



Research Article

The Relationship between Self-regulation and Learners' Writing Ability among Iranian Upper-Intermediate EFL Learners

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

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Background and Objectives: Language learning research has been paying more attention to the factors that may affect the choice by language learners of learning strategies in general and writing strategies in particular to enhance their own learning. Consistent with the studies conducted, the present study sought to explore the relationship between self-regulation strategy on writing ability of a group of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners.

Methodology: The study was conducted in 2023 adopting a correlational approach as it examined whether there was a relationship between students' self-regulation and the levels of their writing skill. 40 participants selected out of 80 whose homogeneity was determined by the Michigan test (1997) were chosen for the study. The students were given a writing task, along with a questionnaire on self-regulation strategy and their writing tasks were checked using Jacob et.al's (1981) scale. Path analysis was used to test the path of learning approaches in seven components of self-regulation. All the statistics were conducted on SPSS software 21 for data analysis.

Results: Using the Pearson correlation to compare the performances of students, the results revealed that, as far as total performance was concerned, there was a significant positive correlation between self-regulated learning components and writing ability. Considering the sub- components of the Self-regulation learning scale, the Goal setting with the correlation coefficient value of ($r = 0/635$) and the memory strategy with ($r = 0/332$) had the highest and lowest correlation with writing, respectively.

Conclusion: The study confirmed the fact that among the components of the self-regulation strategy, goal setting and self-evaluation had the potentialities to predict the relationship between self-regulation learning and the writing ability.

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Introduction

In the multifaceted domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition, research has increasingly shifted its focus to the internal cognitive and metacognitive processes that learners employ (Magno, 2009). Central to this paradigm shift is the understanding that learners utilize a myriad of strategies—such as planning, self-monitoring, idea generation, and self-evaluation—to navigate complex tasks like writing (Lienemann & Reid, 2008). The act of composing in a foreign language was not merely a linguistic exercise but a deeply strategic one, where individuals had to organize their thoughts, manage motivation, and refine their output, making the writing process a fertile ground for observing specific learning approaches in action (Hayes et al., 1981; Kellogg, & Raulerson, 2007). This strategic engagement was intrinsically linked to the concept of self-regulation, an active process through which individuals learn to control their own behaviors, cognition, and motivation (Pintrich, 2000a). Within the context of composition writing, self-regulation translated to a learner's ability to manage the entire writing process autonomously, from initial planning to final revision, making it a critical area of investigation for understanding how learners truly master this demanding productive skill.

The critical importance of writing within EFL contexts formed the core of the problem this study addressed. As a fundamental productive skill, writing served as a primary tool for communication and a key metric by which language learners were often judged. However, achieving proficiency in writing presented a unique challenge; unlike speaking, which could be instructed orally, effective writing necessitated more than just knowledge of grammatical rules (Nami et al., 2012). It demanded a high degree of cognitive control, sustained focus, and the ability to independently structure and refine ideas. Despite the recognized significance of self-regulation as a major predictor of general academic success, with research finding that strong self-regulation skills may be more important than IQ (Berry & Mason, 2012) and predict both math and reading achievement (Duncan et al.,

2007), its specific relationship with writing ability in specific EFL contexts remained underexplored. Particularly within the Iranian EFL landscape, there was a discernible gap in the literature concerning how self-regulatory strategies directly influenced the writing proficiency of upper-intermediate learners. This study, therefore, sought to address this gap by empirically investigating the connection between these two critical variables.

The implications of establishing a strong link between self-regulation and writing ability were considered profound for both pedagogical theory and classroom practice. For learners, possessing strong self-regulatory skills was seen as a cornerstone of academic autonomy, enabling them to concentrate on instruction, organize their thoughts, rehearse information, and set strategic goals for their writing tasks (Schunk, 1989; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). Furthermore, the practice of self-regulation fostered metacognition, requiring learners to critically reflect on their writing processes, the effectiveness of their strategies, and the subsequent improvements in their drafts. This metacognitive awareness was instrumental in transforming students from passive recipients of knowledge into independent, self-directed learners capable of transferring acquired skills to new contexts. For educators and curriculum designers in Iran and similar EFL settings, the findings of this study provided a robust evidence base for integrating self-regulatory strategy instruction directly into writing syllabi. By demonstrating the tangible benefits of these skills, this research advocated for a pedagogical shift towards learner-centered approaches that empowered students to take control of their own learning journey.

Aligned with the modern educational goal of fostering learner autonomy, this study aimed to explore the precise impact of self-regulation strategies on the writing proficiency of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. The purpose was twofold: first, to determine whether a statistically significant relationship existed between learners' self-regulatory capacities and their demonstrated writing abilities, and second, to understand how these self-directed skills manifested in and facilitated the students' progression as writers. By adopting a learner-centered

framework that acknowledged individual differences in learning styles and goals, this research positioned the teacher as a facilitator who helped students learn strategies and activate cognitive and metacognitive processes (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2013; Zimmerman, 2002). Graham & Harris (2003) stated that self-regulation writing intervention studies have employed various group and single-subject designs, most frequently measuring outcomes at posttest. They found that these studies commonly examine writing quality, length, structural elements, and story grammar, with writing quality often assessed holistically using anchor papers rather than detailed rubrics. Graham (2006) reported a wide range of revision measures used in self-regulation research, including surface-level and meaning-changing revisions, revising time, and errors detected and corrected. Graham & Harris (2003); Harris et al. (2008b) found that the self-regulation model can be successfully implemented in whole-class, small group, and one-on-one settings, with proficiency typically developing after 8-12 lessons. They also noted that struggling writers often do not show significant improvement until the final stage of instruction. Festas et al. (2015), Graham & Harris (2003), and Harris et al. (2006) realized that research on the self-regulation model has shown significant improvements in the writing performance of elementary and middle school students. Graham et al. (2005) found that third-grade students in self-regulation conditions wrote longer, more complete, and higher-quality stories and persuasive essays than control students, with effects maintained over time. They realized that while peer support did not incrementally improve writing quality, it did enhance knowledge about planning and led to transfer effects across genres. Brunstein & Glaser (2011) used a path-analytic model and found that students in a self-regulation condition demonstrated greater writing knowledge, higher self-efficacy, and better story quality than those in a strategy-only condition. Their analysis showed that self-regulatory supports most directly improved story planning, which then facilitated deep-level revisions and ultimately improved story quality. Limpo & Alves (2013) examined planning and sentence-combining instruction and found that both positively impacted essay length and quality compared to a control

condition. They hypothesized that the self-monitoring focus of the instruction helped bring students' self-efficacy beliefs more in line with their actual performance. Ennis et al. (2015) used a piecewise hierarchical linear model (HLM) with students at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. They found significant gains in writing performance during the intervention, though growth in writing measures was significant only in the first five weeks, while academic engagement grew significantly in the later weeks. Hacker et al. (2015) used a quasi-experimental design and HLM to analyze growth and found that while there was no difference in writing quality at posttest between self-regulation and traditional instruction, students in the self-regulation condition produced higher-quality essays at a maintenance test. Graham & Harris (2014) stated that they collect qualitative data on social validity through interviews to determine participants' perceptions of the interventions' value and effectiveness. However, they and other researchers have noted that the published literature has a heavy quantitative focus, suggesting a need for more mixed-methods studies to enrich the understanding of self-regulation interventions. Graham (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of writing strategy instruction in grades 1–12 and found that self-regulation interventions were highly effective, with an average weighted effect size of 1.57 for group-design studies, which was substantially larger than the 0.89 effect size for non-self-regulation studies. Graham and Perin (2007a) performed a comprehensive meta-analysis of grades 4–12 writing interventions and confirmed the powerful effect of the self-regulation model, reporting an average weighted effect size of 1.14 for self-regulation studies compared to 0.62 for non-self-regulation studies. They concluded that strategy instruction, particularly through the self-regulation model, had a strong impact on writing quality and was especially beneficial for struggling writers. Graham et al. (2012) focused a subsequent meta-analysis on grades 1–6 and again found that self-regulation-based strategy instruction had a significantly larger effect ($ES=1.17$) on writing quality than non-self-regulation interventions ($ES=0.59$). Furthermore, they calculated a weighted effect size of 0.50 for the added benefit of self-regulation instruction over strategy instruction

alone, providing empirical evidence for why self-regulation interventions are so effective. Graham and Harris (2014) also pointed out that the literature is replete with studies using weak comparison conditions, where effects could be confounded by differences in instructional time or instructor experience. They argued that to account for students being nested within classrooms, multilevel models must become ubiquitous in writing intervention research to appropriately measure change. Additionally, Graham (1999) found that surface-level features of texts can influence raters' judgments of writing quality, suggesting a need for controls to mitigate this bias, such as having students use word-processing software. Consequently, this investigation moved beyond theoretical postulation and provided concrete insights into how nurturing self-regulation could directly enhance the quality and effectiveness of writing instruction, ultimately contributing to the development of more proficient and autonomous Iranian EFL writers.

Methodology

This study employed an exploratory and correlational design to investigate the relationship between self-regulated learning and writing ability among Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. The participants were 40 students (25 males and 15 females), selected from a larger pool of 80 learners at language institutes in Behshahr, Iran. Their ages ranged from 18 to 46, and their primary motivations for learning English were general proficiency and preparation for international exams like IELTS and TOEFL. To ensure homogeneity in language proficiency, the 40 top-scoring students on the Michigan English Test (MET) upper-intermediate level were selected for the final sample. The MET, developed by CaMLA, was used as a reliable proficiency benchmark. The primary instruments for data collection included the Academic Self-regulated Learning Scale (A-SRL-S) and a writing assessment scored with the ESL Composition Profile. The A-SRL-S, developed by Magno (2009c) and based on Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons' model, is a 55-item questionnaire measuring seven subscales of self-regulation: memory strategy,

goal setting, self-evaluation, seeking assistance, environmental structure, responsibility, and organizing. The writing ability was assessed using the ESL Composition Profile by Jacobs et al. (1981), which evaluates content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, providing a total score out of 100. The procedure began with administering the MET to 80 students to identify the 40 most proficient participants. Subsequently, these selected participants completed the A-SRL-S questionnaire and were asked to write a paragraph on a topic selected from their coursebooks. This writing task was designed to elicit a sample of their writing ability for evaluation. While completing the questionnaire might have familiarized students with the components of self-regulation, this was not controlled for, as the primary aim was to observe the natural application of these strategies in their writing. The collected data consisted of the self-regulation scores from the A-SRL-S and the writing scores from the assessed paragraphs. For data analysis, the means for the Self-Regulated Learning Scale were calculated. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the overall self-regulation scores and the writing ability scores. Furthermore, to explore the specific contributions of different self-regulation components, a path analysis was performed to test the pathways between the seven subscales of self-regulation and writing performance. All statistical analyses were conducted using the SPSS software version 21.

Results

Based on the information obtained, the following results are presented.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables (N=40)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Michigan Test Score	78.05	6.824
Writing Ability	78.45	4.624
Overall Self-Regulation	153.37	10.738
Self-Regulation Components		
Memory Strategy	40.05	3.037

Goal Setting	14.20	1.435
Self-Evaluation	33.40	2.589
Seeking Assistance	22.55	2.111
Environmental Structure	13.93	1.730
Learning Responsibility	14.93	1.456
Organization	14.33	1.575

The study sought to investigate the relationship between self-regulation and the writing abilities of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. Following the homogenization of the sample via the Michigan English Test ($M=78.05$, $SD=6.82$), descriptive statistics for the key variables were calculated. The participants' writing ability, as scored by the ESL Composition Profile, had a mean of 78.45 ($SD=4.62$). Their overall self-regulation score, measured by the Academic Self-regulated Learning Scale, averaged 153.37 ($SD=10.74$). Among the components of self-regulation, Memory Strategy had the highest mean score ($M=40.05$), while Environmental Structure had the lowest ($M=13.93$). A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test confirmed that all data were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$), permitting the use of parametric tests for subsequent analysis. To address the main research question, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Self-Regulation, Its Components, and Writing Ability

Variable	Correlation with Writing Ability (r)	Significance (p-value)
Overall Self-Regulation	0.562	0.0001
Self-Regulation Components		
Goal Setting	0.635	0.0001
Self-Evaluation	0.586	0.0001
Learning Responsibility	0.431	0.005
Organization	0.398	0.011
Environmental Structure	0.357	0.024
Seeking Assistance	0.344	0.030
Memory Strategy	0.332	0.036

Note: All correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$.

The results revealed a statistically significant, positive correlation between overall self-regulation and writing ability ($r = 0.562$, $p = 0.0001$). This indicates that as the learners' self-regulatory capacity increased, their writing ability also demonstrated a significant improvement. A further correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationship between the individual components of self-regulation and writing ability. The results, detailed in Table 5, showed that all seven components were significantly and positively correlated with writing performance ($p < 0.05$). The strength of these relationships varied, with Goal Setting ($r = 0.635$, $p = 0.0001$) and Self-Evaluation ($r = 0.586$, $p = 0.0001$) demonstrating the strongest correlations. Memory Strategy, while still significant, had the weakest correlation ($r = 0.332$, $p = 0.036$).

Table 3

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Writing Ability from Self-Regulation Components

Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	Significance (p-value)
Goal Setting	0.385	< 0.05
Self-Evaluation	*	< 0.05
Model Summary	Value	
R ² (Coefficient of Determination)	0.51	
F-statistic	Significant	($p < 0.05$)

Note: $R^2 = 0.51$ indicates that 51% of the variance in writing ability is explained by the model. Only Goal Setting and Self-Evaluation were significant predictors. The specific beta value for Self-Evaluation was not provided in the original text.

To determine if these components could predict writing ability, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The model was found to be valid and statistically significant (F value, $p < 0.05$). The analysis indicated that only two of the seven self-regulation components served as significant predictors of writing ability: Goal Setting ($\beta = 0.385$) and Self-Evaluation. Together, these two components accounted for approximately 51% of the variance in writing ability scores ($R^2 = 0.51$). The other five components—Memory Strategy, Assistance Seeking, Learning Responsibility, Environmental Structure, and Organization—did not emerge as significant predictors in the regression model. Notably, Goal Setting had the highest beta coefficient, identifying it as the strongest unique predictor of writing ability among the self-regulation components studied.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to investigate the relationship between self-regulated learning strategies and the writing ability of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. The findings confirmed a significant positive correlation, indicating that learners with higher overall self-regulation scores demonstrably outperformed in their writing tasks. This result aligns with the conceptualization of self-regulation as a coordinated process involving attention, working memory, and behavioral inhibition skills (Matthews et al., 2009), which are crucial for managing the complex, multi-faceted demands of writing, such as focusing on content, organization, form, and goals simultaneously (Harris et al., 2008). The study thereby reinforces the established body of research indicating that teaching students to efficiently use strategies is beneficial for enhancing writing quality (e.g., Brunstein & Glaser, 2011).

The observed correlation substantiates the work of previous scholars in the field. It is consistent with Plata's (2008) assertion that students must learn to monitor and supervise cognitive goals to progress as writers, a concept akin to what Gardner (1994, p.715) terms "execution control." Furthermore, the results support Torrano and Torre's (2004) argument regarding the superior performance of learners with higher self-regulation, who can effectively use metacognitive and behavioral strategies to temper feelings of disappointment when facing obstacles (Boekarets & Cascallar, 2006; Wolters, 2011). A key and surprising divergence from some existing literature, however, was that this study did not support gender-based findings, such as those reported by Kitsantas et al. (2009) and Oxford (2003), who claimed female learners often use cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently and thus enjoy higher self-regulation; the current research did not focus on gender differentiation.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are significant. They underscore the need for teachers to emphasize students' individual characteristics, such as self-assessment and self-efficacy (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). By understanding

students' self-regulatory and self-efficacy beliefs, educators can provide more efficient and suitable planning support for writing tasks. As Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) pointed out, it is crucial for students to be aware of their abilities and for teachers to explicitly instruct them in strategies to improve their writing. This aligns with Winne's (1996) recommendation that students achieve better results when they monitor their progress, control the efficacy of their learning methods, persist in the face of challenges, and maintain high confidence in their abilities.

In conclusion, this study confirmed that self-regulation, with its underlying components, has a definitive relationship with the writing ability of EFL learners. Crucially, the regression analysis provided deeper insight, revealing that while all seven components were positively correlated with writing performance, only Goal Setting and Self-Evaluation served as significant predictors of writing ability. These two components alone accounted for approximately 51% of the variance in writing scores, with Goal Setting being the strongest unique predictor. This suggests that the capacity to set clear objectives and to critically self-evaluate one's work are particularly potent drivers of writing proficiency, whereas components like Memory Strategy, Assistance Seeking, Learning Responsibility, Environmental Structure, and Organization, while related, did not independently predict writing ability in this context. This study conclusively demonstrates a significant positive relationship between self-regulation and the writing abilities of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners, with the components of Goal Setting and Self-Evaluation emerging as particularly potent predictors of writing proficiency. These findings carry direct pedagogical implications, compelling educators to move beyond traditional instruction and provide explicit training in self-regulatory strategies, with a dedicated focus on teaching students how to set compositional goals and critically evaluate their own work throughout the writing process. To build upon these insights, it is recommended that future research adopts longitudinal designs to track the long-term impact of such strategy instruction, employs qualitative methods to explore classroom implementation, and rigorously

investigates how these approaches can be tailored to different genres, such as argumentative writing, and diverse learner demographics, including the potential interaction of age and gender with strategy effectiveness.

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Conflict of Interest

No financial, scientific, or personal conflicts of interest were involved in the conduct of the present research.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of scientific research. Participants took part in the study with full awareness, and their information was considered confidential. The results were used solely within the framework of the research's scientific objectives, and the names or personal details of participants were omitted.

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