.1
High self-efficacy	13	28.9	28.9	100.0
Valid N (likewise)	45	100.0	100.0	

In examining the correlation, non-parametric correlation through Spearman's rho was used since there was an unequal distribution between the variables of students' writing self-efficacy and their writing performance. With the total sample number of 45 students, it was reported that the correlation between students' writing self-efficacy and their writing performance was at 0.069, with the correlation significance value of 0.653. The coefficient value indicated that the correlation between both variables was positive but with a significantly weak strength while the significance suggested that there was a relationship between students' self-efficacy in writing and their writing performance.

Table 4. Correlation results

			Students' Writing Score	Students' Writing Self-Efficacy
Spearman's rho	Students' Writing Score	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.069
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.653
		N	45	45
	Students' Writing Self-	Correlation Coefficient	.069	1.000

	Efficacy	Sig. (2-tailed)	.653	.
	N		45	45

To answer the second research question, a Spearman's rho correlation test was conducted due to the non-normal distribution of data as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test. The result showed a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.069$ with a p-value of 0.653. This result indicates a very weak and non-significant positive correlation between writing self-efficacy and writing performance.

The first research question focused on analyzing EFL undergraduate students' levels of writing self-efficacy. This study found that among the 45 students surveyed, most demonstrated moderate levels of self-efficacy in writing, indicating that their perceived ability to perform writing-related tasks was still mediocre. This pattern aligns with a recent study by (Setyowati et al., 2024), which also showed moderate self-efficacy to be the dominant level among Indonesian EFL undergraduates. Interestingly, both studies examined similar variables and sample characteristics, with researcher research expanding on (Setyowati et al., 2024) work by focusing on freshman-level students, while they investigated sophomores. However, the study results contrast with those reported by (Romrome et al., 2023), who found that most Indonesian EFL undergraduates in their study already had sufficient self-efficacy beliefs. This discrepancy might be attributed to the broader range of undergraduate levels included in their sample, suggesting that self-efficacy may develop over the course of a student's academic career.

One possible explanation for the weak correlation is that many freshmen may have limited academic writing experience, leading them to overestimate their capabilities. High self-efficacy, in this case, may stem from prior success in high school, where writing standards and expectations differ significantly from those at the university level. As students transition into higher education, their confidence may not yet reflect the reality of academic writing demands. This is supported by Chen, J., (2019), who discussed the “overconfidence effect” in EFL learners' self-assessment.

Additionally, the inverse trend observed in some cases—where students with higher self-efficacy performed more poorly than those with lower self-efficacy—raises further questions. One interpretation is that students who feel overconfident may not invest sufficient effort into revising or proofreading their work, assuming their writing is already proficient. On the other hand, students with moderate or low self-efficacy may approach writing more cautiously, double-checking their work and paying more attention to feedback and structure, which could lead to better performance.

Based on the elements of writing self-efficacy proposed by (L. S. Teng et al., 2018), it was revealed that students demonstrated the most confidence in their self-regulatory

dimension of self-efficacy. This pattern was supported by the general agreement that metacognitive, measured in self-regulatory aspects, boosted students' self-efficacy levels especially in terms of writing essays required in the higher education levels (M. F. Teng et al., 2022; Wang & Li, 2019). Students' ability to execute metacognitive processes to raise their confidence in writing was important to conceptualize their self-efficacy beliefs in the practice of EFL writing. Previous studies have also shown that students who were able to exhibit a goal-oriented writing organization showed a raise in motivation and confidence where it was in line with their self-efficacy (Sabti, Md Rashid, et al., 2019).

Moving on to the second research question of this study, the relationship between EFL freshman students' writing self-efficacy, as the predictor variable, and their writing performance was examined. It was revealed that there was a little to no correlation between EFL freshman students' writing self-efficacy and their writing performance. This finding indicates that students' perception of their ability to perform well in writing tasks does not necessarily determine their actual performance in essay writing. These findings of a very weak to no correlation between students' writing self-efficacy and their writing performance further contribute to expanding the understanding of the self-efficacy concept, particularly in the practice of EFL writing skills for freshman undergraduate level.

There have also been a number of previous studies that found similar correlational patterns with this current one. As an instance, a recent study by (Setyowati et al., 2024), which examined similar variables within the same essay writing genre, also found a very weak correlation between the two variables. Despite the fact that the previously mentioned study incorporated a separate writing performance test, the writing self-efficacy of sophomore EFL undergraduates was found to inadequately affect their writing performance. Moreover, (Aldina, 2022) also reported similar results where the researcher found no significant correlation between the variables measured by the same L2WSS questionnaire developed by (L. S. Teng et al., 2018) as this study.

However, the findings of this current study provided a contrast to several studies. As an instance, a study conducted by (Weda & Sahril, 2018) revealed a significant correlation between both variables where their study was addressed to a more diverse group of EFL undergraduates across three different English majors. However, this study differs with the current one where the researchers incorporated four distinct writing tests to measure the participants' writing performance comprehensively. Another previous study incorporating a separate writing performance test conducted by (Soleimani et al., 2020) also revealed similar results of a significant relationship between these variables. This latter study was directed to EFL undergraduates across different ages and university levels, which further acts as a distinction with the current study. The differences in terms of the measurement and the characteristics of the sample between both of these previously mentioned studies and the current one might serve as a possible explanation on how the correlation between the same variables across studies was not aligned

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that EFL instructors should not rely solely on students' self-perceptions when assessing writing readiness. Diagnostic assessments and formative feedback are crucial, especially for freshmen who may not yet have calibrated their self-beliefs to match actual performance. Furthermore, instructors may consider integrating reflective writing tasks that prompt students to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses more accurately. Metacognitive instruction may also help students align confidence with competence.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate two research questions addressed to EFL undergraduate freshmen, which concerned their writing self-efficacy levels and the potential effects toward their writing performance. The findings revealed a nuanced distribution of writing self-efficacy among participants. Most freshman students demonstrated a medium level of writing self-efficacy, with smaller percentages showing low and high levels respectively. Following this result, a very weak to no correlation was found between freshman students' writing self-efficacy and their writing performance. While the correlation existed, it was not statistically significant. This finding challenges the common assumption that higher self-efficacy consistently leads to better writing performance, echoing previous studies such as Teng and Zhang (2018) and Zhang and Ardasheva (2019), which have questioned the universality of this relationship in EFL contexts.

These results highlight the complex nature of EFL writing development. Self-efficacy, as a self-perceived capability, might not operate as a direct predictor of performance among first-year undergraduates. The presence of an inverse relationship in some cases may indicate possible overconfidence among students, which could be rooted in their limited exposure to academic writing norms. Factors such as lack of feedback literacy, unfamiliarity with academic genres, or gaps in metacognitive awareness may influence how self-beliefs are translated into performance.

In light of these findings, educators should be cautious in interpreting students' confidence as a reliable indicator of writing readiness. Pedagogical approaches should include structured, formative assessments to help freshmen calibrate their self-perceptions. Incorporating reflective practices, guided feedback sessions, and metacognitive strategy instruction could help align students' beliefs with actual writing competencies.

As for future research, more targeted investigation is needed to understand the interplay between self-efficacy and academic performance in EFL writing. Longitudinal studies are recommended to observe how writing self-efficacy evolves over time, particularly as students gain more experience and feedback. In addition, intervention-based studies that examine the effects of self-efficacy training, feedback mechanisms, or writing strategy instruction on performance could provide practical insights for improving EFL pedagogy. Exploring mediating variables such as writing anxiety, language proficiency, or motivation would also help clarify the nature of this relationship further.

In conclusion, while this study answers its initial research questions, it opens the door to deeper inquiry into the cognitive, affective, and contextual dimensions that shape EFL freshmen's writing development.

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