

# An Investigation into Iranian EFL Learners' Level of Writing Self-efficacy

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**Abstract**—This article sets out to examine the relationship between EFL learners' sense of self-efficacy and their writing achievement. In order to tackle with this question, two self-efficacy questionnaires were employed, English and General self-efficacy. Ninety-three Iranian EFL learners from four different universities in north-eastern part of Iran took part in the study. Pearson correlation and ANOVA were run to analyze the collected data. The findings indicated a significant relationship not only between learners' writing performance and English self-efficacy beliefs, but also between learners' writing performance and their General self-efficacy beliefs. It is worth mentioning that English self-efficacy beliefs showed stronger relationship with learners' writing performance as compared to General self-efficacy.

**Index Terms**—English self-efficacy, writing performance, general self-efficacy, EFL learners

## I. INTRODUCTION

Students establish and exhibit their knowledge through the chief common mode of writing. The ability to convey one's thoughts successfully in writing depends on one's sense of efficacy towards the skill—a skill which everyone needs in his/her lifelong learning journey. Despite the fact that writing is a highly demanding skill to acquire, it is the most widespread medium through which educators evaluate the performance of students. Writing is an extremely intricate and challenging task calling for a number of processes to be carried out. Those writers who have the ability to convey grammatical rules and mechanical actions while keeping focus are called proficient writers [6]. On the other hand, lack of confidence, low self-efficacy and motivation will have destructive effects on student's capability to write [24]. It is assumed that individuals who highly and positively perceive themselves as good writers are more likely to opt for writing opportunities, devote more energy through their writing process and persist longer in pursuing writing proficiency [4]. Hence, a high sense of self-efficacy or agency versus low self-efficacy, is expected to make a contribution to the composition of good-quality texts.

As mentioned above, writing composition continues to be vital in the education system playing the role of one of the fundamental language skills [28]. One of the prerequisites for the development of writing competence is that students be motivated and encouraged to become successful. Self-efficacy is essential to increase students' cognitive, behavioral and motivational engagement, the role of which has been proved to be indispensable in the improvement and advancement of writing skill. Whereas, being deficient in focus and determination impede development and improvement in learning writing in a second language [6]. Accordingly, the current study aims at exploring the relationship between students' self-efficacy and their achievement in writing module.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Self-efficacy, which is stemmed from the social learning/ cognitive-behavioral perspective, was proposed by Albert Bandura. Self-efficacy was defined by Bandura as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" [2]. Self-efficacy assumed to be contextualized and task or domain specific [3]. Generally speaking, people believe that self-efficacy is how confident they are, or how much control they have in their capability to attain a goal or get a task done [3]. Strong *writing self-efficacy* stands for a high sense of efficacy and confidence for the task of writing. As soon as individuals with firm belief in their writing ability face difficulty while conducting a writing task, they may be more engrossed in writing, exercise more effort and demonstrate more persistence and resiliency [1].

The individual's perception and evaluation of his writing skills has considered as writing self-efficacy [10], or the writer's belief in his '*ability to successfully perform writing tasks at a given level*' [26] has viewed as writing self-efficacy. Debates over writing efficacy are usually revolved around three degrees of efficacy: high, mid and low. Individuals with a positive sense of writing efficacy or high writing efficacy are those with strong confidence in their writing ability. Likewise, those who have moderate levels of confidence in their writing are labeled as enjoying a moderate sense of writing efficacy. Those having less confidence in their writing ability, or having a reduced amount of

positive sense of writing efficacy are often referred to as low efficient writers. It has been proved that high self-efficacious consider difficult writing tasks as challenging and work considerably and carefully through using their cognitive strategies productively to learn them [8, 9].

It has been proved that self-efficacy has an effect on achievement directly and indirectly bringing up students' grades [30]. Moreover some studies have shown that self-efficacy contributes to the prediction of writing outcomes [17, 18, 19, 21, 31]. Furthermore, learners' self-efficacy beliefs were proved to be related to success, in some academic fields such as reading and writing [25, 26]. It seems that self-efficacy beliefs assumed to be mediator of the preceding writing performance and antecedents of those beliefs, such as apprehension.

Investigations into the association between writing self-belief and writing outcomes in academic setting by researchers have revealed a strong association between them [14, 17, 22]. In their studies, the strongest predicting power among all the motivational constructs examined over writing performance was self-efficacy; such results confirm the claim made by Bandura's social cognitive theory, that self-efficacy has a strong effect on writing performance [1].

Perceived magnitude of the writing task might be the source of low self-efficacy and poor writing performance. When a student sees a task overwhelming, putting an effort in a task turns out to be more difficult for him [9]. In this line of inquiry, Pajares and Valiente [22] carried out a research on writing self-efficacy of elementary- school students and found that the students' beliefs predicted their writing achievement. Moreover, their self-efficacy beliefs directly influenced their anxiety about the task of writing, their feelings about its perceived effectiveness and particularly their evaluation of essay writing.

Reviewing the literature, we can find a great deal of self-efficacy investigators who have verified that students' belief about their writing skills predicts their succeeding writing competence [10, 11, 15, 18, 20, 21, 25, 26]. As a case in point, investigations by McCarthy, Meir and Rinderer [10], and Pajares and Johnson [16] have revealed significant correlations between the quality of written products and the writers' evaluation of their own writing skill. Findings of these two studies indicated that students who considered themselves as successful and good writers, could undeniably write well, while the students who saw themselves as deficient writers, would work in accordance with their beliefs.

In addition, Pajares and colleagues have conducted abundant studies in which they measured students' self-efficacy coupled with their self-regulation in writing [18, 19]. In 1999, Pajares, Miller and Johnson [18] measured teacher evaluations of students writing, the results showed that without a doubt, student self-efficacy facilitates the influences of aptitude and self-efficacy for self-regulation of writing performance. Likewise, the findings of their research demonstrated that the students' self-efficacy contributed to the students' prediction of their writing performance.

In another study, Wachholz and Etheridge [29] carried out a study on the writing self-efficacy beliefs of a group of pre-service teachers which substantiated an association between writing performance and writing self-efficacy. Along the same line, Kim and Lorschach [7] studied whether young students were capable of describing their self-efficacy in writing and whether there was a similarity among the educators', investigator', and students' perception of writing self-efficacy or not. They found out that the students with high sense of self efficacy had a greater degree of writing development than those having low self-efficacy. In addition, individuals with low self-efficacy exhibited limited knowledge of writing rules and skills.

In line with other researchers, Kim and Lorschach [7] demonstrated in their study that writing tasks will be more avoided by students with low self-efficacy for writing than those with high level of self-efficacy. Completing the writing task for both students with high and low self-efficacy took a long time, but the rationale for the length of time varied for both groups. The reason behind taking a long time for completing the task for high self-efficacious students was their desire to do it well, whereas the rationale for the students with low self-efficacy in taking a long time was due to having difficulty with the task [7].

Due to a dearth of studies that have investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL students' perceptions of themselves, the aim of the present study is to figure out the relationship between students' self-efficacy and their writing achievement. The objectives of this study are: 1) To determine the relationship between learners' English Self-efficacy and their writing achievement. 2) To determine the relationship between learners' General Self-efficacy and their writing achievement. 3) To determine which of them have stronger association with writing performance.

### III. METHOD

#### A. *Setting and Participants*

A total number of 93 EFL learners, comprising 38 male and 55 female, participated in this research which was carried out in Mashhad, a city in Iran. The subjects were assumed to be balanced in terms of educational background since all of them were studying English as their major in different universities in Mashhad. The ones chosen were all undergraduate (BA=55) and graduate (MA =38) students majoring in English language teaching, English translation, and English literature. The graduate students were all studying in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. The participants were upper-intermediate EFL learners who ranged in age from 20 to 30 years.

#### B. *Instrumentation*

To measure self-efficacy of the learners, we employed two instruments:

*General Self-Efficacy Scale.* To measure students' general self-efficacy the researchers utilized the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES), designed and validated by Sherer et al., [27]. It consists of 17 five-point Likert items, ranging from 'strongly disagree' (one) to 'strongly agree' (five). In our study, the reliability of the scale estimated via Cronbach's alpha was 0.89.

*English Self-Efficacy Scale.* To assess students' English self-efficacy, the researchers used the English Self-Efficacy Scale (ESES), developed and validated by Rahemi [23]. It consists of 10 items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (one) to 'strongly agree' (five). In the present study, the total reliability of the scale estimated via Cronbach's alpha was 0.83.

### C. Procedure

The process of data collection took three months starting in May (2012) and ending in July (2012). The permission being obtained, the researchers introduced two exam topics along with the instructions to the students. Participants were supposed to fill out questionnaires in about 10 minutes on the exam day and the researchers were about to select one of the topics afterwards to be written about in the same session. Students' writings were scored by two raters, one of whom was one of the researchers. The inter-rater reliability for the raters' scores was .86. The essays were analytically rated using the scale adopted by Engelhard et al. [5]. This rating scale consists of five domains: content and organization, style, sentence formation, usage, and mechanics. The overall score of the five domains considered to be 100 full score, each domain having 20 points.

The collected data were entered into the SPSS 16 program for further processing. In order to measure the relationship between English self-efficacy and writing performance, Pearson correlation was run. Another Pearson correlation was used to explore the association between General self-efficacy and writing performance. To do a deeper analysis of these relationships, One-way ANOVA was calculated for each of these relationships. To do this, the participants of the study were divided into three groups with regard to their total score in writing namely Low, Moderate and High-Groups.

## IV. RESULT

To address the questions of this study, two correlation analyses and two One-Way ANOVA were run. Table 1 vividly shows the results of correlation regarding English Self-Efficacy.

TABLE 1  
ENGLISH SELF-EFFICACY BY WRITING ACHIEVEMENT

	Writing performance
English Self-Efficacy	.96**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

From Table 1, it can be deduced that English Self-Efficacy was positively and strongly related to Writing performance ( $r=.96$ ,  $p<.01$ ). In other words, the higher the level of ES in Iranian EFL learners, the better their performance was in writing module. This means that those students who believed they were capable of writing successfully, were apt for writing well and getting high grades.

Stated differently, those Iranian EFL learners who saw themselves as capable in writing were more likely to be successful in their writing performance. In order to carry out further analysis of the association between English Self-Efficacy and writing performance, the participants were ranked into three groups in regard to their writing score. In consequence, students were located in high, mid or low groups based on their obtained writing scores. To see whether the difference among groups is statistically significant One-way ANOVA was used. Table 2 presents the results of ANOVA for the three groups.

TABLE 2  
ONE-WAY ANOVA: VARIABILITY DUE TO WRITING LEVEL

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2981.610	2	1490.805	261.253	.000
Within Groups	513.572	90	5.706		
Total	3495.183	92			

Table 2 can directly represent the differences between the three groups in terms of Writing score band is statistically significant ( $F=261.253$ ,  $p<.05$ ). To spot the accurate location of the differences, Scheffe Post Hoc test was then computed. The results of Post Hoc comparison can be seen in Table 3

TABLE 3  
SCHEFFE POST HOC TEST

Groups	N	1	2	3
Low-Group	29	33.6897		
Mid-Group	29		41.0345	
High-Group	35			47.4000
Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000

$\alpha = .05$

Findings of Scheffe Post Hoc test indicated that the High group, the members of which had the highest writing score, hold the highest level of English Self-Efficacy (mean= 47.4000). The Mid-Group placed in the second position (mean=41.0345), and the Low-Group showed the lowest ranking in English Self-Efficacy (mean=33.6897). This means that those Iranian EFL learners having a high level of confidence in successfully performing and completing writing activity tended to be better writers of English as a foreign language and as a result, they got higher and better marks in writing. Conversely, those students who doubt their academic ability in writing had a low grade on their paper. That is, the more self-efficacious students were, the higher their writing scores would be. The aforementioned results underscore the meaningful association between Iranian EFL learners' English Self-efficacy and their writing performance.

As mentioned earlier, another correlation was computed to figure out the potential relationships between learners' General Self-Efficacy and Writing Performance. The results of correlation can be observed in Table 4.

TABLE 4  
GENERAL SELF-EFFICACY BY WRITING ACHIEVEMENT

	Writing performance
English Self-Efficacy	.44**

\* p< .05, \*\* p< .01

Having a quick glance at Table 4, it can be inferred that General Self-Efficacy was positively and moderately related to Writing performance ( $r=.44$ ,  $p<.01$ ). In other words, the higher the level of General Self-efficacy in Iranian EFL learners, the better their performance was in writing module. This means that those students who feel capable and confident about their capabilities to do the task of writing were much more likely to write well and get high marks.

That is, having high level of General Self-Efficacy equated to having better performance in writing. To put another way, those Iranian EFL students who found themselves confident and capable in writing task tended to be more successful in their writing performance. In order to conduct further analysis of the relationship between General Self-Efficacy and writing performance, One-way ANOVA was used. To see whether the difference among groups was statistically significant. Table 5 displays the results of ANOVA for the three groups.

TABLE 5  
ONE-WAY ANOVA: GENERAL SELF-EFFICACY / WRITING PERFORMANCE

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2097.503	2	1048.752	12.272	.000
Within Groups	7691.486	90	85.461		
Total	9788.989	92			

As observed in Table 5, the differences between the three groups in terms of Writing score band is statistically significant ( $F=12.272$ ,  $p<.05$ ). With the aim of finding the accurate location of the differences, Scheffe Post Hoc test was then run. Table 6 displays the results of Post Hoc comparison.

TABLE 6  
SCHEFFE POST HOC TEST: GENERAL SELF-EFFICACY BY GROUPS

Groups	N	1	2	3
Low-Group	29	56.1786		
Mid-Group	29		62.8750	
High-Group	35			67.9394
Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000

Subset for alpha=.05

Findings suggested that the High group enjoyed the highest level of General Self-Efficacy (mean= 67.9394). The Mid-Group ranked second (mean=62.8750), and the Low-Group showed the lowest ranking in General Self-Efficacy (mean=56.1786). Unlike the low achievers, those Iranian EFL learners feeling a high level of confidence in successfully conducting and completing writing activity were actually more likely to be better writers of English as a foreign language. Simply put, the more self-efficacious students were, the higher their writing scores would be. The foregoing result underlines the meaningful association between Iranian EFL learners' GS and their writing performance.

To find a solution for the third question, Coefficient of Determination was calculated. This allows us to see how much of the variance (the variability of scores around the mean) in one measure can be accounted for by the other. Table 7 gives the results of Coefficient of Determination for each of those measures.

TABLE 7  
COEFFICIENT OF DETERMINATION

	General Self-Efficacy	English Self-Efficacy
Coefficient of Determination( $r^2$ )	19.36	92.16

The findings in Table 7 suggest that 19.36% of the variance in the two tests of General Self-Efficacy and writing score is common to both; the proportion of overlapping variance between General Self-Efficacy and writing score is 19.36%. That means that about 19.36 percent of variance was shared between whatever General Self-Efficacy and writing performance are involved. Furthermore, the same Table represents that 92.16% of the variance in the two tests

of English Self-Efficacy and writing score is common to both; the proportion of overlapping variance between General Self-Efficacy and writing score is 92.16%. Accordingly, by a quick look at the results it can be inferred that the proportion of variance on English Self-Efficacy measure was greater than General Self-Efficacy. To conclude, Iranian EFL learners' English Self-Efficacy had stronger relationship with their writing performance.

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of the current study was to explore the potential association between Iranian students' English and General self-efficacy and their writing performance in an EFL context. Considering the first objective, the findings demonstrated that those Iranian EFL learners who found themselves as capable in writing were apt for being successful in their writing performance. This result lends support to the study conducted by Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons [30] that asserted the influence of self-efficacy on achievement. In addition, this result is similar to many previous studies conducted on the relationship between writing performance and self-efficacy [16, 18, 20, 21, 31] which contended that self-efficacy plays a critical role in predicting writing outcomes. As substantiated in this study, learners' self-efficacy beliefs demonstrated to be related to achievement in academic fields such as writing [25, 26].

It was also found that High achievers holding the highest level of English Self-Efficacy outperformed the Mid and Low-Groups. This would mean that those Iranian EFL learners who enjoyed a high level of confidence in successfully performing writing activity tended to be better writers and as a result, they surpassed others in higher marks in writing. On the other hands, those learners who were suspicious of their academic ability in writing had a low grade on their paper. This is in line with prior studies which proved that lack of confidence, low self-efficacy and motivation will have destructive effects on a student's ability to write well [24]. And, individuals who highly perceive themselves as good writers are more likely to opt for writing opportunities and persist longer in pursuing writing proficiency [4]. Therefore, when students perceive themselves as capable, enriched self-efficacy levels will help them through sustaining effort, enhancing perseverance, fostering optimism and lessening feelings of apprehension regarding a task [21]. Consequently, the positive correlation between English self-efficacy and writing performance simply reinforces the fact that when students realize they have competence in their knowledge, beliefs and feelings about their capabilities, they will exhibit improvement in the performance of the English language.

The moderate statistically significant positive relationship between General Self-Efficacy and writing performance showed individuals with confidence and capability in writing task led to successful writing performance. This finding supports prior research by Kim and Lorschach [7] that high self-efficacy equals to high writing ability. Once more, this result is consistent with a great deal of self-efficacy investigations which have proved that students' beliefs about their writing skills predict their writing competence [10, 11, 15, 18, 19, 21, 25, 26]. In addition, this study verified that High group, the members of which got the highest writing score, enjoyed the highest level of General Self-Efficacy. The Mid-Group and the Low-Group ranked second and third in turn concerning General Self-Efficacy. Simply put, individuals felt a high level of confidence in successfully conducting writing task. Conversely, those learners who distrusted their academic ability in writing got a low grade on their paper. A possible explanation may be the fact that when a student sees a task overwhelming, putting an effort in a task becomes more difficult for him [9]. The abovementioned results confirm the claim made by Bandura's social cognitive theory, that self-efficacy plays a major role in predicting writing performance [1].

Furthermore, the findings also supports investigations by McCarthy, Meir and Rinderer [10], and Pajares and Johnson [16] who have found that students who considered themselves as successful writers, would undeniably write well, while the students who saw themselves as poor writers, would perform in accordance with their beliefs. In a nutshell, the major element which will bring about confidence and competence in performing the task is the beliefs the students have of themselves. Up to now, the findings substantiate the contention that learners' self-efficacy beliefs are effective indicators of their success in writing module. In addition, both English Self-Efficacy and General Self-Efficacy revealed the same findings with minute differences in the amount of  $r^2$  regarding their associations with writing performance.

Taking the third question into account, the findings suggest that the proportion of overlapping variance between English Self-Efficacy and writing score was greater than the variance between General Self-Efficacy and writing score. Thus, it can be inferred that Iranian EFL students' English Self-Efficacy had more significant relationship with their writing performance. While self-efficacy assumed to be contextualized and task or domain specific [3], this result is not so much unexpected. The aforementioned result coincides with Bandura's contention [1] that self-efficacy as a predictor is most useful when matched properly to the criterial measure. As a matter of fact, General self-efficacy is the most inclusive form of self-efficacy which was put forward by the authors of the scale not to be task specific [27]. Hence, the reason behind this finding may lie on this fact that due to being more specific and language oriented, English self-efficacy which directly relates to English language learning, revealed stronger relationship with writing performance. To say differently, the more the degree of correspondence with the performance with which the belief is compared, the more predictability of self-efficacy will be.

Examining the results of this research, several implications are put forward; first, it provided further evidence to substantiate Pajares [14], who stated that the beliefs students have about their capabilities and their inner processes deserve due attention, as they might contribute to success or failure in educational contexts. Second, it is of utmost

importance for teachers to know that their perceptions of students' self-efficacy may affect students' abilities in the field of writing. Along with facilitating understanding of learners' self-efficacy; the obtained information will be of great importance for educators to develop innovative teaching materials and improve their pedagogical practices. Furthermore, L2 learners need considerable help to promote fundamental knowledge of the writing process and to be trained in effective writing strategies. As well as raising students' writing self-efficacy, such measures could help them in due course and encourage them to undergo wonderful lifelong learning experiences. Though the subject of self-efficacy which has been previously discussed, the beliefs students hold about themselves in Iran, and how their self-efficacy influence writing achievement proposes a lot more to write about.

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