



THE DESCRIPTION OF WRITING STRATEGY, SELF-EFFICACY, AND WRITING ANXIETY RELATING TO WRITING PERFORMANCE

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Abstract. Academic writing in English remains a persistent challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, whose written work often fails to meet disciplinary expectations due to complex interactions among linguistic competence, psychological states, and strategic behavior. While previous quantitative research, particularly studies employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), has examined causal and mediating relationships among writing self-efficacy, anxiety, strategy use, and performance, these approaches offer limited insight into how these constructs manifest in students' lived experiences and writing processes. To address this gap, the present study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to portray the characteristics, expressions, and interconnections of writing strategy use, self-efficacy beliefs, and writing anxiety as experienced by EFL learners in relation to their academic writing performance. In-depth semi-structured interviews and analysis of writing artifacts were conducted with 18 purposively selected students from the 4th, 6th, and 8th semesters of the English Language Education Study Program at Halu Oleo University. Data were analyzed through iterative thematic analysis to generate rich descriptions of participants' strategic behaviors, confidence levels, emotional responses, and perceived writing outcomes. The findings depict self-efficacious students as actively employing planning, drafting, and revising strategies with metacognitive awareness, which they associate with improved text quality and fluency. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy frequently reported strategy avoidance or mechanical application of techniques without adaptation to task demands. Writing anxiety emerged not as a uniform barrier but as a context-dependent experience, sometimes coexisting with strategic effort yet often disrupting cognitive resources during high-stakes writing tasks. Notably, the descriptive accounts reveal that strategy use appears closely intertwined with self-efficacy beliefs, while anxiety manifests more independently without consistent patterns of strategic compensation. These qualitative descriptions complement prior SEM-based findings by illuminating the experiential dimensions underlying statistical relationships, highlighting the need for pedagogy that nurtures self-efficacy through mastery experiences, cultivates flexible strategy repertoires with explicit modeling, and addresses anxiety through supportive writing environments. The study contributes a nuanced understanding of the psychological and strategic landscape of EFL academic writing beyond what variable-centered quantitative approaches alone can capture.

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INTRODUCTION

English writing skills are a crucial competency in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Writing ability not only measures linguistic mastery but also reflects critical thinking skills, academic logic, and the organization of ideas (HL et al., 2025). In practice, many students in EFL environments, including in Indonesia, struggle to produce high-quality academic writing. This weakness is not always caused by a lack of grammar or vocabulary knowledge, but rather by psychological factors and the learning strategies they use in the writing process (Muslimin & Suhartoyo, 2023; Wang & Xie, 2022). Poor student writing performance not only impacts academic achievement but can also hinder their participation in global scientific communication (Sejati et al., 2016).

At Universitas Halu Oleo (UHO), students in the English Language Education study program still face serious challenges in academic writing. Based on observations by lecturers teaching Academic Writing and Thesis courses, more than 60% of final-year students experience difficulties in writing scientific papers in English that meet academic standards. This is evident in the low scores on the writing component in core courses, as well as the numerous substantial revisions to the background, methods, and discussion sections during proposal seminars and thesis defenses. Of the estimated 900 active students in the English Language Education Study Program at UHO, approximately 540 demonstrated substandard writing performance, particularly in coherence of ideas, paragraph structure, and proper grammar. This phenomenon demonstrates that writing performance is not simply a matter of linguistic ability but is also closely related to psychological factors and the learning strategies students employ. This fact underscores the importance of research that not only evaluates student writing but also examines internal determinants such as self-efficacy, writing anxiety, and writing strategies as key factors in improving academic writing skills (Huang et al., 2022; Yenti & Susanti, 2025; Zhang, 2024).

Previous quantitative research employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) has examined causal pathways among these variables, revealing that self-efficacy positively influences writing performance and strategy use, while writing anxiety often shows inconsistent effects (Golparvar & Khafi, 2021; Shen & Bai, 2022). However, such variable-centered approaches provide limited insight into how these constructs are experienced, expressed, and interwoven in students' actual writing practices. To complement these statistical findings with rich experiential understanding, the present study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to portray the characteristics and interrelationships of writing strategy use, self-efficacy beliefs, and writing anxiety as they relate to writing performance among EFL learners.

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their capacity to accomplish specific writing tasks, plays a pivotal role in shaping learners' engagement with academic writing. Drawing on Bandura's social cognitive theory, self-efficacy influences the effort, persistence, and strategic choices individuals employ when confronting writing challenges (Scott et al., 2024; Usher et al., 2023). In writing contexts, students with strong self-efficacy tend to approach tasks with greater confidence and resilience. Empirical studies confirm positive associations between self-efficacy and writing quality (Pajares & Valiante, 2026; Shen & Bai, 2022). Within self-regulated learning frameworks, self-efficacious learners are more likely to deliberately employ planning, organizing, reviewing, and evaluating strategies throughout the writing process (Stone et al., 2024), suggesting a close descriptive linkage between belief systems and strategic behavior (Golparvar & Khafi, 2021).

Writing strategies themselves constitute a critical dimension of academic writing competence. Metacognitive theory posits that effective strategy use enables writers to consciously plan, monitor, and regulate their composing processes (Oxford, 2013). Students who systematically apply strategies such as outlining, drafting with purpose, and iterative revision typically produce more coherent and academically appropriate texts (Sundari & Febriyanti, 2022). While SEM-based studies have modeled strategy use as a predictor or mediator of performance (Ding et al., 2025; Fan & Wang, 2024), qualitative description can illuminate how students actually enact, adapt, or abandon strategies in real writing situations, and how these behaviors connect to their self-perceptions and emotional states.

Writing anxiety represents another salient affective dimension in EFL writing. Characterized by somatic discomfort, cognitive interference, and avoidance tendencies during writing tasks (Blasco, 2016), anxiety can disrupt cognitive resources necessary for idea generation, organization, and linguistic execution. Prior research documents negative associations between writing anxiety and writing outcomes (Hassan, 2001; Horwitz, 2001), as well as reduced strategic engagement among anxious writers (Liu et al., 2024; Shen & Bai, 2022). Yet quantitative models often treat anxiety as a uniform construct, whereas descriptive inquiry can reveal its situational manifestations, when and how anxiety emerges during the writing process, how students perceive its impact, and whether and how they attempt to manage it through strategic or compensatory behaviors.



Although several studies have examined pairwise relationships among these variables using SEM (Golparvar & Khafi, 2021; Vleeschauwer, 2023), a comprehensive descriptive account of how self-efficacy, anxiety, and strategy use co-occur and interact within learners' writing experiences remains underexplored, particularly in Indonesian EFL contexts. By shifting from causal testing to rich description, this study aims to portray the lived realities of EFL students as they navigate academic writing tasks: how their confidence levels shape strategic choices, how anxiety surfaces during composing, and how these psychological and strategic dimensions collectively relate to perceived and observed writing performance. Grounded in social cognitive theory (Honicke et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2024) and self-regulated learning frameworks (Stone et al., 2024), this descriptive inquiry seeks to generate a nuanced understanding that complements existing quantitative evidence and informs more responsive, human-centered pedagogical practices for EFL academic writing instruction in Indonesia.

Consequently, the primary objective of this study was to descriptively portray the characteristics, expressions, and interconnections of writing strategy use, self-efficacy beliefs, and writing anxiety as experienced by EFL learners in relation to their academic writing performance at Universitas Halu Oleo. By shifting from causal testing to rich description, this research aims to uncover the lived realities underlying statistical relationships previously identified in quantitative research, specifically focusing on how confidence shapes strategic choices and how anxiety influences composing processes. The significance of this study lies in its dual contribution: theoretically, it complements prior Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) findings by illuminating the experiential mechanisms underlying statistical relationships, thereby bridging the gap between variable-centered correlations and contextual understanding; practically, it offers actionable insights for educators and policymakers in Indonesia to design human-centered pedagogical interventions that nurture self-efficacy through mastery experiences, cultivate flexible strategy repertoires, and mitigate writing anxiety through supportive learning environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to generate rich, contextualized portrayals of how writing strategy use, self-efficacy beliefs, and writing anxiety manifest and interrelate with writing performance among EFL learners. Unlike previous quantitative investigations that utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test causal pathways and mediating effects among these variables (Golparvar & Khafi, 2021; Shen & Bai, 2022; Vleeschauwer, 2023), the present research prioritizes experiential depth over statistical generalization. This methodological shift responds to a recognized gap in the literature: while SEM studies have established that relationships exist among self-efficacy, anxiety, strategy use, and performance, they offer limited insight into how these constructs are subjectively experienced, enacted, and interconnected within learners' actual writing processes. A descriptive qualitative approach thus complements variable-centered quantitative research by illuminating the lived realities underlying statistical patterns (Harianto et al., 2019).

The research was conducted within the English Language Education Undergraduate Program of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Universitas Halu Oleo. This setting was selected because its students regularly engage in academic writing tasks in English across multiple semesters, providing a relevant context for examining the psychological and strategic dimensions of L2 writing in higher education. Participants were purposively selected to ensure representation across developmental stages of writing competence. Eighteen students from Semesters IV, VI, and VIII were chosen based on variation in their self-reported writing experiences and observed performance in Academic Writing courses. Selection criteria included diversity in perceived confidence levels, reported anxiety during writing tasks, and observable differences in strategic approaches to composing. This purposive sampling strategy, characteristic of qualitative description (Amaluddin et al., 2019; Sejati et al., 2023), prioritized information-rich cases over statistical representativeness to generate nuanced descriptions of the phenomena under study.



Data collection occurred over a six-week period in early 2025 through three complementary techniques: (1) in-depth semi-structured interviews, (2) stimulated recall sessions using participants' own writing artifacts, and (3) analysis of academic writing samples produced for coursework. Interviews, lasting 45–60 minutes each, explored participants' perceptions of their writing abilities (self-efficacy), emotional experiences during writing (anxiety), strategic behaviors employed across planning-drafting-revising stages, and self-assessments of writing outcomes. Stimulated recall sessions involved participants reviewing their drafts while verbalizing their thought processes, enabling researchers to observe the real-time interplay between affective states and strategic decisions. Writing samples, including argumentative essays and literature review sections, were analyzed for textual features reflecting strategic implementation (e.g., coherence, organization, revision markers). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic analysis procedure (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006) aligned with descriptive qualitative aims. First, researchers immersed themselves in the transcripts and writing samples through repeated reading. Initial descriptive codes were then generated line-by-line to capture participants' expressions of self-efficacy ("I feel capable when I outline first"), anxiety manifestations ("My mind goes blank when the deadline approaches"), and strategic behaviors ("I always read my draft aloud to catch errors"). Codes were subsequently grouped into potential themes representing patterns across participants, such as "self-efficacy as strategic enabler" or "anxiety-induced strategy abandonment." Themes were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure coherence and refined to accurately reflect the study's descriptive focus. Throughout the analysis, researchers maintained an audit trail documenting analytical decisions and engaged in peer debriefing to enhance credibility. The final descriptive account presents thick, contextualized portrayals of how writing strategy, self-efficacy, and anxiety relate to performance, not as isolated variables but as dynamically intertwined dimensions of the EFL writing experience.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed. Prior to participation, students received detailed information about research objectives and procedures, and provided written informed consent. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without academic consequence. All identifying information was removed from transcripts and writing samples, and data were stored securely with access limited to the research team. The study protocol received approval from the Universitas Halu Oleo Ethics Committee for Educational Research.

This descriptive qualitative methodology generates detailed portraits of psychological and strategic phenomena in EFL writing that variable-centered approaches cannot capture. By foregrounding learners' voices and lived experiences, the study contributes complementary insights to the existing SEM-based literature, offering pedagogically actionable understanding of how self-efficacy, anxiety, and strategy use actually unfold within authentic writing contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study generated rich descriptive accounts of how writing strategy use, self-efficacy beliefs, and writing anxiety manifest and interrelate in the academic writing experiences of EFL students at Universitas Halu Oleo. Through in-depth interviews, stimulated recall sessions, and analysis of writing artifacts, three interwoven thematic patterns emerged that illuminate the lived realities underlying statistical relationships previously identified in SEM-based research (Golparvar & Khafi, 2021; Shen & Bai, 2022). Rather than testing causal pathways, this descriptive inquiry reveals how these psychological and strategic dimensions unfold within authentic writing contexts.

First, students with high self-efficacy consistently demonstrated what Bandura (1997) conceptualizes as mastery-oriented engagement with writing tasks (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003). These learners approached assignments with a sense of agency, viewing challenges as opportunities for growth rather than threats to competence. During stimulated recall sessions, participant 2 (Semester VIII) articulated this orientation while reviewing her literature review



draft:

"When I see a complex topic, I don't panic. I tell myself, 'I've written similar papers before, I can break this down.' First I list what I know, then I find gaps. This confidence lets me focus on improving ideas rather than worrying about my English" (Interview, February 12, 2025).

Her writing artifact reflected this strategic confidence through coherent thematic organization, explicit synthesis of sources, and purposeful revision markers in the margins.

This experiential pattern aligns with quantitative findings showing positive associations between self-efficacy and performance (Pajares & Valiante, 2026; Shen & Bai, 2022), yet reveals the mechanism through which this relationship operates: self-efficacious students actively construct writing processes characterized by metacognitive awareness. As participant 7 (Semester VI) explained while examining his argumentative essay:

"I always ask myself three questions before drafting: What's my main point? Who is my reader? What evidence supports this? If I feel unsure about grammar later, I don't stop, I keep developing ideas first, fix language after" (Stimulated Recall Session, February 18, 2025).

His artifact showed evidence of this approach through layered revisions that prioritized conceptual development before linguistic polishing.

Conversely, students with low self-efficacy exhibited what Zimmerman (2000) terms helpless patterns, avoidance behaviors, and fragmented strategy use. Participant 16 (Semester IV) described her experience:

"I stare at the blank page for twenty minutes. My mind goes to 'What if my grammar is wrong?' I start writing but delete sentences repeatedly. Sometimes I copy structures from articles because I don't trust my own sentences" (Interview, February 5, 2025).

Her draft revealed minimal planning (no outline), superficial revisions limited to word substitution, and frequent self-interruptions, as evidenced by deleted phrases. These descriptive findings complement SEM results by illustrating why self-efficacy correlates with performance: it fundamentally shapes learners' willingness to engage strategically with the writing process rather than becoming immobilized by linguistic insecurity.

Second, the study revealed that writing strategy use is not merely a technical skill but an embodied practice deeply intertwined with students' self-perceptions. High self-efficacy participants enacted strategies fluidly across the writing process, treating them as organic extensions of their thinking rather than mechanical procedures. During artifact analysis, participant 13 (Semester VIII) thesis chapter demonstrated sophisticated strategy integration: color-coded outlining for argument structure, marginal notes questioning her own claims ("Is this evidence strong enough?"), and systematic integration of sources with synthesis statements rather than isolated quotations. When reflecting on these practices, she stated:

"These aren't 'strategies' I learned from a textbook, they're how I think. When I outline in colors, I'm actually mapping my argument's logic. The questions in margins? That's me having a conversation with my future reader" (Interview, February 20, 2025).

This descriptive insight extends quantitative findings about strategy-performance relationships by revealing that effective strategy use emerges from metacognitive awareness cultivated through repeated successful experiences, a process inherently connected to self-efficacy development (Plakans & Gebril, 2011; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2022). As Bandura theorizes, mastery experiences build both skill and belief simultaneously (Honicke et al., 2023; Usher et al., 2023). Participants like Putri had internalized strategies through prior successes, transforming them from external techniques into cognitive habits.

In contrast, low-self-efficacy students often treated strategies as rigid prescriptions to be followed mechanically without adaptation to rhetorical purpose. Participant 4 (Semester VI) described using an outline template provided by his lecturer:

"I fill the boxes: introduction, three points, conclusion. But sometimes my ideas don't fit the boxes. I force them anyway because the template feels safe" (Stimulated Recall, February 15, 2025).

His artifact showed formulaic structure with underdeveloped arguments crammed into predetermined sections. This observation resonates with metacognitive theory while adding nuance: strategy effectiveness depends not on mere application but on the writer's belief in their capacity to adapt strategies to communicative needs, a dimension invisible to quantitative measurement but vividly captured through descriptive inquiry (Knouzi, 2024; Oxford, 2013).

Third, Contrary to assumptions derived from affective filter theory, writing anxiety emerged not as a uniform barrier but as a context-dependent experience with variable impact on strategy use and performance (Setyadi & Salim, 2013; Usher et al., 2023). While all participants reported some anxiety during high-stakes tasks (e.g., thesis proposals), its manifestation and consequences differed markedly based on self-efficacy levels and task familiarity.

High self-efficacy students acknowledged anxiety yet described it as manageable through strategic compensation. Participant 10 reflected:

"Before my thesis proposal, my hands shook when typing. But I used my usual process: outline first, write a messy draft, then revise. The anxiety didn't disappear, but my routine created a 'safe space' to write through it" (Interview, February 12, 2025).

Her artifact showed no degradation in strategic behavior during high-anxiety tasks; planning and revision remained robust. This finding challenges simplistic interpretations of SEM studies showing inconsistent anxiety-performance relationships by revealing that anxiety's impact depends on learners' strategic repertoires and self-regulatory capacity (Shen & Bai, 2022).

Low-self-efficacy students experienced anxiety as cognitively disruptive, yet even here the relationship with strategy use was complex. Participant 18 described anxiety-induced strategy abandonment:

"When the lecturer says 'This is for your portfolio,' my mind blanks. I skip outlining and just start writing to finish quickly. Later, I see the mess, but by then it's too late to reorganize" (Interview, February 5, 2025).

Her artifact confirmed this pattern: minimal planning followed by linear drafting with superficial edits. However, in low-stakes contexts (e.g., journal reflections), the same participant employed basic strategies despite residual anxiety, suggesting that task perception moderates anxiety's disruptive potential, a nuance obscured in variable-centered approaches.

Notably, no participant described anxiety as systematically preventing strategy use when academic consequences were significant. Even highly anxious students like Riska attempted strategies under pressure, though often ineffectively. This descriptive insight reframes quantitative findings about non-significant anxiety-strategy paths (as in prior SEM work): anxiety may not eliminate strategy use but rather degrades its quality and adaptability, a distinction critical for pedagogy yet invisible to statistical modeling.

Fourth, the most significant contribution of this descriptive inquiry lies in its portrayal of how these dimensions interact dynamically during actual writing. Consider participant 7's experience composing a research critique: he began with moderate anxiety about evaluating published work ("What if my criticism seems naive?"), but his strong self-efficacy ("I have analyzed texts before, I can do this") activated strategic behaviors (outlining argument structure, comparing his analysis to the original). As he progressed, the successful execution of strategies further boosted his confidence, reducing anxiety mid-process. His artifact showed evidence of this trajectory: initial hesitant phrasing in early paragraphs evolving into assertive critical analysis later, with revision notes reflecting growing certainty ("This point needs stronger evidence" → "Added reference to support claim").

This lived experience illustrates what SEM models conceptualize as mediation, not as a statistical pathway but as an unfolding cognitive-affective process: self-efficacy enables strategic engagement, which generates mastery experiences that further strengthen self-efficacy while mitigating anxiety, a cyclical rather than linear relationship. Theorized within self-regulated learning frameworks, these dimensions operate synergistically rather than unidirectionally (Stone et al., 2024). The descriptive approach captures this dynamism, where quantitative methods necessarily simplify complexity into directional paths.

Fifth, these findings carry distinct implications compared to those derived from SEM

results. While quantitative studies recommend "increasing self-efficacy or teaching strategies, this descriptive inquiry reveals how such interventions might authentically function: First, self-efficacy development requires mastery experiences, not just encouragement. Students like participant 13 built confidence through repeated successful use of strategies, not through praise alone. Pedagogy should scaffold incremental writing challenges with explicit reflection on growth.

Second, strategy instruction must emphasize adaptability over prescription. When students like Budi treat strategies as rigid templates, effectiveness diminishes. Instruction should model strategy adaptation to rhetorical contexts, as demonstrated by high-efficacy participants. Third, anxiety management requires contextual sensitivity. Since anxiety manifests differently across tasks and individuals, blanket anxiety reduction programs may be less effective than teaching students to recognize their anxiety triggers and deploy personalized strategic responses, as Sari did with her "safe space" routine. Fourth, writing instruction should make the invisible visible. Stimulated recall sessions revealed that effective writers engage in rich internal dialogues during composing, a process opaque to observers. Classroom practices like think-aloud modeling and reflective writing journals can externalize these cognitive processes for learners.

This descriptive account does not contradict prior SEM findings but rather humanizes them, revealing the experiential realities beneath statistical relationships. Qualitative description provides the thick context necessary to translate quantitative patterns into meaningful pedagogical action (HL et al., 2023; Sejati et al., 2021). For EFL writing instruction at institutions like Universitas Halu Oleo University, understanding how self-efficacy, anxiety, and strategies intertwine in students' lived experiences may prove more transformative than knowing that they correlate, a contribution uniquely enabled by descriptive qualitative inquiry.

The distinctive contribution of this study lies in its illumination of lived experiential dimensions that remain inaccessible to prior quantitative approaches. The findings reveal that writing anxiety does not operate as a uniform impediment but rather as a context-dependent phenomenon that degrades the quality and metacognitive awareness of strategy use without necessarily eliminating strategic engagement altogether. This study identifies a critical qualitative distinction in strategy enactment: whereas high-self-efficacy learners internalize writing strategies as organic cognitive habits, low-self-efficacy learners tend to apply them rigidly as mechanical templates. These cyclical, dynamically intertwined relationships between self-efficacy, anxiety, and strategic behavior offer nuanced insights that complement and extend existing statistical models, thereby advancing a more human-centered understanding of the psychological and strategic landscape in EFL academic writing.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This descriptive qualitative study demonstrates that writing self-efficacy, writing anxiety, and writing strategy use function as dynamically interconnected dimensions within EFL students' academic writing experiences rather than operating as isolated or linearly related factors. Students with strong self-efficacy consistently exhibited mastery-oriented engagement, approaching writing tasks with agency and enacting strategies as flexible cognitive habits that supported coherent organization, purposeful revision, and effective source integration. In contrast, students with lower self-efficacy tended to apply strategies rigidly as mechanical templates, thereby constraining idea development and limiting rhetorical adaptability. Writing anxiety manifested not as a uniform barrier but as a context-dependent phenomenon; while high-self-efficacy students managed anxiety through established routines that preserved strategic engagement, those with lower self-efficacy experienced anxiety as cognitively disruptive, sometimes leading to strategy abandonment under pressure.

Importantly, anxiety did not eliminate strategy use altogether but rather degraded its quality, flexibility, and metacognitive awareness—a nuanced pattern that quantitative approaches often overlook. These dimensions operated synergistically in practice: self-efficacy fostered strategic engagement, which generated successful writing experiences that further strengthened confidence and mitigated anxiety, revealing a cyclical rather than unidirectional relationship. For



pedagogical practice, writing instruction should move beyond teaching strategies as isolated techniques toward fostering their organic integration with self-belief through scaffolded mastery experiences, reflective activities that help students recognize their growth, exercises that encourage strategy adaptation across rhetorical contexts, and modeling that makes visible the internal processes of effective writers. Future research should employ longitudinal qualitative designs to trace how these dimensions evolve through specific writing experiences, investigate culturally and socially situated forms of writing anxiety such as fear of peer judgment, and explore emotion regulation as a lived practice rather than a measured variable. Ultimately, advancing EFL writing instruction requires complementing statistical evidence of variable relationships with a rich understanding of the human experiences that underlie them, ensuring that pedagogical interventions respond authentically to learners' contextual realities.

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