

# Exploring Writing Difficulties in the Composing Process: A Case Study of ESL Writing

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## Abstract

Writing is one of the skills alongside listening, speaking and reading that determine the ESL learners' capabilities to be proficient in English language. The skill is essential in ESL learning because it helps to facilitate the learners' expression of ideas, thoughts and emotions on a topic. However, even with a proper guidance on composing a piece of writing, it remains the most challenging skill that most ESL learners are struggling with. In order to identify the core challenges that ESL learners are facing in their writing competency, this study aims to investigate the perceptions regarding their utilisation of learning strategies to explore writing difficulties in the composing process among undergraduates at a public university in Malaysia. This study is conducted as a quantitative method and 137 participants from a public university in Malaysia responded to an online survey, administered through Google Form. The instrument used is a 5-point Likert-scale survey and rooted from Flower and Hayes (1981); Petric and Czalr (2003) which consists of 5 sections, which include: (A) respondent demographics, (B) Writing difficulties, and (C) Composing process (Before-, While-, After writing). The result of this study shows that there is a correlation between the respondents' writing difficulties during the composing process and achieving their writing goals due to their inadequate knowledge of the convention of writing in tertiary education. Based on the data obtained in this study, it could be assured that it could benefit future researchers to expand and identify other factors that influence the difficulties of writing for ESL learners.

**Keywords:** Writing Difficulties, Composing Process, Academic Writing, ESL Learners

## Introduction

Writing competency is essential in language learning as it facilitates the expression of ideas, thoughts and emotions. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) defined writing as a means for students across various subjects to construct meaning for themselves. Herrington (1985) also associates writing with the processes of learning to think critically and sharing knowledge within specific domains. Due to that, writing is a demanding process as it requires several embedded metacognitive processes Hadley (1993) which denote the process to either narrate or retell informational fragments in the form of writing. Writing composition on the other

hand entails several cognitive tasks which include brainstorming, planning, outlining, drafting and revising. Flower and Heyes (1981) also asserted the cognitive process theory of writing composition into three “...visible language” of planning, translating and reviewing (p. 374). These complex processes are further intensified with writers’ ability to juggle rhetorical problems and their own goals in writing (Flower & Heyes, 1981). Due to this reason, writing often challenges novice writers, especially second or foreign users of the language. In their academic writing, inexperienced or beginner writers may fail to explicitly define the macro rhetorical purpose as their written production is highly based on their preexisting knowledge of the topic (Cheung, 2013).

The ability to write effectively in English is a crucial academic skill for undergraduate students as it serves as an indicator of their language proficiency. This competence is necessary to engage in the formal conventions of academic writing across different types of assignments including essays, summaries, critical review, research reports and dissertations (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). As one of the productive skills, writing competence is a crucial skill to be acquired by ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in the educational landscape in Malaysia. Though significant emphasis has been placed on skill mastery, many Malaysian students struggle with academic writing. These difficulties arise from the shift in writing expectations between secondary and tertiary education (Musa et al., 2012) which is amplified for non-native users of the language. Maznun et al (2017) also highlighted in their study that even undergraduate students majoring in English had difficulties developing their introduction in report writing. With this in mind, it is necessary to zoom into the influences of writing difficulties and composition.

### **Statement of Problem**

Writing is a significant challenge for many students, whether they are writing in their native language or a foreign language. According to Nunan (1998), one of the most demanding aspects of language learning is the ability to create a well-structured, fluent, and extended piece of writing. This task becomes even more formidable for individuals learning a second language. He further contends that writing is an exceptionally challenging mental task that demands the writer's command over a multitude of elements. These elements can range from the writer's academic background and individual interests to a diverse set of psychological, linguistic, and cognitive aspects. As for ESL learners, Bizzell (1982) highlights that students’ success in academic writing can be hindered by their social background and prior educational experiences. In simpler terms, their difficulties with academic writing may not be due to a lack of inherent ability but rather stem from the social and cultural influences on their writing. These challenges can pose difficulties for both educators and ESL writers. Therefore, it is important to delve into and analyse the perceptions of ESL learners regarding the factors that impact their writing abilities, especially with respect to the writing composition process. As claimed by Hyland (2003), identifying these factors is essential because it allows for more effective addressing of writing-related issues.

Recent studies on writing difficulties among ESL students emphasise on writing attitudes Hashemian and Heidari (2013); Bulut (2017), writing motivation and engagement Boo et al (2015); Zhang & Hyland (2018); Yu et al (2023), and writing apprehension (Maringe and Jenkins, 2015; Akhtar et al., 2020). These studies collectively suggest that addressing not only the technical aspects of writing but also psychological and motivational factors is essential for

enhancing the writing skills of ESL students. Hence, these studies propose that educators and curriculum designers should take into account the aforementioned factors when developing strategies and interventions to support ESL learners in improving their writing abilities. Even in Malaysia, recent research has explored ESL learners' writing difficulties through social cognitive theory Rahmat et al (2017) as well as the psychology of audience awareness in the writing composing process (Rahmat et al., 2018). These two studies apply psychological theories to the context of ESL learners' writing difficulties and contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges ESL students face in the writing process and can inform strategies for improvement. Since recent research places significant importance on extrinsic factors related to writing difficulties, it often overshadows the intricacies of the actual writing composition process. Hence, by examining the ESL students' writing difficulties in the composing process, this study might provide valuable insights into an under-researched area, contributing to the resolution of a research gap.

Moreover, based on prior research, the primary challenge for ESL students when it comes to writing tasks is their limited proficiency in the English language. To compose effective writing, learners require a strong grasp of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure (Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019). Additionally, many Malaysian students struggle with writing in English as it demands various cognitive and linguistic skills they may not be confident in, particularly in generating and organising ideas. Furthermore, ESL students often face more complex challenges, which can be related to cultural and linguistic factors Musa et al (2012), leading to a decline in their interest in writing. Despite the challenges, Malaysia places a notable concentration on developing writing skills within its education system, alongside verbal communication skills. This commitment is outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013 - 2025), which highlights the importance of proficiency in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, encompassing all language aspects. Nonetheless, despite almost a decade of its implementation, there is still a concerning issue with the passing of the SPM English paper in Malaysia. According to an analysis of the SPM English 2022 results conducted by NGO Untuk Malaysia, out of 373,974 candidates who sat for the SPM last year, a total of 52,674 candidates (14.3%) did not pass English. Thus, it is imperative to examine the underlying factors contributing to this persistent challenge, particularly in the context of students' writing strategies and difficulties.

In recent years, there has been a notable surge in research focusing on students' writing strategies, particularly within the Malaysian ESL context. Several studies conducted by researchers such as Mastan and Maarof (2014); Mastan et al (2017), as well as Raoofi et al (2017), have significantly contributed to our understanding of how students approach writing tasks, the strategies they employ, and the factors that influence their writing processes. These studies have shed light on various aspects of writing strategies, including the use of cognitive processes, metacognitive awareness, and self-regulation in the writing process. They have explored how different instructional methods and interventions can impact the development of effective writing strategies among ESL learners in Malaysia. However, despite the substantial progress in researching writing strategies, the same level of attention has not been directed toward investigating the specific challenges and difficulties that ESL learners encounter during the writing process. Writing difficulties encompass a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from linguistic challenges, such as grammar and vocabulary, to cognitive barriers, like generating and organising ideas effectively. Additionally, cultural and

sociolinguistic factors can further complicate the writing process for ESL learners. Therefore, while the study of writing strategies has advanced our knowledge, there is still a critical need for deeper investigation into the specific writing difficulties in the composition process that ESL learners face in Malaysia, which this study fulfills. This research could help pinpoint the root causes of these challenges and inform the development of targeted interventions and instructional approaches to address them effectively. Ultimately, a comprehensive understanding of writing difficulties is essential for educators and policymakers to enhance the writing proficiency of ESL students in Malaysia and similar contexts.

### **Objective of the Study and Research Questions**

This study aims to investigate learners' perceptions regarding their utilisation of learning strategies. More specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions:

- i. How do learners have writing difficulties?
- ii. How do learners perceive the composing process ?
- iii. Is there a relationship between writing difficulties and the composing process?

### **Literature Review**

One of the many steps of academic writing requires university students to partake in the composing process in order to produce good pieces of writing and to succeed intellectually in the field of their choice. Writing is often acknowledged to be the most difficult English language skill to master, especially for second language learners, as it requires not only mastery of its vocabulary and grammar but also an understanding of how native speakers of the target language organise their thoughts (Nunan, 1998; Handayani, 2023). Producing a good piece of writing relies heavily on how the students approach their essay topics. It involves the students' engagement in a recurrent manner where they are not expected to compose and submit complete and polished responses to their writing tasks without first going through phases of drafting and obtaining feedback on their drafts, whether from peers or the teacher, followed by amendments of their evolving texts (Kroll, 1990; Celce-Murcia, 2001). In other words, the composing process is a stage where the writer goes through a recursive process where the cycles of planning, drafting, and editing take place simultaneously to ensure that their writing makes positive progress (Harmer, 2007). Since some second language learners often have significant difficulties with some aspects of academic writing in English, their ability to write well in the target language becomes the denominator that determines their intellectual success in their own field. According to Handayani (2023), the ability to compose an effective paragraph is critical for EFL students in university in order to thrive academically and in their future careers because, to produce an effective paragraph, students must not only grasp the paragraph and its features but also utilise the elements of their subject in their writing. The composing process is crucial in ensuring that the student's writing reflects their capabilities to be successful in their field because writing main ideas and supporting them are the staples of academic writing. Hence, Rahmat (2023) stated that the first stage of writing is the planning stage, as it involves the writer thinking about how he or she plans to respond to the title of the essay and how they plan to expand the main ideas. Therefore, the composing process, as referred to by Flower and Hayes (1981), encompasses the whole essay writing stage.

Academic writing is deemed the most complex process for second-language learners of English because of their limited command of the language and its mechanics, which could

possibly lead to writing anxiety. Handayani (2023) supported the idea that its complexity may be the cause of their inability to write, especially for students whose first language is not English. They often have significant difficulties with some aspects of English grammar that are distinguishable from the problems that native English speakers have. These include choice of article, a, an, or the; word order; prepositions, on, at, in, etc. (Kakhramon et al., 2023). Writing strong academic paragraphs in English requires the writer to have a strong command of the language and an understanding of the structure of its content because they need to fulfill a number of distinct but related tasks such as gathering and ordering content, shaping content into correct and clear expressions, and meeting the genre requirements of the writing (Mahmud & Rahman, 2023). However, achieving cohesivity and ensuring that their writing is syntactically developed proves to be a problem (Harris et al., 2017; Ruscetti et al., 2018; Hamzaoui, 2021), as they face writing difficulties in major aspects of writing in English, such as their lack of vocabulary and understanding of grammar, lack of knowledge on the mechanics of writing (Ferguson et al., 2011; Singh, 2017; Phuong, 2021), the studies' organisation Hanauer & Englander (2013); Komba (2015); Mahammoda (2016); Flowerdew (2019), and genre conventions (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Kao & Reynolds, 2017; Finn, 2018). The errors in identifying appropriate content for their research article would cause the students to either exaggerate or underplay the big claims of their topic and the significance of their study. According to Parry (1998); Thompson (1999), this imbalance has been attributed to the students' limited proficiency in English or failure to consider the expectations of the discourse community (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Mahmud & Rahman, 2023). Having a low command of the English language among second-language learners will also cause them to have writing anxiety where their fear is related to language skills, i.e., writing, speaking, reading, and listening (Jaleel & Rauf, 2023). Horwitz et al (1986) stated that this type of anxiety stemmed from a concern for their performance and a fear of failure. Hence, most students with this difficulty may become tense and less motivated to write. Although it is considered a normal issue and mostly expressed by students, it still has its own effects on learning and is considered one of the major obstacles to obtaining language skills MacIntyre & Gardner (1994); Sawalha & Foo (2013); Jaleel & Rauf (2023) as they will constantly have negative self-perceptions and low self-regulation Calle-Arange & Reyes (2022) on writing a strong and cohesive academic essay. Therefore, academic writing in English is highly challenging for second-language learners, as they need to think of numerous factors that could influence their own understanding and the readers' perceptions of the materials that they have written.

Numerous studies have been done to determine the difficulties in academic writing among second-language learners of English in university. Based on past studies, the patterns of students' difficulties could be influenced by two main factors: the structure of academic writing itself and the students' low English language proficiency. A study conducted by Singh (2016) on the academic writing difficulties faced by non-native English-speaking international graduate students in Malaysia indicated that the respondents found writing the literature review, methodology, and findings/analysis sections, using appropriate academic style, writing coherent paragraphs, and expressing ideas in proper English very difficult compared to writing the introduction, recommendation, conclusion, references/bibliography sections, and references. Similar results highlighting both major influences on difficulties in academic writing were also shown in a study by Aldabbus and Almansouri (2022) to discover the major difficulties in academic writing encountered by some second language learners at a university in Libya. The analysis revealed that both graduate and undergraduate students had problems



choosing the appropriate academic words, developing a thesis statement, organising ideas, and writing coherent paragraphs because they had limited resources, low English language proficiency, and a lack of writing practice opportunities.

The significance of the structure of academic writing and English language proficiency is prominent in determining the students' perceptions and experiences in writing. Badi (2015) conducted a small-scale survey to investigate the academic writing challenges of 20 ESL learners from four nationalities studying at a university in Australia. The results suggested that the most common difficulty is related to language use as well as coherence and cohesion. Apart from that, they also had problems writing in their own voice, finding relevant topics and sources, and referencing. The researcher also concluded that a variety of factors, such as a lack of previous experience and knowledge about the conventions of academic writing, may contribute to those difficulties as well. The two factors are also proven through a study by Low et al (2020) on accessing the ESL writing performance and exploring the language challenges and needs of 45 Malaysian public relations (PR) undergraduate students through purposive sampling. By collecting the students' speech-writing samples and conducting semi-structured interviews, the data were descriptively measured using SPSS, while textual and thematic analyses were conducted to explore the types of errors and students' and teachers' feedback on their writing experiences. One of the significant results showed that the majority of the students scored average grades in their writing exercises, but the main concerns lie in their language, including subject-verb agreement, syntax errors, tenses, language used, prepositions, mechanics, semantics, conjunctions, dangling modifiers, and verb consistency. Furthermore, through the focus group and in-depth interviews that were conducted, the main factors that caused their difficulties in ESL writing were the inability to generate ideas for the purpose of writing as well as difficulties in expressing ideas in written texts due to their poor proficiency in the English language. Hence, based on these findings, the structure or format and lack of English language proficiency are the major factors that make academic writing difficult for most English second language learners.

Academic writing requires writers to go through the composing process in order to produce a piece of writing. Writing challenges are common, and they can arise in a variety of contexts and for a variety of writers. However, many times, it is preconceived ideas about academic writing and its complexities that fear writers (Mahmud & Rahman, 2023). According to Rahmat, et al (2022), the perceived difficulties can lead to the writers' beliefs about the writing process. This belief leads them to form expectations, which in turn influence their writing behaviour and eventually their writing success. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study. This study explores writers' perceptions of writing difficulties using Flower and Hayes's (1981) model of writing difficulty. Next, this study also explores the perception of the composing process. According to Petric & Czalr (2003), writers go through three main stages and they are before writing, while writing, and when revising.

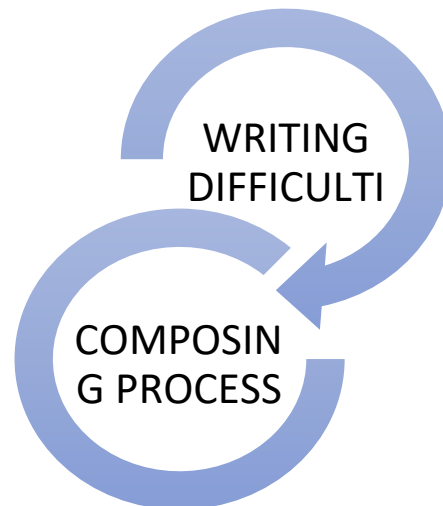


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study-  
 Exploring Writing Difficulties in the Composing Process:  
 A Case Study of ESL Writing

**Methodology**

This quantitative study is done to explore writing difficulties and the perception of the composing process in writing among undergraduates at a public university in Malaysia. A purposive sample of 137 participants responded to an online survey, administered through Google Form. The instrument used is a 5-point Likert-scale survey ranging from 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree. The survey is rooted from Flower and Hayes (1981); Petric and Czalr (2003) to reveal the variables in Table 1 below. The survey consists of 5 sections, which include: (A) respondent demographics - 4 items); (B) Writing difficulties - 7 items); and (C) Composing process (Before-, While-, After writing) 38 items.

Table 1  
*Distribution of Items in the Survey*

| SECTION | CATEGORY             | WRITING STAGE                               |    |    |
|---------|----------------------|---|----|----|
| B       | WRITING DIFFICULTIES | Writing Difficulty (Flower and Hayes, 1981) | 7  | 7  |
| C       | COMPOSING PROCESS    | Before Writing (Petric & Czalr, 2003)       | 9  | 38 |
|         |                      | While writing                               | 13 |    |
|         |                      | When Revising                               | 16 |    |
|         |                      | TOTAL NUMBER OF ITEMS                       |    | 45 |

Table 2  
*Reliability of Survey*

| <b>Reliability Statistics</b> |            |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| Cronbach's Alpha              | N of Items |
| .857                          | 45         |

Table 2 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .857, thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen/used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings that answer the research questions for this study.

### Findings

This section will discuss the findings based on the data from the present study. Figures 2-4 show the demographic profile of UiTM students that took part in this study. The data were tabulated based on gender, discipline, level of study and students' English proficiency.

#### Findings for Demographic Profile

##### Q1 Gender

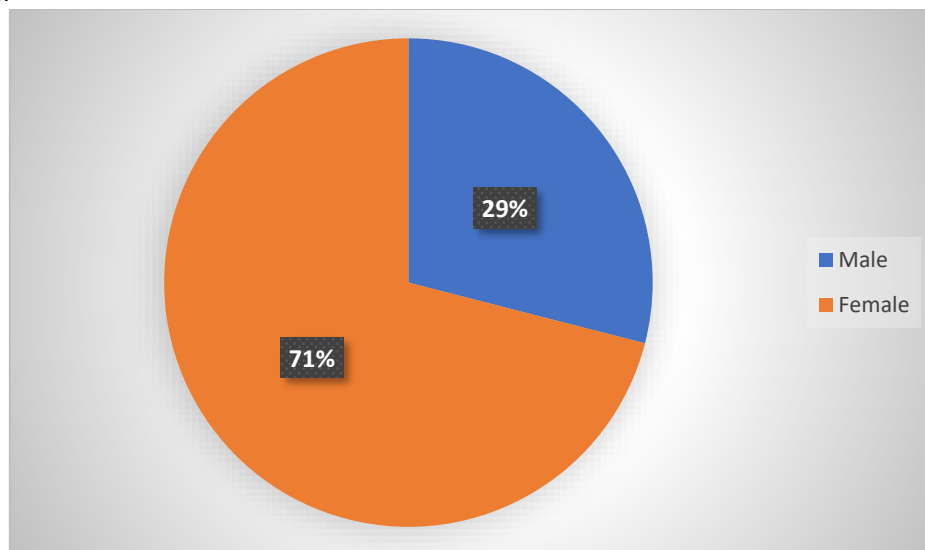


Figure 2- Percentage for Gender

Initially, the project aimed to engage 100 UiTM students; however, due to a positive response, a total of 137 responses were gathered. The increased response rate may be indicative of the project's impact and the genuine interest students hold in the subject matter under investigation.



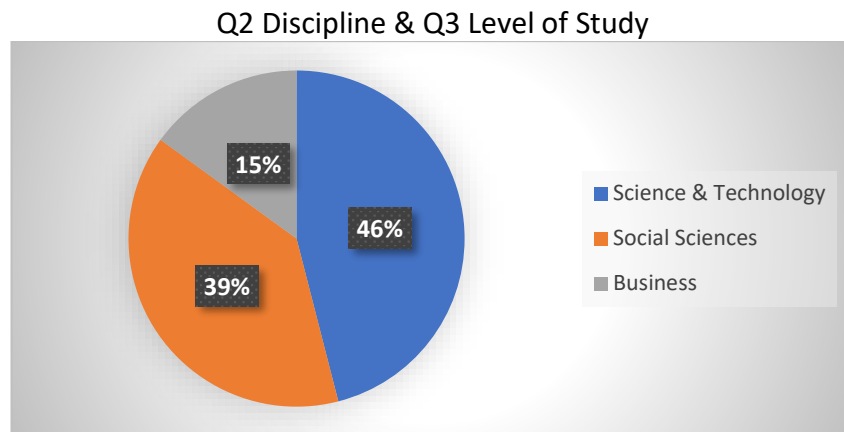


Figure 3- Percentage for Discipline

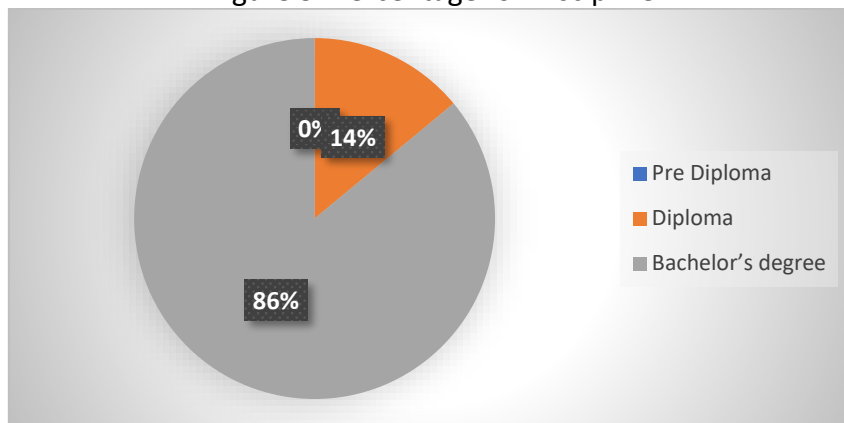


Figure 4- Percentage for Level of Study

Figure 3 presents the percentage of students involved in this study according to their disciplines. A total of 46% of the students enrolled in the field of science and technology and 39% of them have a background in the social sciences. The remaining 15% registered in a discipline related to business. Next, figure 4 presents the level of study. It is worth noting that the majority of the students (86%) are pursuing their bachelor's degrees. While a smaller proportion of them are completing their diplomas (14%).

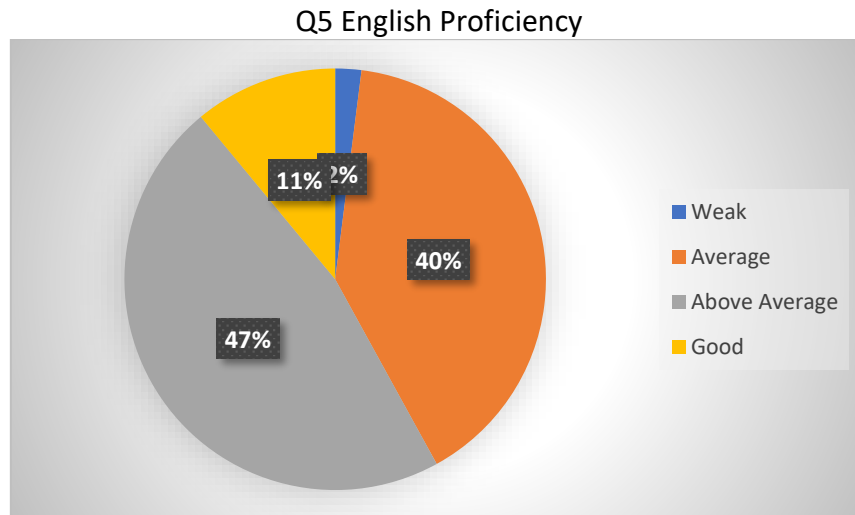


Figure 4- Percentage for English Proficiency

Figure 5 demonstrates that the majority of the students indicated their English proficiency is above average (47%), and 40% reported to possess average English fluency. On the other hand, only 2% of the total students acknowledged having weak English proficiency.

### Findings for Writing Difficulties

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do learners perceive writing difficulties.

#### Writing Difficulty

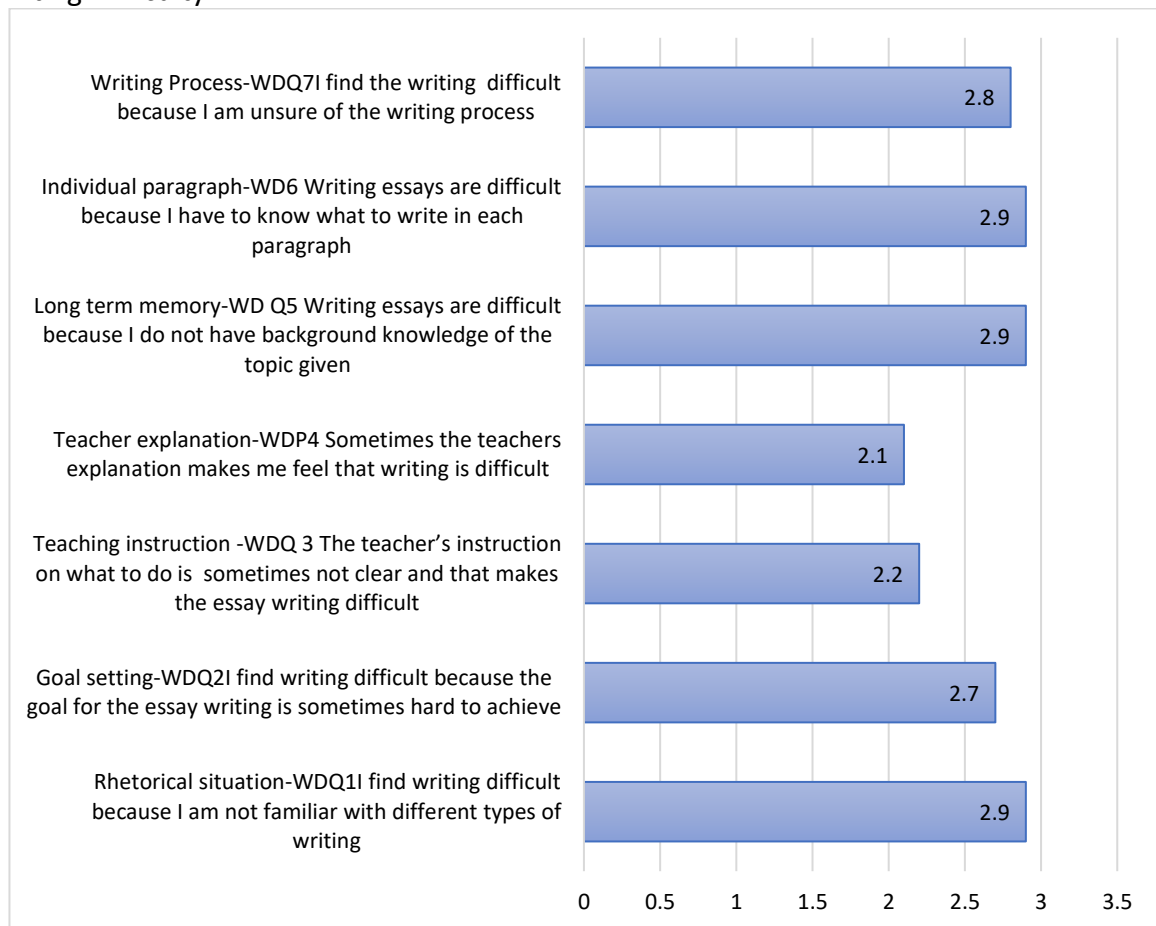


Figure 5- Mean for Writing Difficulty

Figure 5 illustrates the mean scores of the reasons contributing to students' perceived difficulties in writing. The mean scores were established using a five-point Likert scale, where scores ranging from 1.00 to 1.80 indicates "strongly disagree," scores between 1.81 and 2.60 denote "disagree," scores from 2.61 to 3.40 represented "neutral" responses, scores between 3.41 and 4.20 signify "agree," and scores ranging from 4.21 to 5.00 indicate "strongly agree." In questions 1, 5, and 6, a notable trend (a mean score of 2.9 each) emerged where most students neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements presented. A possible explanation for this neutral answer suggests that students might be uncertain about certain aspects of writing or they might not find any difficulties in writing. Interestingly, students reported mean scores of 2.2 and 2.1 respectively, indicating that they strongly do not perceive that the instruction and explanation provided by their teachers have an impact on making the process of their writing more difficult.

### Findings for Composing Process

This section presents data to answer research question 2 - How do learners perceive the composing process? In the context of this study, the Before-, When-, and After-, Writing process has an influence on how learners compose their writing.

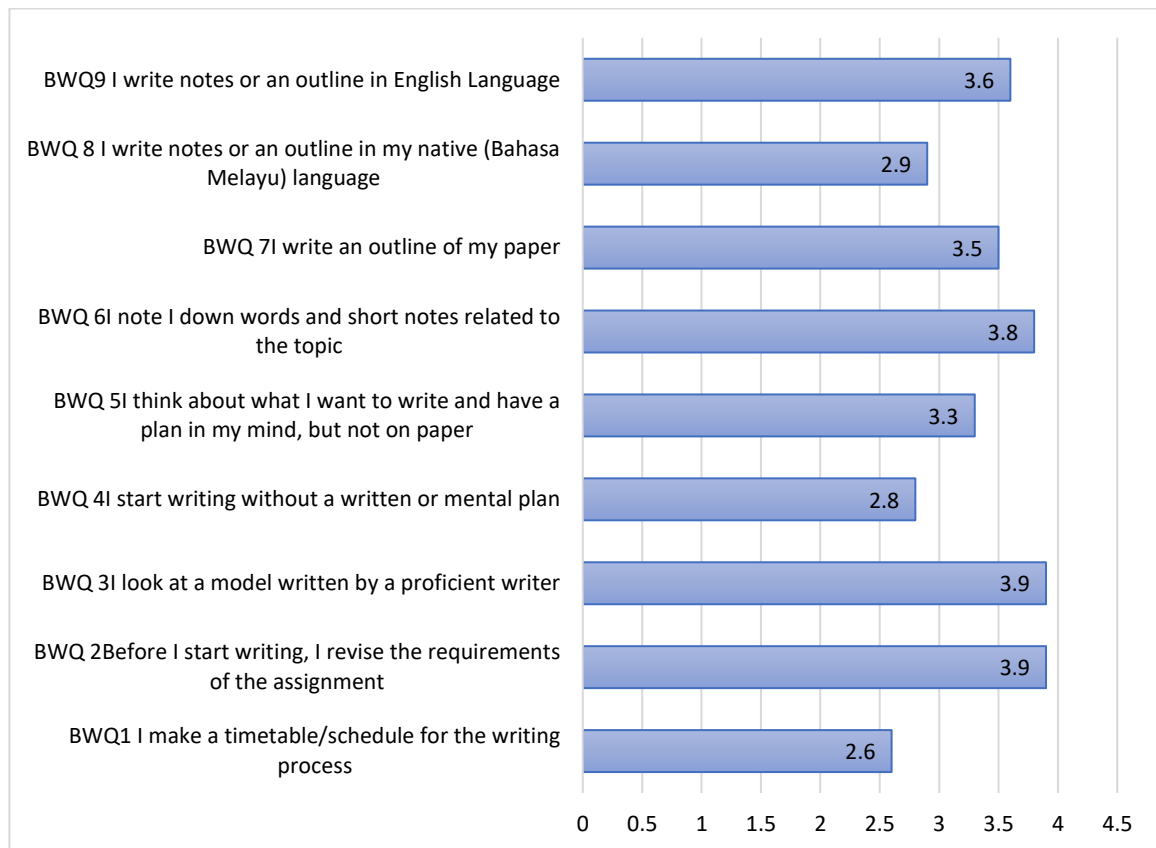


Figure 7- Mean for Before Writing

Figure 7 presents the mean scores for Before Writing. The mean scores were established using a five-point Likert scale, where scores ranging from 1.00 to 1.80 indicate "strongly disagree," scores between 1.81 and 2.60 denote "disagree," scores from 2.61 to 3.40 represented "neutral" responses, scores between 3.41 and 4.20 signify "agree," and scores ranging from 4.21 to 5.00 indicate "strongly agree." The highest mean score is 3.9 for 2 items. The items are "Before I start writing, I revise the requirements of the assignment" and "I look at a model written by a proficient writer". Next, at a mean score of 3.8, is item number 6, which is "I note down words and short notes related to the topic". Finally, the lowest mean score is shown in item number 1, with a mean score of 2.6, which is "I make a timetable/schedule for the writing process".

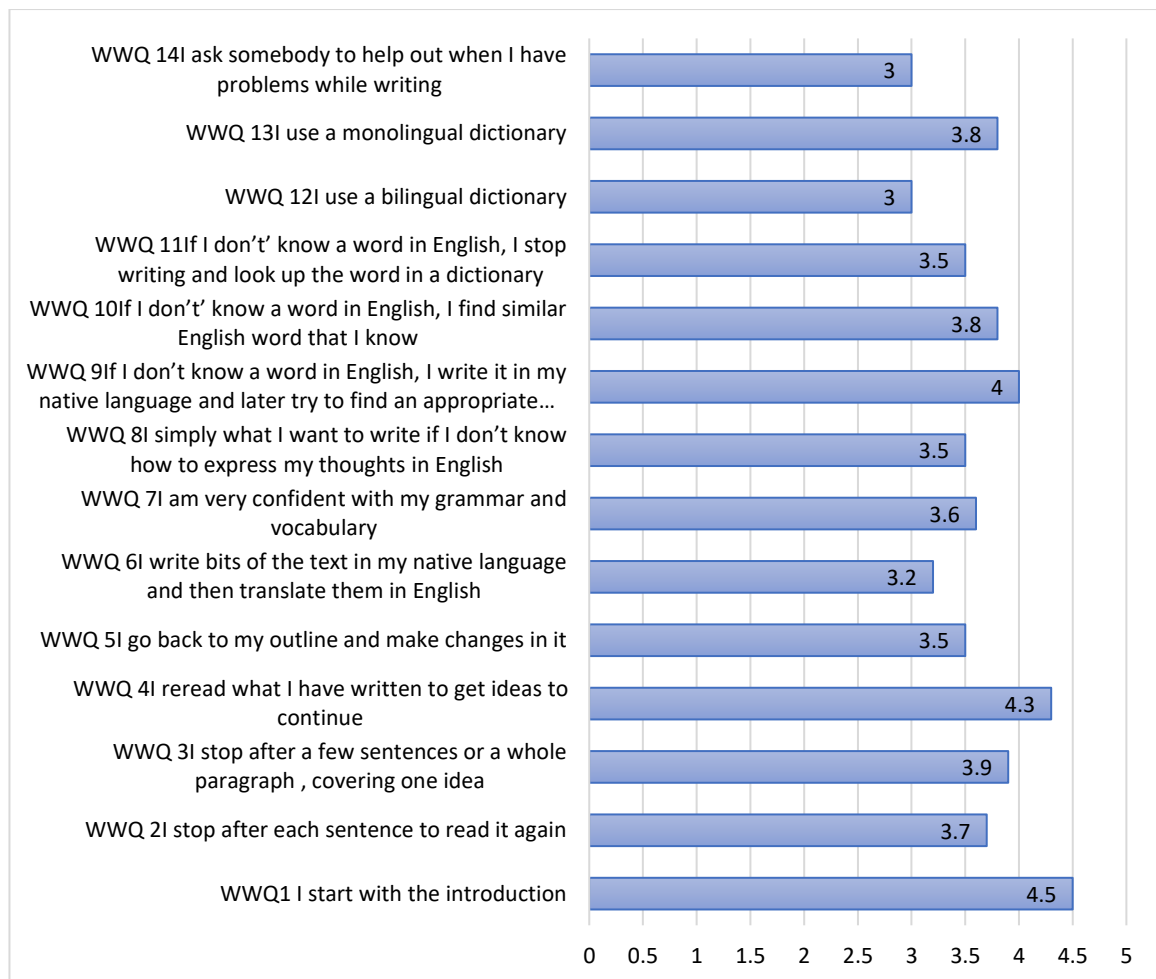


Figure 8- Mean for When Writing

Figure 8 displays the mean scores relating to students' perception of the composing process When Writing (WW) by utilising the similar likert-scale method as Figure 7. The highest mean score as shown in this figure is 4.5, which attributes to the statement "I start with the introduction". The second highest mean score, at 4.3, is item number 4, which ascribes with the statement "I reread what I have written to get ideas to continue". On the contrary, the lowest mean score, at 3, is associated with 2 specific items. These items include statements "I use a bilingual dictionary" and "I ask somebody to help out when I have problems while writing".

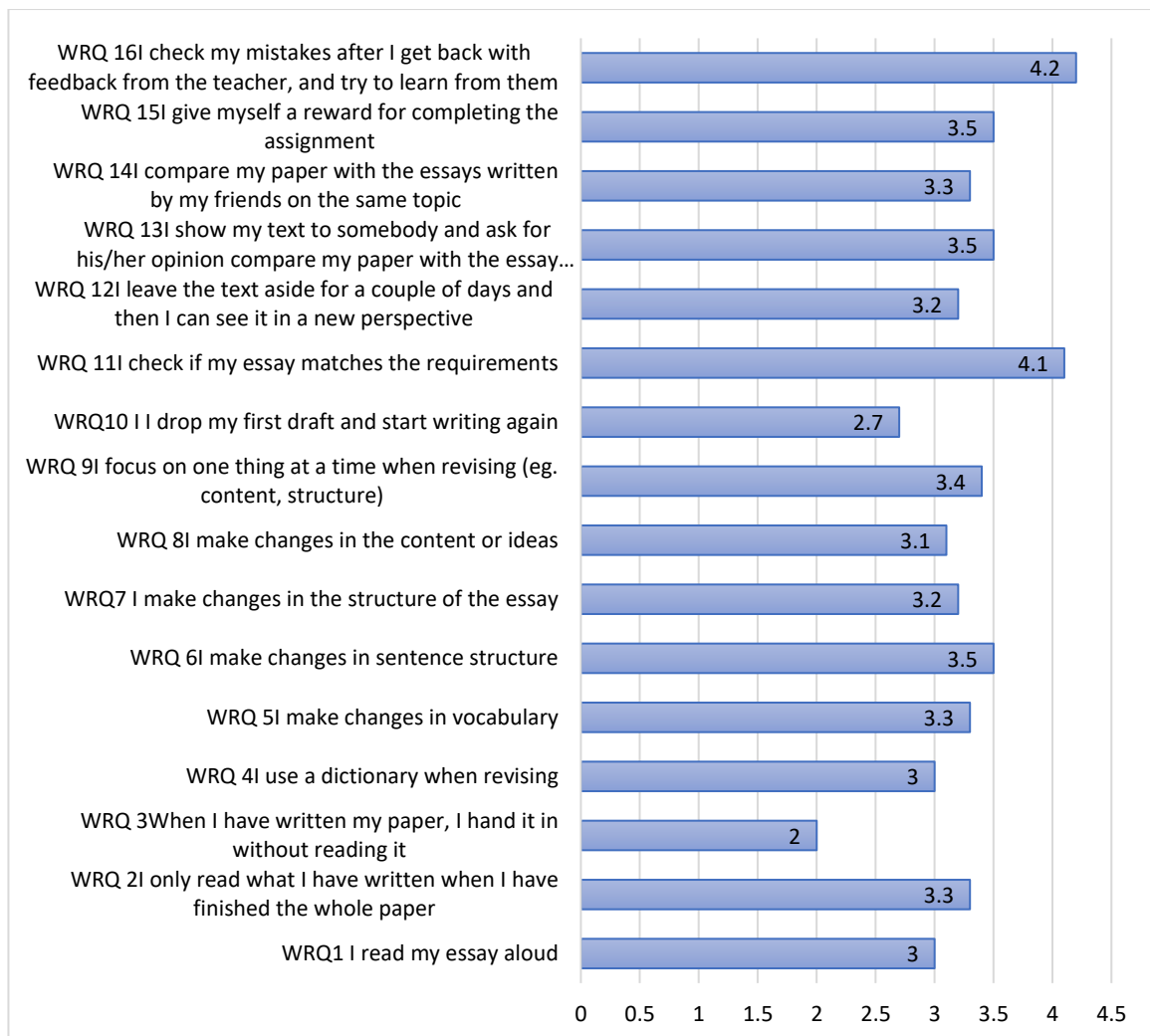


Figure 9- Mean for When Revising

Figure 8 presents the mean scores on the subject of students' perception of the composing process When Revising (WR). The highest mean score is at 4.2, which attributes to the statement "I check my mistakes after I get back with feedback from the teacher, and try to learn from them". Following that is the second highest mean score at 4.1, which associates with the statement "I check if my essay matches the requirements". On the other hand, the lowest mean score, at 2, is item number 3, which is "When I have written my paper, I hand it in without reading it".

### Findings for Relationship between

This section presents data to answer research question 3- Is there a relationship between writing difficulties and the composing process? To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between metacognitive, effort regulation, cognitive, social and affective strategies data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in table 3, 4, and 5 below.



Table 3  
Correlation between Writing Difficulty and Before Writing

|                     |                     | WRITINGDIFFI<br>CULTIES | BEFOREWRITI<br>NG |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| WRITINGDIFFICULTIES | Pearson Correlation | 1                       | -.122             |
|                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                         | .156              |
|                     | N                   | 136                     | 136               |
| BEFOREWRITING       | Pearson Correlation | -.122                   | 1                 |
|                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .156                    |                   |
|                     | N                   | 136                     | 136               |

Table 3 shows there is no association between Writing difficulties and Before writing. The results indicated that the relationship between Writing difficulties and Before writing had a low significance value ( $r = -.122$ ) and ( $p = .156$ ). This means that there is also a weak positive correlation between Writing difficulties and Before writing.

Table 4  
Correlation between Writing Difficulty and While Writing

|                     |                     | WRITINGDIFFI<br>CULTIES | WHILEWRITIN<br>G |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| WRITINGDIFFICULTIES | Pearson Correlation | 1                       | .170*            |
|                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                         | .048             |
|                     | N                   | 136                     | 136              |
| WHILEWRITING        | Pearson Correlation | .170*                   | 1                |
|                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .048                    |                  |
|                     | N                   | 136                     | 136              |

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 shows there is an association between Writing Difficulties and While Writing. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between metacognitive and affective strategies ( $r = .170^*$ ) and ( $p < .000$ ). According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a weak positive relationship between Writing difficulties and While writing.

Table 5

*Correlation between Writing Difficulty and While Revising*

|                     |                     | WRITINGDIFFI<br>CULTIES | WHENREVISI<br>NG |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| WRITINGDIFFICULTIES | Pearson Correlation | 1                       | .092             |
|                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                         | .284             |
|                     | N                   | 136                     | 136              |
| WHENREVISING        | Pearson Correlation | .092                    | 1                |
|                     | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .284                    |                  |
|                     | N                   | 136                     | 136              |

Table 5 shows there is no association between Writing difficulties and When revising. The results indicated that the relationship between Writing Difficulties and When Revising had a low significance value ( $r = 0.92$ ) and ( $p = .285$ ). This means that there is also a weak positive correlation between Writing Difficulties and While Revising.

### Conclusion

The finding of this study has shed light on the various challenges ESL learners in Malaysia encounter when it comes to writing difficulties and writing processes. The findings have indicated that the respondents face hurdles in writing due to inadequate knowledge of the convention of academic writing in tertiary education which is consistent with (Musa et al., 2012; Singh, 2016; Aldabbus and Almansouri, 2022; Mahmud and Rahman, 2023). This could be rooted from the shift of the writing requirements from secondary to tertiary level which requires them to acquire, organize and shape information while adhering to the specification of the targeted writing genre. The result also contradicts with Abas and Aziz (2016); Ceylan (2019) which asserted that writing issues are commonly rooted from the lack of interest in writing activities. Echoing the aforementioned issue, it is also revealed that learners also face the difficulty in achieving the goals of essay writing which typically require students to articulate their thoughts, support their arguments with evidence, and communicate effectively. This is consistent with the underlined categories in Flower and Heyes (2014) the process and content goals where writers aim to narrow the gap between their intentions for the writing process and the successful delivery of information to their intended audience. It is indicated that students often struggle with the complex task of organizing their ideas, preserving coherence, and meeting the specific objectives of the assignment.

The finding further revealed that there is positive inter-correlation between students' writing difficulties during the writing process. This discovery also elucidates the relationship that exists between these issues and the composing phase, highlighting the necessity of both of these factors working together. A closer examination of the writing process undertaken by learners uncovers a critical gap in their approach-specifically, the omission of a fundamental phase: brainstorming and planning. This omission is closely associated with the writing difficulties they subsequently encounter. The respondents of study have indicated a common practice: they would refer to the assignment requirements and immediately commence writing the introduction abandoning the pre-writing strategies. It is imperative to underscore

that during the planning stage Flower & Heyes (1981), writers engage in crucial cognitive processes, including retrieving relevant background knowledge, establishing the trajectory of their thoughts and organizing groups of ideas and discovering new ideas. Students who want to grow as writers must have the abilities to organize information and the ability to manipulate one's linguistic repertoire which is challenging to master without having a plan (Brooks, 2014). Subsequently, neglecting this pivotal step can have significant implications, leading to the production of subpar written work which later reflects one's proficiency and writing competency.

This phenomenon aligns closely with the findings of Alemu's (2019) which revealed a consistent pattern among students who embarked on paragraph development without prior planning. Consequently, these students encountered notable challenges in producing coherent and well-developed textual context and exerted substantial negative influences on the overall writing proficiency of the students. These findings highlight the importance of reinstating the planning phase as an integral component of the writing process to enhance the overall quality of written compositions. Learners who encounter the aforementioned writing difficulties are prone to exhibit struggles when expressing their thoughts in the target language. This corroborates the findings of Mohammadi et al (2022), who also identified a positive correlation between writing difficulties during the composing stage.

### **Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

This research offers valuable pedagogical insights for educators aiming to enhance their students' writing proficiency. One significant implication is the necessity to first instill an awareness about the significance of utilizing idea-generating strategies before embarking on the writing process. These strategies encompass techniques such as brainstorming, clustering and free-writing which serves as effective tools for stimulating creative thinking and idea generation. As students engage with these strategies, they begin to forge connections and organise new concepts in relation to their pre-existing ideas. This process mirrors a form of scaffolding, where educators play pivotal roles in facilitating the transition to familiar to unfamiliar knowledge domain (Palmer & Rowell, 2005). In line with the understanding that writing is an intricate process, it is imperative to emphasize the value of sequential journey in composing well-developed and coherent written texts. This research has proven that rushing into the writing phase without a structured plan has been identified as the cause of numerous challenges faced by students in their writing endeavors. Consequently, the implementation following the sequence of writing compositions issues paramount importance to enhance the learners' overall writing competence.

This research also presents several avenues for future investigation. Firstly, the current study primarily focuses on students' writing difficulties as assessed through a questionnaire. However, for a more profound understanding of the underlying causes of these challenges, it would be beneficial to incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews and observations. These approaches can provide valuable insights into the pedagogical implications necessary to address each issue effectively. Additionally, this research omits consideration of other critical factors, such as the levels of proficiency and writing apprehension Maringe & Jenkins (2015); Akhtar et al (2020) experienced by students during the writing process. As highlighted by Lee et al (2015), students with lower proficiency levels may derive greater benefits from lectures or peer feedback in their writings. Therefore, future research could explore the

relationship between anxiety and writing performance to inform instructional strategies that cater to students' emotional states. Additionally, it is important to note that this study did not include comparative analysis of academic writing between genders. There is an opportunity for future research to undertake comparative studies, investigating the potential influences of gender on the experiences of academic writing challenges. This could provide an understanding of the distinct composing stages and strategies employed by both genders to yield valuable insights into gender-related disparities in academic performance and potential factors contributing to these differences. Lastly, to enhance the validity of the findings, future studies should aim for a more extensive and diverse participant pool, allowing for the generalisation of results to broader populations.

In essence, the theoretical contribution of this study encourages a two-fold approach: first, by highlighting the importance of the planning stage Flower & Heyes (2021), and second, by advocating for the integration of the 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning through collaborative writing tools (Lo Yuok & Melor, 2021). In classroom, instructors can adopt various collaborative writing tools such as Google Docs, Mind Mapping, WhatsApp etc. They are widely utilised platforms that play a significant role in promoting writing skill development among learners through collaborative efforts with peers. Also, these tools facilitate interaction both in virtual and physical environments, removing the constraints associated with time and location. By incorporating a structured planning stage and collaborative writing tools, ESL educators can create a pedagogical framework that addresses both the individual preparation needed for effective writing and the collaborative aspects that foster autonomy and peer interaction in ESL learners. This theoretical perspective contributes to the ongoing discourse on ESL writing instruction, providing a foundation for innovative and effective teaching practices in diverse learning environments.

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