

Exploring the Use of Strategies in Academic Writing: A Case Study of English as a Second Language (ESL) Writers

Izlin Binti Mohamad Ghazali¹, Aina Athirah Rozman Azram²,
Ilham Alia Mat Isa³, Mafarhanatul Akmal Ahmad Kamal⁴

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam

Email: izlin449@uitm.edu.my, ilhamalia@uitm.edu.my

mafarhanatulakmal@uitm.edu.my

Corresponding Author Email: aathirah@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

Writing skills are crucial in producing excellent and notable compositions. Most writers usually focus on employing various strategies and this is applicable to English as a Second Language (ESL) writers too. The strategies hold huge influence in the ability of writing academic pieces since academic writing is a complex and structured composition compared to non-academic writing. This study aims to identify learners' perception on the use of strategies in academic writing especially the ESL writers. The instruments used for this quantitative survey were adapted from Raofi, Miri, Gharibi & Malaki (2017) framework on the use of strategies in writing. The questionnaire comprised six sections including the five strategies sections: metacognitive, effort regulation, cognitive, social and affective. The 94 respondents involved were undergraduates from Universiti Teknologi MARA who have completed academic writing courses. Generally, the findings discovered the majority of the respondents employed all five strategies in academic writing moderately. The results derived from the data may benefit studies in language and education in understanding the perception of ESL writers towards the use of writing strategies specifically for academic writing.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Strategies in Writing, English as a Second Language (ESL), ESL Learners, ESL writers

Introduction

This section aims to provide insights into the topic and idea of writing academic strategies on the current understanding and relevant pertaining issues.

Background of Study

Writing ability as an ESL writer is not limited to the right use of grammar, genres and vocabulary. During the process of writing, writers will experience a chained thinking process

to compose and assemble ideas together via visibility of tacit knowledge and preconception of their second language thus developing variety writing strategies. Academic writing precisely is a concise, clear and focused piece of writing to provide clarity using a variety of evidence. The fact that it is a process of discovery holds valuable notion for researchers to delve into the area of metacognitive, cognitive, social and communicative writing strategies (Abdulwahed,2011; Alamri,2019; Aripin,2021).

Myriad studies (Abdulkareem,2013; Singh, 2019; Zejno,2018) disclosed the perception and challenges of writing academic pieces in Malaysia especially among international students who practically use English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL). Besides that, existing works have highlighted that first language (L1) interference is a prevalent determinant in which there is a major transfer of L1 knowledge to writing in a second language (L2) due to non-existence of rules and concepts in their mother tongue language (Al-Saggaf et al.,2022). Consequently, many ESL writers portray a comprehensive set of writing strategies ranging from cognitive to social to endure the challenges as a second language learners and produce good writing composition. Therefore, this study is conducted as an effort to further delve into perceptions of ESL writers in using different writing strategies especially for academic writing.

Statement of Problem

Ideally, teaching writing to English for Second Language learners requires the instructors to be literate in developing motivation among the learners. Yang (2024) highlighted that interrelated social and collaborative writing activities are positively impactful to learners' writing motivation. The changes identified include improved interest in tasks, clearer expectations for outcomes, and heightened confidence in writing skills. This is supported by another study from Kurniasih et al. (2022) which reported the affective strategies such as motivation greatly impact the learners' writing performance. To address the motivation factor in academic writing, the researchers have explored the perceptions of the use of strategies in writing for ESL learners.

Recent studies showed accumulated interest in the writing strategies commonly used by the ESL learners to further understand the learners' writing processes in producing academic writing with progressive quality. One of the findings revealed that the ESL learners used a high level of metacognitive strategy in writing (Mello et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Amawa et al. (2022) discovered that the ESL learners capitalized all writing strategies differently as the findings specifically revealed a positive outcome from making use of metacognitive strategies in overcoming the learners' weaknesses in writing. Other than metacognitive strategies, Teng et al. (2022) found that learners at higher grade levels recorded more frequent use of self-regulatory writing strategies than those in lower grade. They also noted the difference in gender with female learners who were more inclined to use the self-regulatory writing strategies than the males. Moreover, with regards to cognitive strategies used in writing, Sethuraman & Radhakrishnan (2020) emphasized the necessity to integrate cognitive strategies in the ESL learners' writing skills. Their study demonstrated the positive influence of these strategies towards achieving coherence in the learners' writing products as well as enabling them to observe their thought process while they write. Consequently, these series of successful writing tasks would help to boost the ESL students' motivation in completing future writing projects.

These studies above with a few others have focused on the writing strategies commonly used by the ESL learners. Future studies were suggested to employ a mixed method data collection that could be useful to examine further into how ESL learners construct their writing process using these writing strategies (Mello et. al, 2023). This could further enlighten the way these strategies can be capitalized to improve other aspects of writing such as the learners' confidence, teaching or support materials by language instructors and possible better writing outcomes. Raofi et al. (2014) in their qualitative study, found out that the advanced ESL learners use more metacognitive strategies in their writing processes. Therefore, it is important to observe the students' perceptions quantitatively towards the use of writing strategies in academic writing. By looking into the students' perspectives in this writing strategies inventory, there could be meaningful pedagogical implications and a probable improved form assessment to gauge writing performance among ESL learners.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study explores perception of learners on academic writing. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Identify the learners' perception on different strategies used in academic writing.

Therefore, this study is conducted to answer the following questions:

1. How do learners perceive the use of metacognitive strategies in writing?
2. How do learners perceive the use of effort regulation strategies in writing?
3. How do learners perceive the use of cognitive strategies in writing?
4. How do learners perceive the use of social strategies in writing?
5. How do learners perceive the use of affective strategies in writing?

Literature Review

Strategies in Learning

Learning is a complex process that involves putting together new information, skills, behaviours, or understanding gained through a variety of experiences, study, and practice. Throughout a person's life, the process of adaptation is a key part of their ability to get used to their surroundings, learn new skills, and grow mentally and emotionally. The language acquisition process is complicated for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners because they are confronted with a foreign language while also navigating the influence of their first language when using the target language. Therefore, it is imperative for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners to adopt a systematic and deliberate strategy or approach in order to obtain, preserve, and enhance their proficiency in an unfamiliar or non-native language. Learners use these strategies as means and methods to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the language acquisition process, specifically their linguistic competence, self-confidence, understanding, integration, retention, storage, and retrieval of an acquired language, which is unique to each individual because language acquisition varies according to their levels of proficiency (Dalila Ayu & Harwati, 2021; Oxford, 2003).

There are many definitions of strategies in learning that can be applied in the context of language learning. Language learning strategies encompass the actions, behaviours, and cognitive processes employed by learners during the process of acquiring a new language (Oxford & Crookall, 1989; Rigney, 1987; Weinstein & Mayer, 1985). These strategies encompass a wide range of activities undertaken by learners with the aim of facilitating and enhancing language acquisition, as well as improving the retention and retrieval of linguistic

knowledge (Hardan, 2013; Rubin, 1987; Wenden, 1987). According to Oxford (1990), language acquisition strategies can be categorised into two distinct groups: direct strategies and indirect strategies. The aforementioned two categories are subsequently expanded into six subcategories, namely memory, cognitive, and compensating strategies within the domain of direct strategies. In contrast, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies are encompassed within the domain of indirect strategies.

Academic Writing Strategies

Academic writing is a pivotal skill in higher education, contributing significantly to students' success. However, many ESL learners struggle with the intricacies of academic writing. Undoubtedly, different groups of writers have dissimilar writing strategies as they are bound to different needs and challenges in writing (Ismiati & Pebriantika, 2020). Previous studies suggested various writing strategies in writing. Considering writing as one of the ways in assessing the language proficiency among the second language learners at the higher education institutions, the strategies adopted by the students are further studied. In assessing and validating a writing strategy scale for second language learners, Roofi et al. (2017) suggested five major writing strategies applied by non-native learners which are: metacognitive, effort regulation, cognitive, social and affective strategies.

Past Studies on Academic Writing Strategies

There have been many past studies on academic writing strategies. Despite the fact that second language learners ubiquitously deem writing as one of the toughest skills to be mastered in learning English (Fajrina et al., 2021; Ghafar & Mohamedamin, 2022), good writing skill is essential as the language learners will utilise the skill at their future workplace (Stewart et al., 2015). It is imperative to develop proficient writing abilities, since they are not only valuable but also essential in the context of one's future employment opportunities. This can be achieved through the establishment of a comprehensive writing skill set that incorporates several strategies. It is interesting to note that, a study conducted by Al Asmari (2013) in investigating the writing strategies, writing apprehension and writing achievement among Saudi EFL-Major students on 198 students found that students who applied writing strategies have lower writing anxiety compared to those not utilising the writing strategies. Hence, this shows that writing strategies employed by the learners may affect their anxiety level in producing their written work.

According to a mixed method study by Hu (2022), in investigating Chinese EFL learners' writing strategies and emotional aspects on 54 Chinese undergraduates, a moderate level of frequency was reported in the usage of writing strategies among the respondents. In this study, the findings were posted according to four main writing strategies: planning, execution, monitoring and revising. In detail, the respondents utilise execution strategies the most, followed by planning, monitoring and revising. It was reported that in executing, most of the students used the words, phrases or sentences that they have stumbled upon before. As for planning, the most applied planning strategies was reading about the topic carefully before they started writing and 'Before I write an English composition, I think about what ideas to write about by listing them'. The items highlighted the most in monitoring strategies were grammar checking and structure checking. The final strategy- revising- students stated that they often checked the spelling and punctuation and shifted some words or phrases once they had done writing.

Fajrina et al. (2021) conducted a study in identifying the writing strategies utilised by 135 Indonesian EFL undergraduate students of dissimilar proficiency. The general finding presented that there were no significant differences in the choice of strategies between students of dissimilar English proficiency levels. The findings in this study were reposted according to 4 stages; prewriting, drafting, revising and overall writing, with most of the respondents highlighted writing strategies were used the most in the drafting stage. In the prewriting stage, the most frequently used strategy was 'look at a model by proficient writer'. While in the drafting stage, 'reread what I have written' and 'start with the introduction' were the most common strategies used. In the final stage (revising stage), most respondents agree to 'check if essay meets the requirements'.

Aside from the aforementioned studies, Raoofi et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study on L2 writing strategies of university students. 21 university students were interviewed on the writing strategies employed. All respondents reported applying various writing strategies. Metacognitive strategies were found applied by highly proficient students - such as planning, organising ideas, monitoring, revising and evaluating. Cognitive, social and affective strategies were evident too, where the respondents stated asking for their friends and teacher's assistance, resting for a while should he/she face problems in writing, referring to the online (internet) sources, using memorised words in their work. Despite the fact that effort regulation strategies were practised by L2 learners, studies done on SLA are still scarce (Raoofi et al., 2017). Effort regulation strategies utilised by successful L2 learners were noticeable in a study by Raoofi et al. (2017), where the respondents claimed that they did not give up when they faced difficulty in writing.

Conceptual Framework

Writing is a process that requires writers to use strategies effectively. Deciding which strategies to use or what to include (or not include) requires writers to make informed decisions. According to Rahmat (2020), writing needs critical thinking skills. They need to apply information, analyse information, synthesise information, also evaluate information before deciding to include it in the written text. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study. This study explores the perception of writers on their use of strategies in academic writing. According to Raoofi, Miri, Gharibi & Malaki (2017), writers use metacognitive, effort regulation, cognitive, social and affective strategies in their writing process.

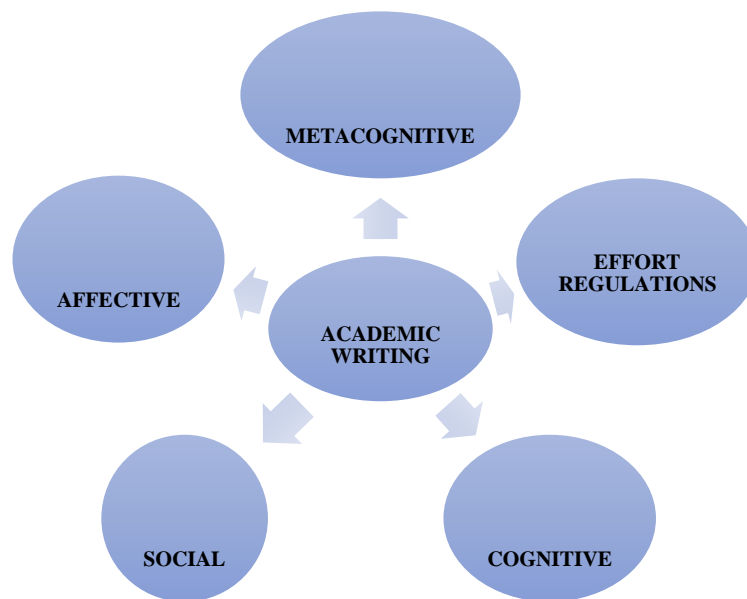


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study-
Exploring the Use of Strategies in Academic Writing: A
Case Study of ESL Writers

Methodology

This quantitative study is implemented to explore writing strategies among ESL undergraduates. A purposive sample of 94 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from Raofi, Miri, Gharibi & Malaki (2017) to reveal the variables in Table 1 below. The survey consists of 6 sections; section A profiles the demographic aspects, section B comprises 10 items on Metacognitive strategies, section C includes 5 items on Effort regulation strategies, section D has 6 items on cognitive strategy. Section E specifies 4 items on social strategies and section F exhibits 3 items on affective strategies.

Table 1

Distribution of Items in the Survey

Section	Writing Strategy Raofi, Miri, Gharibi & Malaki (2017)	No. of Items
B	Metacognitive	10
C	Effort Regulation	5
D	Cognitive	6
E	Social	4
F	Affective	3
Total		28

Table 2 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .937, thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument used. Further analysis using SPSS is conducted to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

Table 2
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.937	28

Findings

This section provides an overview of the demographic information of the participants who participated in the study. Three demographic variables were collected from the respondents, including gender, registered courses, and the discipline schools of the students.

Findings for Demographic Profile

Table 3

Percentage for Gender

	Items	Percentage
1	Male	33%
2	Female	67%

Table 3 displays the distribution of gender across all participants engaged in this study. Out of a sample size of 94 participants, the predominant gender demographic consists of females, accounting for 67% of the total. In contrast, the proportion of male respondents is 33%.

Table 4

Percentage for Course

	Items	Percentage
1	ELC501 – English for Critical Academic Reading	25%
2	ELC550 – English for Academic Writing	32%
3	EWC661– English for Report Writing	41%
4	ALS660 – Final Year Project (FYP – LG240 & LG243)	2%

Table 4 displays the breakdown of registered courses. The participants in the study were drawn from four different courses with English for Report Writing (EWC661) having the largest representation, comprising 41% of the total number of respondents. This was followed by English for Academic Writing (ELC550) at 32%, English for Critical Academic Reading (ELC501) at 25%, and finally, the Final Year Project for LG240 and LG243 (ALS660) accounted for 2% of the participants.

Table 5

Percentage for Discipline

	Items	Percentage
1	Science & Technology	54%
2	Social Sciences	23%
3	Business	23%

In relation to the field of study, this study encompasses three distinct clusters of disciplines, as illustrated in Table 5. The Science and Technology discipline had the largest proportion of participants, accounting for 54% of the total. This is followed by Social Sciences and Business, each with 23% of the total respondents.

Findings for Metacognitive

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do learners perceive the use of metacognitive strategies in writing?

Table 6

Mean for Metacognitive Strategies

Item	Variable	Mean
MWSQ1	I organize my ideas prior to writing.	3.7
MWSQ 2	I revise my writing to make sure that it includes everything I want to discuss in my writing.	4
MWSQ 3	I check my spelling.	4.3
MWSQ 4	I check my writing to make sure it is grammatically correct.	4.3
MWSQ 5	I evaluate and re-evaluate the ideas in my essay.	3.9
MWSQ 6	I monitor and evaluate my progress in writing.	3.8
MWSQ 7	I revise and edit an essay two or more times before I hand it in to my teacher.	4
MWSQ8	I go through the planning stages in my writing.	3.8
MWSQ9	I go through the drafting stages in my writing.	3.8
MWSQ10	I go through the revising and editing stages in my writing.	3.9

Table 6 presents the mean value of metacognitive strategies employed by the participants as a means to enhance their academic writing. The participants in the study employed a total of ten metacognitive methods. Notably, both MWSQ 3, which pertains to checking spelling, and MWSQ 4, which focuses on ensuring grammatical accuracy, received the highest mean value of 4.3. Both MWSQ 2, which pertains to the act of revising one's work to ensure the inclusion of all desired discussion points, and MWSQ 7, which focuses on the practise of revising and editing an essay multiple times prior to submission to an educator, yielded an identical mean result of 4. Subsequently, two additional metacognitive strategies, namely MWSQ 5 "I engage in the critical evaluation and re-evaluation of the concepts presented in my essay" and MWSQ 10 "I diligently undertake the revising and editing phases during the composition process," were identified, yielding a mean value of 3.9. The mean values for MWSQ 6, MWSQ 8, and MWSQ 9, which pertain to monitoring and evaluating progress in writing, going through planning stages in writing, and going through drafting stages in writing, respectively, were found to be 3.8. Finally, the mean value for the response to MWSQ1, which assesses the extent to which individuals engage in pre-writing organisation of their ideas, was found to be 3.7. This finding suggests that the participants prioritised reducing errors, including those related to spelling and grammar, and subsequently engaged in the process of revising and editing their written work. The participants were observed to engage in monitoring and evaluating their preparation stages in writing. Additionally, it was noted that the least utilised strategy among the participants was structuring their ideas prior to initiating the writing process.

Findings for Effort Regulation

This section presents data to answer the second research question on how learners perceive the use of effort regulation strategies (ERS) in writing. There were five different strategies listed in this third part of the questionnaire.

Table 7

Mean for Effort Regulation

Item	Variable	Mean
ERSQ1	I write a lot to develop my writing skills.	3.2
ERSQ2	I often work hard to do well in my writing even if I don't like English writing tasks.	3.9
ERSQ3	Even if the writing activities are difficult, I don't give up but try to engage in them.	4.1
ERSQ4	I concentrate as hard as I can when doing a writing task.	4.1
ERSQ5	I spend a lot of time and energy on writing good English assignments.	4.1

Table 7 displays the mean values for effort regulation strategies employed by the learners. The highest mean values were recorded for three different strategies which are ERSQ3 ("Even if the writing activities are difficult, I don't give up but try to engage in them."), ERSQ4 ("I concentrate as hard as I can when doing a writing task.") and ERSQ5 ("I spend a lot of time and energy on writing good English assignments."). The second highest mean score was 3.9 for "I often work hard to do well in my writing even if I don't like English writing tasks". Meanwhile, ERSQ1, "I write a lot to develop my writing skills." showed the lowest mean score with 3.2.

Findings for Cognitive

This section presents data to answer the third research question on how learners perceive the use of cognitive strategies in writing. There were six different cognitive strategies (CWS) listed in this fourth part of the questionnaire.

Table 8

Mean for Cognitive Strategies

Item	Variable	Mean
CWSQ1	I use memorized grammatical elements such as singular and plural forms, verb tenses, prefixes and suffixes, etc, in my writing	3.9
CWSQ2	I put newly memorized vocabulary in my sentences.	3.8
CWSQ3	In order to generate ideas for my writing, I usually engage myself in brainstorming.	4
CWSQ4	I use different words that have the same meaning.	4
CWSQ5	I use my experiences and knowledge in my writing.	4.2
CWSQ6	I try to use effective linking words to ensure clear and logical relationship between sentences or paragraphs	4

Table 8 displays the cognitive strategies used by the learners. The highest mean score value of 4.2 was recorded for CWSQ5, "I use my experiences and knowledge in writing". Meanwhile,

the second highest mean value was 4 for three different strategies which are CWSQ3 (“In order to generate ideas for my writing, I usually engage in brainstorming.”), CWSQ4 (“I use different words that have the same meaning.”) and CWSQ6 (“I try to use effective linking words to ensure clear and logical relationships between sentences or paragraphs.”). Besides, CWSQ1, “I use memorized grammatical elements such as singular and plural forms, verb tenses, prefixes and suffixes, etc, in my writing” showed a mean score value of 3.9. Lastly, the lowest mean score is 3.8 for CWSQ2, “I put newly memorized vocabulary in my sentences”

Findings for Social Strategies

This section presents data to answer research question 4 on how learners perceive the use of social strategies in writing. There were four items of social strategies (SWS) presented in this part.

Table 9

Mean for Social Strategies

Item	Variable	Mean
SWSQ1	In order to generate ideas for my writing, I usually discuss the writing topic with a friend or classmate.	4
SWSQ 2	After revising and editing my essay thoroughly, I ask a friend or my classmate to read and comment on it.	3.6
SWSQ 3	I try to identify friends or classmates whom I can ask for help in my writing.	3.9
SWSQ 4	When I have trouble writing my essay, I try to do it with my classmates or friends.	3.8

Table 9 presents the mean score for Social Strategies. The highest mean is 4 for the item “In order to generate ideas for writing, I usually discuss the writing topic with a friend or classmate”. Next at a mean score of 3.9 is “I try to identify friends or classmates whom I can ask for help in my writing”. The item on “When I have trouble writing my essay, I try to do it with my classmates or friends” is at the mean score of 3.8. The item with lowest mean is “After revising and editing my essay thoroughly, I ask a friend or my classmate to read and comment on it”, at 3.6.

Findings for Affective Strategies

This section presents data to answer research question 5 on how learners perceive the use of affective strategies in writing. Three items were outlined in accordance to the affective strategies (AWS).

Table 10

Mean for Affective Strategies

Item	Variable	Mean
AWSQ1	I try to write an essay in class with confidence and ease.	3.7
AWSQ2	I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of writing.	4
AWSQ3	I encourage myself to write even when I am afraid of making mistakes	4.1

Table 10 depicts the mean for Affective Strategies. The item with the highest mean is “I encourage myself to write even when I am afraid of making mistakes” at 4.1. The next item with .1 difference is “I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of writing” at 4. The lowest mean is at 3.7, for “I try to write an essay in class with confidence and ease”.

Conclusion

This closing section includes the summary of the main findings on all five writing strategies researched in this study. The overview is followed by pedagogical implications and suggestions for future researchers to embark on.

Summary of Findings and Discussions

Based on the devised objective, this study indicates five different strategies in academic writing employed by ESL writers namely Metacognitive, Effort Regulation, Cognitive, Social and Affective strategies. In terms of metacognitive strategies, most participants agreed that they paid extra attention to spelling and grammatical aspects when writing, especially since the participants were majoring in difficult writing courses like Critical Academic Reading, Academic Writing, Report Writing and Final Year Project as ESL writers. This is in line with the findings by Raofi et al. (2014) mentioning that metacognitive strategies are usually used by highly proficient students as they are required to plan, organise ideas, monitor, revise and evaluate their writing compositions. Secondly, the findings on effort regulation strategies have proven that participants focused on motivating themselves, concentrating when writing and spending more time and energy when completing English writing assignments. These efforts are crucial and substantially utilised successfully by L2 learners as a sign of not giving up when facing difficulties in writing (Raofi et al., 2017).

Besides, ESL writers participating in the study also perceived cognitive strategies as important by agreeing to the notion that experiences and tacit knowledge were used in academic writing. In different stages of writing like ‘executing’, ESL writers relied heavily on sentence patterns from previous reading. Moreover, as an ESL writer, most of them planned the composition by reading and researching on the topic (Hu, 2022). Not only that, more than half of the participants also used social strategy to generate ideas for writing by discussing the topics with fellow classmates or friends. Raofi (2017) highlighted this as evident in which friends, teachers’ assistance and being relaxed and composed are important for ESL writers to produce good writing. Hence, his findings are in accordance with this study for Affective strategy; most participants agreed that they prioritised stable mental state when writing and tried to relax whenever they faced fear and anxiety.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

There are few suggestions that can be made pertaining future research delving into writing strategies for ESL writers. Firstly, future research should consider employing qualitative methods to delve deeper into the matter of cognitive and metacognitive areas of academic writing. Pre and post studies can be executed to assess the efficiency of employing these strategies. Accordingly, qualitative findings will help educators to enforce effort regulation, social and affective strategies to help students enhance their writing skills. Besides, future researchers may also focus on the relationship between those strategies to inculcate and establish optimal writing flow to ESL writers who struggle to write in academic settings. This study on the perceptions from ESL writers will provide a platform in justifying the difficulties

and concerns experienced by them and provide new area of research to the future researchers and academicians.

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