



## Exploring ESL Students' Writing Development in the Higher Education ODL Programme

Siti Soraya Lin Abdullah Kamal\*  
sorayalin@usm.my  
School of Distance Education  
University Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

Corresponding author\*

Received: 31 December 2023

Accepted: 1 April 2024

Published: 25 May 2024

### CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kamal, S. S. L. A. K. (2024). Exploring ESL Students' Writing Development in the Higher Education ODL Programme. *Journal of Creative Practices in Language Learning and Teaching*, 12(1), 149-166. <https://doi.10.24191/cplt.v12i1.25240>

### ABSTRACT

Limited research investigates the experiences of ESL students developing writing proficiency in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) settings at the higher education level in Malaysia. This study addresses this gap by exploring ESL students' perceptions and experiences regarding confidence, challenges, and strategies for writing development in ODL programmes. Utilizing qualitative methods, the research examines how ODL environments influence student experiences. Interviews with 30 ODL students were conducted and analyzed using a thematic approach. Findings reveal diverse confidence levels linked to factors like family background, English exposure, and the learning environment. Students also face challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and formal writing tasks. To overcome these obstacles, students employ strategies such as extensive reading, engaging with English media, seeking feedback, and persistent practice. The study highlights the global significance of English and the impact of cultural and family contexts on ESL writing development. By recognizing the interconnected ecological factors shaping students' writing journeys, ODL institutions can develop tailored support programmes and promote cultural inclusivity, ultimately enhancing ESL students' writing development in ODL contexts.

**Keywords:** Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory; ESL students; higher education; open and distance learning; writing development



## INTRODUCTION

The mastery of English as a Second Language (ESL) has become increasingly crucial in our interconnected world. English serves as a global lingua franca, facilitating communication, education, and professional development across cultures and borders. Malaysia, like many other nations, has embraced a transformative educational vision outlined in national policy documents, such as the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2023-2025 (PEMANDU, 2013). This blueprint underscores the nation's commitment to nurturing a knowledgeable, skilled, and globally competitive citizenry. In line with this vision, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes, initiated in 1971 by Universiti Sains Malaysia, have become a prevalent trend. These programmes offer flexibility and accessibility, making them increasingly popular amongst students (Zakaria et al., 2004).

The ODL programme, characterised by the physical separation of students and instructors in time and place (Muda & Bit-Lian, 2019), leverages technology for advantages such as easy access, flexibility, cost reduction, and increased competitiveness and effectiveness (Ahmad & Kosnin, 2008). ODL has been recognised as a way to expand higher education, especially in developing countries, and can effectively reach learners who have limited access to traditional educational settings (Farid, 2022; Mansoor et al., 2022; Uchenna & Hashim, 2021). Nonetheless, past research highlights the struggles of students in ODL environments, including technical issues and access problems, and the absence of uniform technology use (Abdullah & Alias, 2006; Scott et al., 2018; Syafrianti, 2021). Therefore, successful engagement in online learning activities, including English writing, requires ODL students to possess high motivation, self-efficacy, proper time management, goal-setting abilities, and perseverance (Alkış & Temizel, 2018; Broadbent, 2017; Kizilcec et al., 2017; Imani & Emaliana, 2021).

Writing skill is a cornerstone of academic achievement and professional success, involving thoughtful choices regarding vocabulary, structure, drafting, and editing (Shuvra & Roy, 2023). Writing is a complex and multifaceted activity requiring a creative and iterative process where students continually review, evaluate, respond, and progress (Hedge, 2014). Besides, academic writing in English is a fundamental skill for university students, demanding not only the ability to generate ideas but also to craft coherent, logical, and understandable texts (Khadawardi, 2022; Zakaria et al., 2021). Research has shown that writing skills pose particular challenges for ESL students, demanding organisation and development of ideas (Thi & Anh, 2019).

Studies have identified additional challenges for ESL students learning writing in ODL environments. Technical difficulties and unreliable internet connections can hinder their learning (Scott et al., 2018; Syafrianti, 2021). Distractions can also pose a problem for students working on writing assignments (Cheng & Tsai, 2011). Even students with strong academic skills can struggle in online writing, requiring additional support and guidance from instructors (Stella & Corry, 2013). Some students also experience feelings of isolation (Qunayeer, 2020) due to limited face-to-face interaction (Murugiah & Thang, 2010).

Research in the field of academic writing holds significant importance (Khadawardi, 2022). While studies have been conducted in international and local contexts, there is dearth of



research focused on understanding the experiences of ODL students in Malaysia. Therefore, this study embarks on a comprehensive exploration of ESL students' perceptions, challenges, and strategies in developing writing proficiency, specifically focusing on the ODL higher education context in Malaysia. By shedding light on the experiences of these students, the researcher aims to bridge the existing gap in literature and provide valuable insights into the factors that shape their writing journeys. Understanding their perceptions of writing, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ is crucial for tailoring educational approaches that meet their needs and align with the CEFR roadmap and the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2023-2025 (Council of Europe, 2020; PEMANDU, 2013). To achieve these objectives, this research centres on two research questions: 1) How do ESL students perceive their own writing abilities, and what factors contribute to their writing confidence or lack thereof, and 2) What are the most common challenges ESL students encounter when developing their writing skills, and what strategies do they employ to overcome these challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding ESL writing offers a comprehensive exploration of students' experiences, difficulties and approaches in the field of scholarly writing. This review critically analyses key studies, aiming to summarise findings, identify trends, and shed light on research gaps. Additionally, this section elaborates on the theoretical framework used to lens the study of ODL students' ESL writing development.

Research consistently highlights the multidimensional nature of difficulties faced by ESL students in academic writing (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019). Limited vocabulary restricts expression and leads to grammatical errors (Misbah et al., 2017). Beyond grammar, students grapple with organizing ideas, selecting appropriate topics, comprehending references, and critiquing existing research (Heo & Sim, 2015; Qasem & Zayid, 2019; Mahmood, 2020; Shakib Kotamjani & Hussin, 2017). These challenges are further influenced by educational backgrounds, prior experiences, and contextual factors (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019). Traditional, exam-oriented teaching methods often stifle creativity and hinder the development of original ideas (Akhter, 2016). Insufficient motivation and a focus on grammar correction over creative expression exacerbate these issues (Patwary & Sajib, 2018). As Vorobel and Kim (2011) emphasize, the intricate interplay of personal, textual, and linguistic factors shapes students' writing experiences. Recognizing these complexities and aligning teaching methods with student needs is crucial for effective ESL instruction (Ismail, 2011). Studies like Wan's (2014) exploration of metaphor-oriented interventions offer promising avenues for enhancing understanding of academic writing.

Understanding students' beliefs and writing self-efficacy is critical. Research by Zumbrunn et al. (2020) reveals a multidimensional nature of writing self-efficacy, highlighting its impact on writing outcomes. Their findings suggest that students with a higher belief in their ability to follow writing rules demonstrate better self-regulation and achieve greater success. Conversely, Akhtar et al. (2020) point out that academic challenges contribute to writing apprehension, leading to diminished interest in engagement. Notably, students often view English writing solely as a means to achieve high grades in exams, overlooking its broader significance for professional success (Akhtar et al., 2020; Khadawardi, 2022). However, studies



by Ismail (2011) reveal that students generally hold positive views regarding ESL writing courses, suggesting a willingness to engage with this skill when its importance is effectively communicated.

While the review has focused on broader ESL writing challenges, specific difficulties arise in ODL environments. Several studies delve into these challenges faced by ODL students internationally and in Malaysia (Musingafi et al., 2015; Joubert & Snyman, 2018; Dzakiria, 2012). Time management is a significant hurdle for adult learners juggling work, family, and studies (Musingafi et al., 2015). Limited internet access, lack of essential devices, and inadequate digital literacy skills further hinder engagement with online learning materials (Joubert & Snyman, 2018). The absence of face-to-face interactions can lead to social isolation and a diminished sense of belonging (Harrison et al., 2018). Inadequate student support services can exacerbate these feelings, leaving students feeling stranded and hindering their motivation (Joubert & Snyman, 2018). Unclear assessment criteria, inconsistent grading, and delayed feedback can also create confusion and hinder progress (Musingafi et al., 2015). Finally, ODL demands a high degree of self-discipline and time management. Procrastination can result in incomplete assignments and hinder academic success (Dzakiria, 2012).

This review highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by ESL students in academic writing and the importance of developing effective teaching strategies tailored to their needs. The studies reviewed agree that students' backgrounds, beliefs, and self-efficacy should be considered when designing instruction. Innovative pedagogical methods and a focus on fostering creativity alongside grammar skills are crucial. Furthermore, the studies on ODL environments (Musingafi et al., 2015; Joubert & Snyman, 2018; Dzakiria, 2012) highlight the need for improved support systems, particularly for aspects like time management, digital literacy, and social interaction. However, research specifically focused on the ODL context in Malaysia remains scarce (Dzakiria, 2012). This gap in knowledge presents a significant barrier to understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by ESL students in this learning environment. While the broader literature on ODL environments offers valuable insights, the specific cultural and educational context of Malaysia necessitates further investigation.

### *Theoretical framework*

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate interplay between individuals and their surrounding environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Rooted in the concept of nested systems, this theory delineates four crucial levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The microsystem encapsulates the immediate interactions of an individual, such as family, teachers, and peers, profoundly shaping their learning experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). The mesosystem delves into the interconnections between these microsystems, emphasizing the influence of relationships across different settings, like the bond between home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hayes et al., 2017). Moving outward, the exosystem encompasses settings in which the individual is not directly involved but is impacted by events within, like parental workplaces and educational policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Jaeger, 2012). At the broadest level, the macrosystem represents the societal norms, beliefs, and cultural values that influence all the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).



Bronfenbrenner's model provides a valuable framework for understanding the multifaceted influences shaping ESL writing development in ODL contexts. This theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of an individual's environment across multiple levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). By analyzing these levels, we gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies that influence ESL students' writing in ODL settings. **Microsystem:** The microsystem encompasses the immediate environment in which students directly interact. In the context of ESL writing and ODL, this includes interactions with online instructors who provide feedback and guidance, as well as virtual peers who can offer support and collaboration opportunities. The quality of these interactions significantly impacts student motivation, engagement, and ultimately, their writing development. **Mesosystem:** The mesosystem focuses on the connections between different microsystems. In ODL, the link between home and the online learning platform is crucial. Parental involvement, support, and expectations regarding online writing tasks can significantly influence student effort and engagement. Conversely, a lack of support or inadequate technology access at home can create challenges. **Exosystem:** The exosystem refers to settings that indirectly influence the student. University policies and regulations regarding online writing instruction, as well as the availability of online resources and support services (e.g., writing labs, technical support), all fall under this category. Limited access to such resources can hinder student progress (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). **Macrosystem:** The macrosystem encompasses broader societal factors that shape educational opportunities. Cultural values and attitudes towards education, technology use, and the importance of English language proficiency all influence ESL students' experiences with ODL writing.

Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the reciprocal nature of these systems is crucial. Students don't passively receive influences from their environment. They actively adapt, negotiate, and potentially influence their environments as well. For example, ESL students in ODL settings might seek out additional online writing resources or connect with peers to overcome challenges. By employing BEST, this study delves into the multilayered landscape of factors shaping ESL writing development in ODL contexts. This framework allows us to move beyond a simplistic view of student challenges and delve into the complex interplay of individual experiences and environmental influences.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically employing a case study design. Case studies are particularly valuable when exploring under-researched phenomena, allowing for an in-depth examination of specific situations. In this context, our study delves into the perceptions, challenges, and strategies of ESL students in developing their writing proficiency, an area that warrants deeper investigation. This study employs a qualitative research design to explore ESL students' perceptions, challenges, and strategies in developing their writing proficiency. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. This qualitative case study will involve 30 ESL students enrolled in a first-year English language course at the School of Distance Education, University Sains Malaysia.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they possess



characteristics relevant to the research question: exploring perceptions, challenges, and strategies of ESL students developing writing proficiency in an ODL environment. An information session for the students was conducted to explain about the research topic, objectives, and the voluntary nature of participation. The confidentiality of responses was also highlighted and the potential benefits of participating, such as contributing to improving the ODL learning experience was explained. Students who expressed interest were then invited for individual interviews.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. Interviews were conducted individually with each participant to encourage open and detailed responses. In qualitative research, interviews are a commonly utilised method for eliciting information (Bryman, 2012). Wellington (2015) underscores the ability of interviews to explore interviewees' thoughts, values, biases, perceptions, opinions, emotions, and viewpoints in depth. The interview questions were developed based on the research questions and covered the following areas: Participants' perceptions of their own writing abilities, factors contributing to participants' writing confidence or lack thereof, common challenges encountered when developing writing skills and strategies employed by participants to overcome these challenges.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data. The analysis process will involve the following steps: 1) Data Familiarisation: Researcher became familiar with the interview transcripts by reading them multiple times. 2) Initial Coding: Codes were generated to identify key concepts, themes, and patterns within the data. 3) Theme Development: Codes were grouped into broader themes related to participants' perceptions, challenges, and strategies. 4) Data Interpretation: Researchers interpreted the themes and identified significant findings that address the research questions.

## FINDINGS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data gathered from participants' perceptions of their writing abilities, factors influencing confidence, challenges, and strategies in English writing. Through a thematic exploration, this section explains distinct themes, sub-themes, and corresponding codes that encapsulate the richness of participants' narratives.

*Research Question 1: ESL students' perceptions of their writing abilities and factors influencing confidence levels.*

Table 1  
 Research question 1: ESL students' perceptions of their writing abilities and factors influencing confidence levels

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Confidence and motivation	Motivation and positive feedback	Quite okay, study hard, positive perceptions, newbie, shyness& frustration





### Theme 2: Cultural and family influences

Certain participants mentioned that their family backgrounds did not involve English-speaking or writing activities, impacting their initial exposure to the language. This lack of exposure affected their confidence. A participant reflected,

“My family's background does not apply to speaking in English”. Furthermore, multicultural environments and family language practices influenced their language choices.

Another participant explained,

“My whole family consists of different races... Instead of each one of us learning different languages, we all just learn and communicate in English”.

### Theme 3: Limited exposure and practice

Some participants had limited exposure and practice in using English, particularly in their daily lives. This lack of usage led to self-perception issues and a lack of confidence. A participant mentioned,

“I like English but I'm not very often using it in daily life. Only using when typing messages. So that I will make mistakes in grammar and vocabulary”.

Another participant also stated,

“I'm not using English very often. I only use English to send emails and text messages to my colleagues at my workplace. I felt unconfident to speak in English since I am very shy”.

Additionally, one participant stated,

“I had little time to discuss with my friends and my lecturer regarding writing”.

### Theme 4: Confidence through daily usage and exposure

ESL students gained confidence through daily usage of English, especially in workplaces where communication with colleagues and clients necessitated English. Exposure to English media like movies and songs significantly contributed to their vocabulary and comprehension, boosting their confidence in writing. A participant noted,

“I speak English with my coworkers, even if it's broken English”.

Another participant also highlighted the importance of continuous learning,

“I speak English at home with family and friends. I still learn and need to increase my writing skill to facilitate my studies and my work”.



Theme 5: supportive learning environment

A supportive learning environment, where ESL students could seek guidance without fear of judgment, fostered confidence. Participants valued spaces where they could ask questions and receive feedback, leading to a sense of trust and encouragement. A participant shared,

“I asked my professors and doctors to check my grammar and vocabulary, so I can learn it at the same time”.

Another participant expressed satisfaction,

“I enjoy this class. It was both informative and enlightening. I mostly use English in my day-to-day communication”.

In summary, the confidence levels of ESL students in their writing abilities varied widely based on their motivation, exposure, and supportive environments. While positive feedback and determination motivated some, others faced challenges due to limited exposure and self-perception issues. Family backgrounds, multicultural influences, and daily usage of English played significant roles in shaping their confidence. A nurturing learning environment, where students felt comfortable seeking guidance and feedback, emerged as a crucial factor.

*Research Question 2: Challenges faced by ESL students in developing writing skills and employed strategies for overcoming difficulties.*

Table 2  
 Challenges faced by ESL students in developing writing skills and employed strategies for overcoming difficulties

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Language proficiency challenges	Grammar & challenges	Vocab Lack of fluency, spelling errors, vocabulary enhancement needs
Challenges faced in learning environment	Technology Learning challenges	obstacles & environment Internet stability, lack of practice & opportunity, challenges of self-study, procrastination
Strategies employed by the students	Immersive approaches for skill enhancement	Reading, using media, feedback from peers, consistent practice, persistence, practical language use, learning tools, practice with family, importance of English



### Theme 1: Language proficiency challenges

ESL students frequently grapple with English grammar, vocabulary, and formal writing tasks, impeding their ability to express themselves clearly. The participant articulated,

“I am not fluent in English... It can seem like a real challenge to improve especially in writing formally”. Spelling errors and vocabulary gaps were common concerns, as voiced by another participant, “My problem is with spelling and words choice”.

Another participant also echoed this sentiment, highlighting the need for vocabulary enhancement.

“In speech and writing, I lack confidence and need to gain vocabulary and need to constantly watch TV and read in English”.

### Theme 2: challenges faced in learning environment

Challenges within the learning environment, such as unstable internet connections, hinder ESL students' progress. A participant highlighted,

“Internet stability is one of the major issues faced by ODL students, causing us to miss lessons due to poor coverage in certain areas”.

Additionally, lack of the consistent practice opportunities and the need to self-study impacts their confidence and proficiency. A participant voiced,

“I'm not really good enough in writing because too many years left it behind, but still want to improve my grammar and vocabulary, distance learning sometimes challenging because I need to do self-learning”.

Another participant added,

“Sometimes, I don't do the necessary task, since I can learn independently. I delay my work”.

### Theme 3: Strategies employed by the students

ESL students employ a wide array of strategies to overcome the hurdles they face in enhancing their writing skills. One prevalent approach involves immersing themselves in English materials, encompassing newspapers, books, and online articles. As one participant insightfully pointed out,

“Reading is the best way to expand vocabularies and learn how to evade common grammar errors”.

This deliberate engagement with written English serves as a foundational step towards proficiency. In addition to written resources, participants actively engage with spoken English through media such as movies and songs. For example, one participant elaborated,



“I've honed my understanding of spoken English by listening to radio stations and reading the subtitles”.

Furthermore, seeking feedback from peers and colleagues emerges as a valuable practice. For instance, a participant articulated the significance of this interaction,

“I constantly seek ways to enhance my grammar, aiming for increased confidence in both verbal conversations and formal written communication”.

Consistent practice remains a cornerstone of their approach. Many participants emphasized the need for persistence. As one participant wisely noted,

“Persistence is the major secret of success”.

Integration into daily life is another key strategy. Participants incorporate English into their routine interactions, utilising language learning tools like Google Translate to bridge communication gaps. A participant shared,

“I rely on Google Translate for accurate English responses in my texts and emails”.

Additionally, meaningful conversations with friends and family serve as vital language practice sessions. A participant highlighted this, stating,

“I immerse myself in English books and novels and engage in English conversations with my colleagues”.

ESL students in this study also underscore the global significance of English. A participant stated,

“ I believe that English is an international language and becomes most important to people around the world”. They recognized its pivotal role in communication, education, and professional development.

Another participant emphasised its importance for future prospects,

“It's really important nowadays to be good in English... for a brighter future, so I must study hard”.

The relevance of English in careers and education was consistently noted, as expressed by a participant,

“I hope I will improve further for my better understanding, and I can master the skills to write.

In summary, ESL students encounter significant challenges in improving their writing skills, especially in grammar and vocabulary. They also face issues such as poor internet connectivity, the need for self-study, and procrastination. To overcome these challenges, students use various



strategies. They engage with written and spoken English materials, seek feedback from peers, and maintain consistent practice. Persistence, integrating English into daily activities, and utilizing learning tools are essential for their learning journey. Moreover, ESL students recognise the paramount importance of English on a global scale, understanding its crucial role in communication, education, and professional development. These diverse approaches contribute to ongoing learning and skill enhancement.

## DISCUSSION

### *Confidence levels in writing*

The findings regarding ESL students' confidence levels in writing revealed a spectrum of emotions. Some students exhibited high motivation and confidence, driven by positive feedback and a determination to improve their skills. This positive attitude resonates with existing literature that emphasizes the role of encouragement and positive reinforcement in boosting students' confidence (Patwary & Sajib, 2018). Conversely, other students faced self-perception issues, often stemming from limited exposure, lack of vocabulary, and grammar challenges. This lack of confidence aligns with studies highlighting how insufficient exposure and vocabulary limitations can hinder students' belief in their writing abilities (Akhter, 2016). Cultural and family backgrounds significantly influenced students' initial exposure to English, impacting their confidence levels. This echoes prior research, emphasizing the impact of cultural contexts on language learning (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019). Additionally, the multicultural environment played a role in shaping language choices, aligning with studies discussing the intersection of personal and textual factors in ESL students' experiences (Vorobel & Kim, 2011). Limited exposure and practice in daily English usage led to self-perception issues and lack of confidence among some participants. This finding corresponds to existing literature, indicating that regular usage and practice are vital for ESL students' language proficiency (Misbah et al., 2017).

ODL students often lack the opportunity to meet people in person, leading to feelings of isolation, reflected to the past study by Harrison et al. (2018). Lack of consistent practice opportunities, exacerbated by challenges in distance learning environments, further hindered their progress, reflecting the impact of learning contexts on students' confidence (Heo & Sim, 2015). A supportive learning environment emerged as a critical factor influencing students' confidence. Spaces where students could ask questions and receive feedback without fear of judgment fostered a sense of trust and encouragement. This aligns with prior studies highlighting the significance of supportive environments in nurturing students' confidence (Ismail, 2011).

### *Challenges faced and employed strategies for overcoming difficulties*

ESL students grappled with grammar, vocabulary, and formal writing tasks, hindering their ability to express themselves clearly. This challenge resonates with extensive literature emphasizing the struggles ESL students face in mastering complex grammatical structures and vocabulary (Misbah et al., 2017). Participants' efforts to enhance their vocabulary through various means, including reading and engaging with spoken English, align with existing strategies recommended in ESL pedagogy (Wan, 2014). Challenges within the learning environment, such as unstable internet connections, posed additional obstacles similar to the findings by Joubert and Snyman (2018). Distance learning difficulties were compounded by the



need for self-study, emphasizing the importance of consistent practice opportunities. ODL demands a high level of self-discipline, and students must independently manage their tasks and assignments echoes the challenge of self-motivation identified by Dzakiria (2012). Participants' persistence in seeking ways to enhance their grammar and their integration of English into daily life, including conversations with peers and family, underscored the multifaceted strategies ESL students employ to overcome challenges (Zumbrunn et al., 2020).

ESL students' recognition of the global significance of English in communication, education, and professional development echoes previous findings (Khadawardi, 2022). Participants' emphasis on mastering English for future prospects aligns with the overarching theme in the literature highlighting the pivotal role of English proficiency in academic and professional success (Akhtar et al., 2020).

### *Theoretical discussion*

In today's globalized world, English proficiency is not just a valuable skill but often a necessity for individuals striving to excel academically and professionally. For ESL students, developing proficient writing skills in English is a significant challenge. This challenge is not isolated; rather, it is influenced by a myriad of interconnected factors within the students' immediate learning environment and beyond. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a valuable lens through which to examine these multifaceted influences on ESL students' writing abilities. At the microsystem level, the immediate interactions within ESL students' learning environments play a pivotal role in shaping their confidence and motivation regarding their writing skills. Positive feedback from teachers and peers can boost a student's self-assurance, encouraging further development. Conversely, a lack of exposure to English-speaking activities within families can lead to self-perception issues, inhibiting confidence. These personal, direct interactions directly impact ESL students' beliefs about their writing abilities.

Moving to the mesosystem, the connections between limited exposure in the microsystem and challenges in the learning environment become evident. Unstable internet connections and the hurdles of distance learning exacerbate the lack of consistent practice opportunities, directly impacting students' confidence in their writing skills. The interplay between these microsystems emphasizes the need for a stable educational ecosystem that provides ample opportunities for ESL students to practice and enhance their writing abilities. In the exosystem, external factors indirectly shape ESL students' writing abilities. Education policies in Malaysia, deeming English as important, act as external influences, significantly contributing to the development of ESL students' confidence and language skills. These interactions, though indirect, significantly contribute to the development of ESL students' confidence and language skills.

Zooming out to the macrosystem, broader cultural norms and societal values influence ESL students' understanding of the importance of English proficiency. Recognizing English as a global language essential for communication, education, and career prospects is a result of societal expectations and cultural attitudes. These values shape students' aspirations and efforts in mastering the language, impacting their motivation to overcome writing challenges. In summary, applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to the findings emphasizes the interconnectedness of various factors influencing ESL students' writing experiences. From immediate family and classroom environments to broader societal attitudes, each layer of the



ecological systems interacts and shapes students' confidence levels, learning strategies, and perceptions of English's importance.

## CONCLUSION

This comprehensive study delved deep into the challenges faced by ESL students in developing their writing skills and the strategies employed to overcome these hurdles. By employing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research provided a holistic understanding of the diverse factors influencing ESL students' perceptions of their writing abilities and the subsequent impact on their confidence levels. The findings underscore the importance of addressing the multifaceted challenges within the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem to facilitate ESL students' writing skill development effectively. These challenges include language proficiency issues, limited exposure and practice, lack of confidence, and the influence of cultural and family backgrounds.

The implications drawn from this research are pivotal for higher education institutions, educators, policymakers, and support services. Tailored support and interventions tailored to address ESL students' language proficiency challenges are essential. Higher education institutions should develop targeted programs, workshops, and writing centres staffed with experienced ESL educators to enhance students' writing proficiency and overall academic success. Additionally, promoting cultural awareness and inclusivity is paramount. Creating an inclusive environment that celebrates cultural diversity fosters a sense of belonging and enhances the overall educational experience for ESL students. Furthermore, recognising the global significance of English, institutions can integrate real-world applications of English writing skills into the curriculum, emphasizing its relevance in communication, education, and professional development. This contextualization of learning can enhance students' motivation and engagement, leading to more effective language acquisition.

While this study provided invaluable insights, future research endeavours can further enrich our understanding of ESL students' writing challenges and strategies. Investigating the effectiveness of specific interventions within different ecological contexts can offer nuanced insights. Longitudinal studies tracking students' progress over an extended period can provide a comprehensive view of the evolving dynamics in their writing proficiency. Furthermore, comparative studies across diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds can shed light on the influence of culture on writing perceptions. Exploring the role of digital technologies and innovative learning platforms in ESL students' skill development can also be a promising avenue for future research.

In summary, by delving into the intricate interplay of ecological factors, this study not only contributes significantly to the existing literature but also provides practical implications for educators, institutions, and policymakers. Empowering ESL students in their writing endeavours requires a holistic approach that addresses the challenges at various levels of their ecological systems, ensuring a nurturing and conducive learning environment.





## REFERENCES

- Ahmad, W. F. W., & Kosnin, A. M. (2008). Pembelajaran jarak jauh: Cabaran dan peluang [Distance learning: Challenges and opportunities]. In M. Z., Othman, & R., Ismail (Eds.), *Prosiding Persidangan Antarabangsa Ke-4 Pendidikan, Dakwah, dan Kepimpinan* (pp. 287-296). Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Abdullah, M. K. M., & Alias, N. (2006). Pembelajaran jarak jauh: Cabaran dan keberkesannya [Distance learning: Its challenges and effectiveness]. *Malaysian Journal of Distance Education*, 8(1), 67-79.
- Akhter, I. (2016). *Effectiveness and difficulties of creative writing in language learning: A study of secondary level Bangla medium schools in Dhaka city* [Doctoral dissertation, BRAC University].  
[http://dspace.bracu.ac.bd/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10361/7820/15163012\\_ENH.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://dspace.bracu.ac.bd/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10361/7820/15163012_ENH.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Akhtar, R., Hassan, H., & Saidalvi, A. (2020). The effects of ESL student's attitude on academic writing apprehensions and academic writing challenges. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 24(5), 5404–5412.  
<https://doi.org/10.37200/ijpr/v24i5/pr2020247>
- Alkış, N., & Temizel, T. T. (2018). The impact of motivation and personality on academic performance in online and blended learning environments. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 21(3), 35-47. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1184344>
- Altınmakas, D., & Bayyurt, Y. (2019). An exploratory study on factors influencing undergraduate students' academic writing practices in Turkey. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 37, 88–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2018.11.006>
- Broadbent, J. (2017). Comparing online and blended learner's self-regulated learning strategies and academic performance. *Internet and Higher Education*, 33, 24–32.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2017.01.004>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbenner, U. (1995). Lewinian space and ecological substance. In U. Bronfrenbenner (Ed.), *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development* (pp. 41-49). Sage.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In R. M. Lerner (Ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology* (5th ed., Vol. 1, pp. 993–1028). Wiley.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human*. Sage.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Cheng, K. H., & Tsai, C. C. (2011). An investigation of Taiwan University students' perceptions of online academic help seeking, and their web-based learning self-efficacy. *Internet and Higher Education*, 14(3), 150-157. <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/53712/>.
- Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing. [www.coe.int/lang-cefr](http://www.coe.int/lang-cefr).
- Dzakiria, H. (2012). Illuminating the importance of learning interaction to open distance learning (ODL) success: A qualitative perspectives of adult learners in Perlis, Malaysia. *The European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 15(2), 1-9.  
<http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2012/Dzakiria.pdf>



- Farid, A. M. (2022). Implementing open and distance learning to expand higher education in developing countries: A review of literature. *Egyptian Journal of Educational Sciences*, 2(1), 141-200. <https://doi.org/10.21608/ejes.2022.268026>
- Harrison, R., Harrison, A., Robinson, C., & Rawlings, B. (2018). The experience of international postgraduate students on a distance-learning programme. *Distance Education*, 39(4), 480-494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2018.1520038>.
- Hayes, N., O'Toole, L., & Halpenny, A. M. (2017). *Introducing Bronfenbrenner: A guide for practitioners and students in early years education*. Routledge.
- Hedge, T. (2014). *Teaching and Learning in Language Classroom* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Heo, J.-Y., & Sim, J.-Y. (2015). Korean students' perspectives on L2 writing difficulty, needs, and challenges. *Studies in English Education*, 20(2), 161-188. <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/ArticleDetail/NODE06384113>
- Imani, C., & Emaliana, I. (2021). Developing writing skills through online self-regulated learning. *UC Journal: ELT, Linguistics and Literature Journal*, 2(2), 96-104. <https://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/UC/article/view/3849>
- Ismail, S. (2011). Exploring students' perceptions of ESL writing. *English Language Teaching*, 4(2), 73-83. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ELT.V4N2P73>.
- Jaeger, E. L. (2012). *Understanding and supporting vulnerable readers: An ecological systems perspective* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California]. [http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Jaeger\\_berkeley\\_0028E\\_12253.pdf](http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Jaeger_berkeley_0028E_12253.pdf)
- Joubert, Y., & Snyman, A. (2018). Challenges experienced with online tutoring in an ODL institution. *Progression*, 39(1), 126-145. <https://doi.org/10.25159/0256-8853/2139>.
- Khadawardi, H. A. (2022). Saudi learners' perceptions of academic writing challenges and general attitude towards writing in English. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 13(3), 645-658. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1303.21>
- Kizilcec, R. F., Pérez-Sanagustín, M., & Maldonado, J. J. (2017). Self-regulated learning strategies predict learner behavior and goal attainment in Massive Open Online Courses. *Computers and Education*, 104, 18-33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.10.001>
- Mahmood, K. (2020). Academic writing challenges of EFL learners and teachers' proficiency in Pakistani higher education. *Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 8(2), 56-76.
- Mansoor, M., Dian, A. M., Omar, H., & Mansor, S. (2022). The impact of Covid-19 on learning and training of law enforcers: A case for fire and rescue department of Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Legal Education*, 10(2), 243-257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23220058221143442>
- Misbah, N. H., Mohamad, M., Yunus, M., & Ya'acob, A. (2017). Identifying the factors contributing to students' difficulties in the English language learning. *Creative Education*, 8(13), 1999-2008. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2017.813136>
- Moore, G. M., & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view of instruction*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Muda, S., & Bit-Lian, Y. (2019). Perceived challenges in open and distance learning among nursing students of Open University Malaysia: A descriptive analysis. *International Conference on Education*. <http://library.oum.edu.my/repository/1190/1/library-document-1190.pdf>
- Murugaiah, P., & Thang, S. M. (2010). Development of interactive and reflective learning among Malaysian online distant learners: An ESL instructor's experience. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 11(3), 21-41.



- Musingafi, M., Mapuranga, B., Chiwanza, K., & Zebron, S. (2015). Challenges for open and distance learning (ODL) students: Experiences from students of the Zimbabwe Open University. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(18), 59-66.
- Patwary, M. N., & Sajib, M. N. F. (2018). Improving writing skills in English at the tertiary level: The gap between the standard practice and classroom scenario. *A Journal of English Studies*, 9. 151-165. <https://doi.org/10.59817/cjes.v9i.115>
- Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU). (2013). *Government Transformation Plan Annual Report 2013*, Kuala Lumpur. [https://www.pmo.gov.my/dokumenattached/NTP-Report-2013/GTP\\_2013\\_ENG\\_Report.pdf](https://www.pmo.gov.my/dokumenattached/NTP-Report-2013/GTP_2013_ENG_Report.pdf)
- Qasem, F. A., & Zayid, E. (2019). The challenges and problems faced by students in the early stage of writing research projects in L2, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. *European Journal of Special Education Research*, 4(1), 32-47. <http://dx.doi.org/10.46827/ejse.v0i0.2271>
- Qunayeer, H. S. A. (2020). Exploring EFL learners' online participation in online peer writing discussions through a Facebook group. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 19, 671-692. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4621>
- Scott, D., Burns, A., Danyluk, P., & Ulmer-Krol, S. (2018). Evaluating the effectiveness of academic writing interventions in a community-based B.Ed. Program. *International Journal of E-Learning & Distance Education*, 33(2), 1–20. <https://login.jproxy.nuim.ie/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/evaluating-effectiveness-academic-writing/docview/2228631924/se-2?accountid=12309%0Ahttps://maynoothuniversity>.
- Shakib Kotamjani, S., & Hussin, H. (2017). Perceptions of challenges in writing academically: Iranian postgraduate students' perspectives. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 6(4), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.6n.4p.1>
- Shuvra, S., & Roy, S. (2023). Tertiary students' perceptions regarding the challenges to develop writing skills. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 9(1), 46-51.
- Stella, J., & Corry, M. (2013). Teaching writing in online distance education: Supporting student success. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, XVI(II). University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center.
- Syafrianti, M. (2021). The utilization of E-Learning media assisted by Google Classroom and Google Meet in learning test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) preparation during the pandemic. *4<sup>th</sup> English Language and Literature International Conference (ELLiC) Proceedings*, 4, 229-234. <https://jurnal.unimus.ac.id/index.php/ELLIC/article/download/7482/5539>.
- Thi, D., & Anh, N. (2019). EFL student's writing skills: Challenges and remedies. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 9(6), 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.9790/7388-0906017484>
- Uchenna, H. I., & Hashim, I. (2021). ICT infrastructural and technical challenges: A major impediment towards the development of open and distance learning (ODL) in Nigeria. *International Journal of Distance Education and E-Learning*, 6(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.36261/ijdeel.v6i1.1419>
- Vorobel, O., & Kim, D. (2011). Upper-intermediate-level ESL students' summarizing in English. *TESOL Journal*, 2, 330-354. <https://doi.org/10.5054/TJ.2011.259958>.
- Wan, W. (2014). Constructing and developing ESL students' beliefs about writing through



metaphor: An exploratory study. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 23, 53-73.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JSLW.2014.01.002>.

Wellington, J. (2015). *Educational research: Contemporary issues and practical approaches*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Zakaria, Z., Hassan, F., Hassan, H., & Sim, H. K. C. (2004). Amalan pelajar cemerlang dalam pembelajaran secara jarak jauh. In H. Atan & R. M. Idrus (Eds.), *Integration of Instructional Design & Technology in Teaching & Learning* (pp. 241-248). Malaysian Educational Technology Association (META) Publishers.

Zakaria, N. Y., Abdullah, A., & Abdul Rabu, S. N. (2021). *Exploring ESL students' current competency and needs in academic writing skills at university*. Sains Insani.

Zumbrunn, S., Broda, M., Varier, D., & Conklin, S. (2020). Examining the multidimensional role of self-efficacy for writing on student writing self-regulation and grades in elementary and high school. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(3), 580-603. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12315>.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest associated with this research.

### Acknowledgement

Special thanks to the students from Universiti Sains Malaysia for their invaluable contribution to this study.

### Authors' Contributions

The author affirms sole responsibility for the study's conception, design, data collection, findings analysis and interpretation, and paper creation.

### About the Authors



Siti Soraya Lin obtained her doctorate in education from The University of Sheffield, UK. Her dissertation explored the social, cultural, and contextual factors affecting struggling readers of English as a second language in Malaysian classrooms. Lin's research interests encompass TESOL (early childhood and primary education), e-learning, parental involvement and qualitative study. She has published articles in peer-reviewed journals and serves as a reviewer for prestigious journals indexed in WOS and Scopus. Currently, she is a lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Distance Education, where she also coordinates university courses. For further information, please contact her at [sorayalin@usm.my](mailto:sorayalin@usm.my)