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Vocabulary Knowledge and Self-Efficacy in EFL Students' Descriptive Writing Performance: A Correlational Study

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ABSTRACT

Writing performance in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) involves both linguistic resources and learners' beliefs about their writing ability. This study examines the relationships among vocabulary knowledge, self-efficacy, and descriptive writing performance among Indonesian EFL learners. The study used a quantitative correlational design with 20 eleventh-grade students from an Islamic boarding school in Pandeglang, Banten, selected through purposive sampling. The study collected data through a vocabulary knowledge test, a self-efficacy questionnaire, and a descriptive writing task. Descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlation were used for data analysis. Vocabulary knowledge was strongly and positively associated with writing performance (rho = .714, p < .001). In contrast, self-efficacy showed a very weak and non-significant association with writing performance (rho = .055, p = .816). Vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy were also not significantly related (rho = .297, p = .204). The findings indicate that vocabulary knowledge was the strongest correlate of descriptive writing performance in this sample, while the relationship involving self-efficacy was not detectable. These non-significant findings should be interpreted with caution, as the sample was small and self-efficacy scores showed limited variation. The study suggests that EFL writing instruction should give sustained attention to vocabulary development while continuing to support students in developing realistic perceptions of their writing abilities.

Keywords: descriptive text, EFL students, self-efficacy, vocabulary knowledge, writing performance

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Introduction

Writing is a complex skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it requires learners to integrate multiple linguistic, cognitive, and affective resources simultaneously (Kormos, 2023). Unlike receptive skills, writing involves generating ideas, organizing information coherently, selecting appropriate linguistic forms, and expressing meaning accurately for a target audience (Oqab, 2018). Many EFL learners experience difficulties when composing written texts, particularly in contexts where exposure to English is limited. Previous studies have identified difficulties in idea development, vocabulary selection, grammatical accuracy, textual organization, and writing anxiety among EFL learners (Basaffar & Alzahrani, 2022; Sanders-Reio et al., 2014; Setyowati et al., 2024).

Among the various genres taught in secondary-level EFL classrooms, descriptive writing occupies an important place because it provides a foundation for developing students' ability to communicate concrete information about people, places, objects, and phenomena (Christina, 2021; Maghvira et al., 2023). Producing an effective descriptive text requires students not only to possess sufficient linguistic knowledge but also to employ appropriate strategies for selecting, organizing, and elaborating relevant details. Consequently, successful descriptive writing is influenced by a combination of linguistic competence and psychological readiness (Hetthong & Teo, 2013). Understanding how these factors interact is therefore essential for improving writing practices and supporting students' writing development.

One of the linguistic factors most frequently associated with writing performance is vocabulary knowledge (Tong et al., 2023). Vocabulary constitutes the fundamental building block of language because it provides learners with the lexical resources needed to express ideas accurately and meaningfully (Maamuujav, 2021). Nation (2022) argues that vocabulary knowledge extends beyond simple word recognition to encompass meaning, form, grammatical behavior, collocations, and contextual usage. Learners with broader and deeper vocabulary knowledge are generally better equipped to convey ideas, establish coherence, and produce more sophisticated written texts. In contrast, limited vocabulary often restricts learners' ability to communicate effectively and may lead to repetitive, vague, or grammatically inaccurate writing (Christina, 2021; Huliani, 2019).

Empirical evidence largely supports the importance of vocabulary knowledge in writing development. Huliani (2019) reported a significant positive relationship between vocabulary mastery and descriptive writing achievement among Indonesian EFL learners. Similarly, Kilic (2019) found that both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge significantly predicted writing performance. More recently, Sukying (2023) demonstrated that vocabulary size and depth substantially contributed to second-language writing quality. Collectively, these findings suggest that vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in shaping students' writing performance across various EFL contexts.

However, writing performance cannot be explained solely by linguistic competence; learners' beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and confidence also influence it (Pajares, 2003). One psychological factor that has received considerable attention in language learning research is self-efficacy (Hao & Lu, 2024; Hashemnejad et al., 2014). According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs about their capability to organize and execute actions required to achieve specific goals. In educational contexts, students with stronger self-efficacy tend to demonstrate greater persistence, resilience, and willingness to engage in challenging tasks. In writing activities, learners who believe they can write successfully are expected to invest more effort, use more effective strategies, and cope better with writing difficulties.

Previous studies examining the relationship between self-efficacy and writing performance have yielded mixed findings. Several researchers reported positive and significant associations between writing self-efficacy and writing achievement (Basaffar & Alzahrani, 2022; De Vleeschauwer, 2023; Hetthong & Teo, 2013; Sanders-Reio et al., 2014). These studies suggest that learners with greater writing confidence tend to achieve better writing outcomes. Nevertheless, other studies have produced contrasting results. For example, Khojasteh et al. (2016), Setyowati et al. (2024), and Bibi et al. (2025) found that self-efficacy was not significantly related to writing performance. These inconsistent findings indicate that the role of self-efficacy in EFL writing remains inconclusive and may depend on contextual, cultural, or methodological factors.

Despite the growing body of research on vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy, these variables have rarely been examined simultaneously in relation to descriptive writing

performance in a single EFL context. Existing vocabulary studies primarily emphasize linguistic resources, whereas self-efficacy studies focus on learners' motivational beliefs. This separation leaves limited evidence on how the two variables are related to writing performance within the same group of learners. Mixed findings on self-efficacy further suggest that its association with writing performance may vary across contexts and measurement conditions.

To address this gap, the present study examines the relationships among vocabulary knowledge, self-efficacy, and descriptive writing performance among Indonesian EFL learners. The study is guided by three research questions: (1) To what extent is students' vocabulary knowledge associated with their descriptive writing performance? (2) To what extent is students' self-efficacy associated with their descriptive writing performance? and (3) Is there a significant relationship between students' vocabulary knowledge and their self-efficacy? Corresponding hypotheses were formulated as follows: H1, vocabulary knowledge is significantly related to descriptive writing performance; H2, self-efficacy is significantly related to descriptive writing performance; and H3, vocabulary knowledge is significantly related to self-efficacy.

By examining these variables within a single correlational framework, the study provides context-specific evidence on the relative strength of linguistic and psychological factors associated with descriptive writing performance. The findings may help EFL teachers determine whether vocabulary development, motivational support, or both should receive greater attention when supporting students' descriptive writing in similar educational settings.

Methods

This research employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationships among vocabulary knowledge, self-efficacy, and students' writing performance in descriptive texts. The correlational design was chosen because this study focused on identifying relationships among variables without manipulating the research variable. Creswell (2018) notes that correlational research identifies relationships among two or more variables or sets of scores through statistical procedures. Thus, this study analyzes the

relationship among vocabulary knowledge (X1), self-efficacy (X2), and writing performance (Y).

The research was conducted at an Islamic boarding school in Pandeglang, Banten, with eleventh-grade students as participants. The sample consisted of 20 eleventh-grade students purposively selected because they had studied English texts and completed descriptive writing tasks relevant to the research objectives. Creswell (2018) explains that purposive sampling selects participants who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2013). This technique was chosen to ensure that the data obtained represent students' performance in the context of descriptive writing learning in EFL classrooms. Although the sample size was relatively small, it was considered adequate for an exploratory correlational study conducted within a specific educational setting. Nevertheless, the limited number of participants may reduce statistical power and restrict the generalizability of the findings beyond the context of the present study. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution and viewed as context-specific rather than broadly representative of Indonesian EFL learners.

This study employed three instruments: A Vocabulary Knowledge Test, a Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, and a Descriptive Writing Test. The Vocabulary Knowledge Test consisted of 30 multiple-choice items assessing word meaning, word use in context, word use in sentences, and synonym/paraphrase recognition, based on Nation (2022) and Schmidt (2010). Each correct answer received one point, while an incorrect answer received zero. The Self-Efficacy Questionnaire comprised 15 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and was developed based on Bandura's (1997) dimensions of magnitude, strength, and generality. The Descriptive Writing Test required students to produce a 150–200-word descriptive text on either an inspirational figure or a tourist destination. Students' writing was assessed using an analytical rubric adapted from Brown and Abeywickrama (2018), covering organization, content, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Two researchers scored the writing samples after a calibration session to establish a consistent application of the rubric. Because scoring was based on discussion and mutual agreement rather than independent scoring, the researchers did not calculate formal inter-rater reliability statistics.

Although vocabulary was included in the writing rubric, the writing score represented multiple dimensions of writing performance rather than vocabulary alone.

Before data collection, one EFL lecturer and two experienced EFL teachers reviewed all instruments to establish content validity. Aiken's V was calculated using Microsoft Excel based on five criteria: clarity, appropriateness, relevance, construction, and language, with a minimum acceptable coefficient of 0.75. The mean Aiken's V coefficients were 0.854 for the Vocabulary Knowledge Test, 0.944 for the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, and 0.950 for the Writing Test and Rubric. Two items received coefficients of 0.667 and were revised based on expert feedback before data collection. The remaining 43 items met the validity criterion. Reliability analysis using SPSS 27 showed satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .804 for the Vocabulary Knowledge Test, .881 for the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, and .886 for the Writing Test and Rubric. These coefficients exceeded the .70 criterion, indicating acceptable internal consistency. For the writing instrument, this coefficient reflects the internal consistency of the rubric criteria rather than inter-rater agreement.

The data collection technique of this research was conducted in three stages. *First,* students take a vocabulary knowledge test to measure their vocabulary mastery. *Second,* students complete a self-efficacy questionnaire to assess their confidence in writing descriptive text. *Third,* students take a writing test by writing a descriptive text following the instructions provided. The entire data collection process is conducted directly in class within a predetermined time.

All the data from this research were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to find out the mean, minimum score, maximum score, and standard deviation of each research variable. The table shows the data distribution for each variable, and the graph shows the overall data distribution. Before conducting the hypothesis test, the data were first tested for normality. The normality test was done using the Shapiro-Wilk test because the sample size was below 50. Furthermore, the relationships among vocabulary knowledge, self-efficacy, and writing performance were analyzed using Spearman's rho to determine the direction and strength of these relationships.

Result and Discussion

This part reports the results of the correlation analysis among students' vocabulary knowledge, self-efficacy, and their writing performance, as presented as follows:

1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics summarized students' vocabulary knowledge, self-efficacy, and writing performance. As presented in Table 1, the mean score of vocabulary knowledge was 78.00 (SD = 8.94), while the mean self-efficacy score was 73.19 (SD = 6.37). The average writing performance score was 76.80 (SD = 4.95). Among the three variables, vocabulary knowledge exhibited the greatest variability, whereas writing performance showed the smallest standard deviation, indicating relatively homogeneous writing scores among participants.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Descriptive Statistics

		VOCABULARY (X1)	SELF-EFFICACY (X2)	WRITING (Y)
N	Valid	20	20	20
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		78.00	73.19	76.80
Median		76.67	73.33	76.00
Std. Deviation		8.94	6.37	4.95
Minimum		66.67	62.67	68.00
Maximum		93.33	86.67	84.00

2. Normality Test

Prior to conducting correlation analyses, the normality of the data was examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test because the sample size was below 50. The results indicated that vocabulary knowledge was not normally distributed (p = .035), whereas self-efficacy (p = .793) and writing performance (p = .100) met the normality assumption. Since one variable violated

the normality assumption, Spearman's rank-order correlation was selected for subsequent analyses. The analysis of these tests is shown in the tables below:

Table 2

Test of Normality

	Shapiro-Wilk		
Variable	Statistic	df	Sig.
X1	.896	20	.035
X2	.972	20	.793
Y	.920	20	.100

Given that the normality test revealed a violation of the assumption of normality for the vocabulary knowledge variable, a non-parametric correlational approach was adopted for the analysis. Specifically, Spearman's rank-order correlation (rho) was used to examine relationships among the variables. This decision aligns with the principle that non-parametric tests are more appropriate when data fail to meet the assumptions required by parametric procedures, particularly normality (Corder & Foreman, 2014; Field, 2018). Spearman's rho is particularly well-suited to this context, as it does not assume the data come from a normally distributed population and instead operates on ranked values, making it robust to distributional irregularities (Hauke & Kossowski, 2011). This statistical approach has been widely endorsed in educational research when sample sizes are modest and distributional assumptions cannot be fully satisfied (Field, 2018; Siegel & Castellan, 1988)

3. Correlation Test

The table below presents the results of Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis examining the relationships among vocabulary knowledge (X1), self-efficacy (X2), and writing performance (Y). The findings are discussed in relation to each of the three research questions guiding this study.

Table 3

Correlations Analysis among Vocabulary Knowledge, Self-Efficacy, and Writing Performance

Correlations Spearman's rho				
		X1	X2	Y
X1	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.297	.714**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.204	.000
	N	20	20	20
X2	Correlation Coefficient	.297	1.000	.055
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.204	.	.816
	N	20	20	20
Y	Correlation Coefficient	.714**	.055	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.816	.
	N	20	20	20

.

4. Testing Hypothesis

RQ1: To what extent is vocabulary knowledge associated with descriptive writing performance?

To address the first research question, a Spearman's rank-order correlation was computed between vocabulary knowledge and writing performance. The analysis revealed a strong positive correlation (rho = .714, p < .001). This result indicates that students with higher levels of vocabulary knowledge tend to achieve higher writing performance scores. Therefore, H1 was supported. Following Cohen's (1988) conventions for interpreting correlation coefficients, this value falls within the range typically classified as a strong effect, indicating that vocabulary knowledge accounts for a substantial proportion of the variance in students' descriptive writing performance.

Table 4

Correlation Between Vocabulary Knowledge and Writing Performance

N	Variables (X1 - Y)	rho	p
20	Vocabulary Knowledge – Writing Performance	.714	.000

The strongest finding of the present study was the significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge and descriptive writing performance (rho = .714, p < .001). This result reinforces the widely accepted view that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of second-language writing. Writing requires learners to transform ideas into meaningful linguistic forms, and this transformation is difficult without sufficient lexical resources. Students with broader vocabulary knowledge can generally select more precise words, express ideas more effectively, and construct more coherent texts. Consequently, they tend to produce higher-quality writing than learners with more limited lexical resources.

This finding aligns with Nation's (2022) theoretical perspective that vocabulary knowledge underlies successful language use across all language skills. In writing specifically, lexical knowledge supports idea generation, textual cohesion, and communicative effectiveness. The present result also corroborates previous empirical studies. Huliani (2019) found that vocabulary mastery significantly contributed to descriptive writing performance among Indonesian EFL learners. Similarly, Kilic (2019) reported that receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge significantly predicted writing achievement. More recently, Sukying (2023) demonstrated that vocabulary size and vocabulary depth contributed substantially to second-language writing quality. The consistency between the present findings and previous studies further supports the association between vocabulary knowledge and writing performance in EFL settings.

The strength of the relationship observed in the present study may also be explained by the nature of descriptive writing itself. Unlike argumentative or analytical writing, descriptive writing relies heavily on learners' ability to retrieve and utilize appropriate lexical items to represent characteristics, qualities, and attributes of people, places, or objects (Christina, 2021; Maghvira et al., 2023). Students with richer vocabularies are therefore better positioned to elaborate descriptions, avoid repetition, and communicate details more effectively. This may explain why vocabulary knowledge emerged as a particularly strong correlate of writing performance in the current context.

It is also important to consider a methodological factor that may have contributed to this correlation's strength. Because vocabulary constituted one of the five dimensions

assessed within the analytical writing rubric, a degree of conceptual and measurement overlap existed between the vocabulary knowledge test and the writing performance score. This overlap may have inflated the observed correlation, as students who performed well on the vocabulary test were also partially evaluated on vocabulary use in their written texts. While the rubric assessed writing holistically across multiple dimensions, including organization, content, grammar, and mechanics, this shared measurement component should be acknowledged as a potential threat to the independence of the two variables, and future research may benefit from using rubrics that exclude vocabulary as a scoring criterion when vocabulary is also measured as a separate predictor.

RQ2: To what extent is self-efficacy associated with descriptive writing performance?

The second research question examined the relationship between self-efficacy and writing performance. The analysis showed a very weak positive correlation (rho = .055, p = .816). The result was not statistically significant, indicating that students' self-efficacy was not associated with their writing performance in the present study. Therefore, H2 was not supported. However, given the limited statistical power associated with the sample size (N = 20), these findings should be interpreted as an absence of detectable association within this sample rather than definitive evidence that no relationship exists between self-efficacy and writing performance.

Table 5

Correlation Between Self-efficacy and Writing Performance

N	Variables (X2 – Y)	rho	p
20	Self-efficacy – Writing Performance	.055	.816

In contrast to the strong association found for vocabulary knowledge, self-efficacy was not significantly related to writing performance (rho = .055, p = .816). This result differs from studies reporting positive associations between writing self-efficacy and writing achievement (Basaffar & Alzahrani, 2022; Hetthong & Teo, 2013; Sanders-Reio et al., 2014). However, it aligns with the findings of Khojasteh et al. (2016), Setyowati et al. (2024), and Bibi et al. (2025), who also reported non-significant relationships between self-efficacy and writing

performance. The present study therefore contributes additional evidence to the growing literature suggesting that the influence of self-efficacy on writing outcomes may not be universal across all educational contexts.

Several explanations may account for this finding. *First,* the self-efficacy scores in the present study exhibited very limited variability, with all participants categorized as having high levels of self-efficacy. Such a pattern suggests a ceiling effect, in which scores cluster near the upper limit of the scale, reducing the variability needed for correlational analysis. When participants report similarly high levels of confidence, statistical procedures are less able to detect meaningful relationships between self-efficacy and other variables, even when theoretical relationships may exist.

Second, self-efficacy may not directly influence writing performance. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy primarily affects individuals' choices, effort, persistence, and resilience rather than performance outcomes themselves. Consequently, self-efficacy may influence writing achievement through mediating variables such as learner engagement, strategy use, self-regulation, or writing practice. Hao and Lu (2024), for example, found that learner engagement plays a significant mediating role between self-efficacy and academic achievement. Therefore, the absence of a direct relationship in the present study does not necessarily imply that self-efficacy is unimportant; rather, its influence may be indirect and context-dependent.

Third, cultural and contextual factors may have contributed to the observed results. In some educational environments, students may report high levels of confidence due to social desirability bias or culturally influenced response patterns (Tao & Yu, 2024). Consequently, self-reported confidence may not always accurately reflect actual writing competence. Under such circumstances, students' perceived capability may become disconnected from their actual writing performance, resulting in weak or non-significant correlations (Pajares, 2003).

RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy?

The third research question investigated the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy. The analysis revealed a weak positive correlation (rho = .297, p = .204). However, the relationship was not statistically significant. Thus, no significant association was found between vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy among the participants. Consequently, H3 was not supported. As with the previous findings, this result warrants cautious interpretation given the modest sample size, which limits the study's capacity to detect weak correlations with statistical confidence.

Table 6

Correlation Between Vocabulary Knowledge and Self-Efficacy

N	Variables (X1 – X2)	rho	p
20	Vocabulary Knowledge – Self-efficacy	.297	.204

Another notable finding concerns the absence of a significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy (rho = .297, p = .204). Although the correlation coefficient was positive, the relationship was weak and not statistically significant. Thus, stronger vocabulary knowledge was not necessarily accompanied by higher self-efficacy in the present sample. Putri et al. (2024) reported a similar pattern, finding a weak and non-significant relationship between EFL students' self-efficacy and vocabulary mastery. Taken together, these findings suggest that vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy may not develop in parallel, as students with greater vocabulary knowledge do not necessarily report higher confidence in their abilities, and vice versa. This pattern is also consistent with the conceptual distinction between self-efficacy as a belief about one's capability and actual competence measured through performance-based indicators (Pajares, 2003).

This finding highlights an important distinction between cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning (Kormos, 2023). Vocabulary knowledge represents an observable linguistic resource acquired through learning and practice (Nation, 2022), whereas self-efficacy reflects learners' subjective beliefs regarding their capabilities (Bandura, 1997).

While both variables are relevant to language learning, they may develop through different mechanisms and may not always progress simultaneously (Pajares, 2003). A learner may possess adequate vocabulary knowledge but remain uncertain about their writing ability, while another learner may exhibit strong confidence despite having relatively limited linguistic resources.

Taken together, these findings indicate that vocabulary knowledge, rather than self-efficacy is the more immediate and observable correlate of students' descriptive writing performance in the present study. Vocabulary knowledge showed a strong, statistically significant positive relationship with writing performance, whereas self-efficacy was not significantly related to writing performance, and vocabulary knowledge was not significantly related to self-efficacy. This pattern supports the view that successful writing in EFL context depends heavily on learners' access to adequate lexical resources (Huliani, 2019; Kilic, 2019; Nation, 2022; Sukying, 2023), while also cautioning against assuming that students' self-reported confidence automatically translates into superior writing performance (Bibi et al., 2025; Khojasteh et al., 2016; Pajares, 2003; Setyowati et al., 2024).

The findings also carry important pedagogical implications. Because vocabulary knowledge showed the strongest relationship with writing performance, teachers should prioritize systematic vocabulary development as an integral part of writing instruction. Explicit vocabulary instruction, extensive reading activities, lexical notebooks, vocabulary recycling, and vocabulary-focused writing tasks may help learners expand their lexical repertoire and improve writing quality. Furthermore, writing instruction should give students opportunities to apply newly learned vocabulary in meaningful communicative contexts.

Although self-efficacy was not significantly associated with writing performance in this study, it should not be neglected in instructional practice. Teachers should continue fostering students' confidence through constructive feedback, mastery experiences, collaborative writing activities, and opportunities for self-reflection. Rather than focusing solely on increasing confidence, instructional efforts should aim to help learners develop realistic, evidence-based perceptions of their writing abilities. This approach may help align students' perceived competence more closely with actual writing performance.

Finally, the correlational nature of this study does not permit causal conclusions. Although vocabulary knowledge was strongly associated with writing performance, the findings do not establish that it directly causes improvements in writing quality. Future studies should use larger samples, longitudinal designs, and multivariate analyses to deepen understanding of the complex relationships among linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors in EFL writing development.

Conclusion

This study investigates the relationships among vocabulary knowledge, self-efficacy, and descriptive writing performance among Indonesian EFL learners. Vocabulary knowledge was strongly and significantly associated with descriptive writing performance (rho = .714, $p < .001$), whereas self-efficacy was not significantly associated with writing performance (rho = .055, p = .816). Vocabulary knowledge and self-efficacy were also not significantly related (rho = .297, p = .204). Thus, vocabulary knowledge showed the strongest association with descriptive writing performance in the present sample.

These findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, including the small sample, single educational setting, limited variation in self-efficacy scores, and potential measurement overlap between vocabulary knowledge and writing performance. The non-significant findings should therefore be interpreted cautiously. Future research should examine these relationships using larger, more diverse samples and independent writing assessments with formal inter-rater reliability procedures.

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