

Academic Writing: Attitudes and Self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is an indispensable requirement at tertiary level. The relationship between writing skills and attitudes towards writing has received much attention from scholars. However, less is known about how EFL learners' attitudes towards academic writing are correlated with their self-efficacy in this particular skill. Thus, the present study aims at examining this relationship among third-year English major learners at a university in Ho Chi Minh City. A total of 89 learners participated in the study by completing a questionnaire. Data collected were analyzed using quantitative methods. Results showed that there was no difference in academic writing self-efficacy among the participants whereas the females felt more positive about their academic writing compared to the males. Notably, a correlation exists between academic writing attitudes and self-efficacy. These findings confirmed the need of raising teachers' awareness of motivational factors that can increase academic writing attitudes and self-efficacy among EFL learners.

Keywords: academic writing; attitudes; self-efficacy; gender; EFL learners

1 Introduction

Writing is regarded as one of the fundamental channels for people to manifest themselves personally and publicly, to communicate with others, to investigate thoughts and feelings, and to live and contribute as citizens (Richards & Renandya, as cited in Lestari et al., 2018). When it comes to higher education, academic writing is important since learners are assessed mostly by their performance in written tasks and examinations (Leki & Carson, 1994). Attitudes towards writing were found to play a crucial role in writing competence and writing achievement (Graham et al., 2007). What's more? Pajares and Valiante (1997, p.353) pointed out that if learners "have confidence in their capabilities to write essays", they may "feel less apprehensive about writing". This belief is based on the concept of self-efficacy developed by Bandura (1997). In the literature, it was generally accepted that there exist positive correlations between writing self-efficacy and attitudes towards writing (Bulut, 2017; Maze & Moukarzel, 2018). However, there have not been enough studies specific to academic writing. That leads to the present study with the aims of determining whether academic writing attitudes and self-efficacy are different among EFL learners with regard to gender and examining whether a correlation exists between these two variables.

2 Literature Review

Although belonging to the same group of productive skills, writing is more complex and abstract than speaking because it requires audiences to understand and interpret what has been written (Gunning, 1998). Academic writing bears its own features that distinguish it from other types of writing since it is formulated to learners at the medium level of college and universities in order to do tasks or assignments in particular coursework (Bailey, 2003; Oshima & Hogue, 2006). Hartley (2008) described academic writing as a style of expression that researchers use to clarify the intellectual limits of their disciplines and specific areas of expertise. Additionally, academic writing is where people express thoughts in a logical and critical way (Horkoff & McLean, 2015).



Attitude is defined as “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object” and are said to be a “complex system consisting of a person’s beliefs about the object, his feelings toward the object, and his action tendencies with respect to the object” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p.6, 340). Attitudes towards writing, in particular, reflect the feelings that writers have about their writing, which mostly ranges from “happy” to “unhappy” (Graham et al., 2007). From another perspective, attitudes are considered as evaluative orientations towards “the act or result of composing”, which is shown in students’ feelings and beliefs such as “I think my writing is good”, “Even though it is difficult at times, I enjoy writing.” (Rose, 1984, p.7). Many studies have confirmed that gender does affect one’s attitudes towards writing. Specifically, girls were found to have more positive attitudes towards writing than boys (Graham et al., 2007; Hansen, 2000; Knudson, 1993).

Regarding self-efficacy, it is a cognitive concept that was defined as “individuals’ judgments of their abilities in organizing and conducting actions necessary to achieve a certain level of performance in an area” (Bandura, 1986, p.94). Bandura (1982) stated that self-efficacy is essential for people to achieve goals because it not only determines the amount of effort and time people will devote and persist when facing obstacles or aversive experiences but also influences their thoughts and emotional reactions to environments. Research has confirmed that a person with high self-efficacy would devote more effort to pursuing his goals (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Bandura (1982) also described the self-efficacy mechanism as that those who hold high self-efficacy beliefs will have a gut feeling about how well they can conduct actions needed to handle future situations.

A person’s self-efficacy can be influenced by four sources (Bandura, 1997). First, performance accomplishments, or under a different term called “mastery experience” by Pajares (1997), deal with the effects that successes or failures of conducting an activity are likely to raise or lower people’s confidence respectively. Second, vicarious experience shows a person how seeing others perform certain behaviors possibly generates expectations that if he persists in his efforts, he can be successful and eventually feel more confident. Next, self-efficacy can be inspired by verbal persuasions from outsiders such as “we can do things and so do you”. Physiological states, finally, carry “informative value concerning personal competency” (p.198) such as people feeling more confident in themselves if they are not stressed or anxious. When relating self-efficacy to writing, there also exists another term called “self-evaluation” to refer to specific situations in which people judge pieces of writing according to some criteria of effective writing (e.g. Beach, 1976; McCarthy et al., 1985). Pajares et al. (2006, p.142) considered students’ self-perceptions of their own writing competence as self-efficacy and supported the view that low self-efficacy beliefs are the “explanation for why students’ writing motivation and achievement can diminish as they pursue their education”. One’s confidence in his capabilities of doing something is a key viewpoint in the work by Bandura (1982). That is why confidence when performing writing skills is the concentration of The Writing Skills Self-Efficacy Scale that was developed by Shell et al. (1989). In line with this, Chitez et al. (2015) measured students’ academic writing self-efficacy in terms of how confident they felt in mastering particular academic writing competence. Personal characteristics such as gender have also been examined in self-efficacy. J. D. Williams and Takaku (2011) stated that there was no difference in writing self-efficacy among participants with regard to gender. On the contrary, Cordeiro et al. (2018) and Demirel and Aydin (2019) agreed that girls consistently had higher self-efficacy than boys.

The relationship between writing attitudes and self-efficacy has also caught the attention of scholars. For example, Sarkhoush (2013) conducted this examination among IELTS learners and found a positive correlation between these two variables. Furthermore, the author also confirmed that those who had positive attitudes towards and high self-efficacy in writing performed considerably better than those who held negative attitudes and low self-efficacy respectively. Similar results were also found in the studies of

Bulut (2017), Maze and Moukarzel (2018), and H. M. Williams (2012) although their participants are different in grades. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of studies specific to learners' attitudes towards their academic writing competence since this writing genre has its own conventions and requires particular research skills that EFL learners should need in the process of producing high-quality pieces of academic writing. Those skills may be related to issues such as finding relevant literature about a topic, discussing theories, and supporting one's point of view (Chitez et al., 2015).

3 Methodology

The study involves 89 third-year English major students at a university in Ho Chi Minh City of which there are 19 males and 70 females. A 21-item questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire includes two main parts, namely Part A and Part B. Part A consists of seven items about attitudes towards academic writing that were adapted from the study of Rose (1984). These five-point Likert scale items require the participants to indicate the frequency of positive feelings about their academic writing that ranges from "Almost never (0 to 10% of the time)" to "Almost always (90 to 100% of the time)". The remaining items in Part B aim at measuring the degree of confidence that the participants have in their academic writing capabilities. These items were adapted from the study of Chitez et al. (2015) based on a five-point Likert scale starting from "Not at all confident" to "Very confident". The questionnaire was piloted by four EFL learners who came from the same cohort as those in the sample. Those four learners were certainly excluded from the official data collection. Their feedback confirmed that the content and wording of the questionnaire were clear and understandable, which allowed the researcher to distribute the questionnaire to the whole sample.

4 Results and Discussion

SPSS version 22 was used for data analysis. The Cronbach Alpha of the academic writing attitudes is .709. As presented in Table 1, since all the Corrected Item-Total Correlations are greater than .3, all of the items are kept for the scale (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 1: *Cronbach's Alpha of the academic writing attitudes scale*

	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
1. Even though it is difficult at times, I enjoy academic writing.	.494	.655
2. I've seen some really good academic writing, and my academic writing match up to it.	.374	.687
3. I like having the opportunity to express my ideas in academic writing.	.434	.673
4. My teachers are familiar with so much bad academic writing that my writing must look good by comparison.	.330	.696
5. I think my academic writing is good.	.490	.657
6. I think of my instructors reacting to my academic writing in a positive way.	.314	.703
7. Academic writing is a very pleasant experience for me.	.499	.655

Concerning the reliability of the academic writing self-efficacy scale, the Cronbach's Alpha is at .898. As shown in Table 2, all of the items' Corrected Item-Total Correlations are greater than .3 (Nunnally, 1978),

which means that all the items are accepted in the scale. Therefore, the two scales in the questionnaire are reliable (Adadan & Savasci, 2011).

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha of the academic writing self-efficacy scale

	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
1. Finding the relevant literature about a topic	.708	.886
2. Summarizing research sources	.727	.885
3. Referring to sources	.592	.891
4. Dealing critically with a subject	.694	.886
5. Discussing theories	.615	.890
6. Expressing yourself precisely	.436	.897
7. Supporting one's own point of view	.533	.893
8. Planning the writing process	.581	.891
9. Handling writing problems and writing crises	.543	.893
10. Structuring a paper	.493	.895
11. Finding the right style for academic texts	.584	.891
12. Using the right terminology	.637	.889
13. Revising a text to make it linguistically correct	.584	.891
14. Keeping to schedule	.497	.895

As part of the study's data analysis, each item was examined to identify if data is normally distributed. Results showed that all the items have the absolute values of skewness between -2 to +2 and kurtosis between -7 to +7, which indicates a normal distribution of data (Hair et al., 2010). ANOVA was then run to examine whether there is any difference in academic writing attitudes and self-efficacy among the participants in terms of gender.

Gender and Academic Writing Attitudes

The descriptive statistics in Table 3 showed that the mean scores of academic writing attitudes among the male participants ($M=3.0451$, $SD=.36902$) are different from the group of females ($M=3.2837$, $SD=.33656$).

Table 3: Mean scores of academic writing attitudes

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	3.0451	.36902	.08466	2.8673	3.2230
Female	3.2837	.33656	.04023	3.2034	3.3639
Total	3.2327	.35544	.03768	3.1579	3.3076

Results in one-way ANOVA confirmed the preliminary result above. As shown in Table 4, the significance of Levene's test is greater than .05 ($p=.246$) indicating that the data are homogeneous and do not need to be transformed. According to Table 5, the probability of F-ratio is smaller than .05 ($p=.009$), which means that there is a statistically significant difference between the groups of males and females in academic writing attitudes. Specifically, the mean score of the females was higher than that of the males. This result may not be surprising since many studies have confirmed that girls hold more positive attitudes towards writing than boys across ages (e.g., Graham et al., 2007; Hansen, 2000; Knudson, 1993).

Table 4: Test of Homogeneity of variances

Academic writing attitudes			
Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
1.362	1	87	.246

Table 5: Anova test of academic writing attitudes

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.850	1	.850	7.207	.009
Within Groups	10.267	87	.118		
Total	11.118	88			

It is also worth noticing that the mean score of all the participants in this aspect is 3.2327, which indicates that although the participants are English majors, they just sometimes had positive attitudes toward academic writing. In fact, to many people, writing in our first language is also a battle. Writing in a second language even requires much more effort. That is why people, in general, may not like to write.

Gender and Academic Writing Self-Efficacy

According to Table 6, the confidence that the participants had in their academic writing competence is above average (M=3.4205, SD=.51344). At the time of data collection, the participants were already equipped with knowledge related to research skills and the requirements of a good essay. Therefore, the mean scores were not as good as the author of the present study expected. This is possibly due to learners not spending enough time practicing writing skills. They may only write if they were assigned writing tasks or they have to prepare for examinations. Besides, the male participants (M=3.4286, SD=.50395) felt quite the same as their female peers (M=3.4184, SD=.51955).

Table 6: Mean scores of academic writing self-efficacy

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	3.4286	.50395	.11561	3.1857	3.6715
Female	3.4184	.51955	.06210	3.2945	3.5422
Total	3.4205	.51344	.05442	3.3124	3.5287

Table 7 shows that the probability of Levene’s test is non-significant ($p=.882>.05$), which allows the study to use the result of ANOVA test in Table 8 to confirm whether there is a difference between the males and females in academic writing self-efficacy. The probability of F-ratio is $p=.225$ which is greater than .05 critical values. That is interpreted as no statistical difference in academic writing self-efficacy between the males and the females

Table 7: Test of Homogeneity of Variances

Academic writing self-efficacy			
Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.022	1	87	.882

Table 8: *Anova test of academic writing self-efficacy*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.354	1	.354	1.496	.225
Within Groups	20.556	87	.236		
Total	20.909	88			

This result is in line with that of the study by J. D. Williams and Takaku (2011). The participants in the present study are young adults who were taught about techniques and methods used in producing a piece of academic writing such as how to find and synthesis related sources and how to express their opinions precisely. In the meanwhile, the undergraduate learners in the study of J. D. Williams and Takaku were required to attend an advanced writing class in their bachelor programs. In other words, the participants in these two studies, no matter their gender, had an equal chance to obtain needed knowledge of academic writing, which possibly is a base for them to believe in their capabilities to do academic writing. In contrast, both studies of Cordeiro et al. (2018) and Demirel and Aydin (2019) agreed that gender did affect writing self-efficacy. A common feature between these two studies is the participants' characteristics. Because those learners were still in general education (grades 4-9 and 9-10 respectively), they might not take English as seriously as those who are English major university learners. That may account for the difference in writing with respect to gender.

The Relationship between Academic Writing Attitudes and Self-Efficacy

As shown in Table 9, the exact significance level is .000 and is reported as being $p < .05$. That means a correlation exists between academic writing attitudes and self-efficacy. The Pearson correlation coefficient $r = .571$ indicates that the correlation is quite strong.

Table 9: *Correlation between academic writing attitudes and self-efficacy*

		Academic writing attitudes	Academic writing self-efficacy
Academic writing attitudes	Pearson Correlation	1	.571**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	89	89
Academic writing self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.571**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	89	89

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This result is consistent with many other studies in the literature regardless of the gender of the participants. Although the participants are IELTS Writing learners (Sarkhoush, 2013), or primary and secondary learners who are not trained enough in academic writing (Bulut, 2017; Mazeh & Moukarzel, 2018; H. M. Williams, 2012), a positive correlation still exists between writing attitudes and self-efficacy in general. This strong connection is essential in boosting learners to conduct certain behaviors in academic writing. According to Ajzen (1991), attitudes do affect a person's intention in performing certain behaviors. In the meanwhile, Bandura (1986) raised the role of self-efficacy judgments in affecting one's performance. As a result, both strong self-efficacy and positive attitudes towards academic writing are optimum conditions for learners to do well in academic writing. In other words, this strong relationship may indicate that if one variable is strong, the other will be strong as well. These two factors will certainly have great impact on learners' writing achievement. That is why teachers may pay more attention to motivational factors that can improve learners' academic writing attitudes and strengthen their beliefs in their capabilities to do this kind of writing.

5 Conclusions

The main goals of this study were to determine whether academic writing attitudes and self-efficacy are different among EFL learners regarding gender and to examine whether a correlation exists between these two variables. Results showed that although gender had no connection with academic writing self-efficacy, this characteristic was found to be a factor that distinguishes academic writing attitudes among the participants. Markedly, EFL teachers may find effective ways to enhance those two aspects and ultimately help learners to be more successful in doing academic writing. Since the study focused on English majors at one university, which did not give a complete picture of the use of academic writing in other fields. Further studies may extend generalizability by investigating this topic with a greater number of participants who also use English in academic environments. Besides, researchers can go deeper into how four sources, namely mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasions, and physiological states, affect EFL learners' self-efficacy in academic writing.

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