

# From Confusion to Confidence: A Grounded Theory of Academic Writing Development Among Iranian Advanced Korean Learners

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Mastery of academic writing is crucial for achievement in higher education. Nevertheless, the majority of studies on Korean academic writing have concentrated on Chinese learners, neglecting other international learners, including Iranian graduate students. This study examines the academic writing obstacles encountered by Iranian learners in Korean universities, focusing on linguistic, cognitive, affective, socio-cultural, and technical aspects. Employing Straussian grounded theory (GT), in-depth interviews were performed with 30 Iranian graduate students with advanced Korean competence and three to nine years of language acquisition experience. Data gathered from July 2023 to September 2024 were subjected to open, axial, and selective coding, resulting in a paradigm model and a conditional matrix. Identified key concerns include limited understanding of genres, obstacles to integrating discourse, excessive reliance on digital resources, and increased writing anxiety. A self-directed academic environment, little institutional support, and fragile peer networks exacerbate these factors. Notwithstanding these obstacles, students used coping mechanisms such as iterative writing, judicious use of technology, peer collaboration, and emotional regulation. The research presents a developmental process model delineating non-linear stages of confusion, crises, adaptation, and achievement. Findings highlight the necessity for culturally responsive, learner-centered pedagogy, adaptable scaffolding, and equitable technology integration to enhance international students' proficiency in academic Korean writing.

*Keywords:* academic writing development, Iranian learners, Korean universities, grounded theory, writing challenges

## Introduction

Among the various forms of writing, academic writing has been widely documented as one of the most challenging skills for international and second-language learners (Al Badi, 2015; Cennetkuşu, 2017; Singh, 2015). Within the Korean higher education context, this skill has become an increasingly central focus in Korean language education, given the growing demand for instruction tailored to academic and research-oriented purposes. This need is underscored by the steady increase in international student enrollment in Korean higher education, which rose from 63,952 in 2008 to 181,842 in 2023, reflecting a compound annual growth rate

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(CAGR) of 6.7%. Growth at the graduate level has been even more pronounced, with the number of international master's and doctoral students expanding from 12,388 to 48,153 (CAGR: 8.9%), including a significant rise in Iranian graduate students from 51 to 324 during the same period (Korean Ministry of Education: <http://www.moe.go.kr>).

Unlike literary or practical writing, academic writing in a second language entails cognitively and linguistically demanding tasks, such as identifying research problems, constructing logical arguments, conducting critical analyses, and articulating original perspectives with fluency and accuracy (Deb, 2018; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2003). Despite its importance, many international learners remain underprepared, as university language curricula often prioritize listening and speaking skills over the systematic development of academic writing (Bailey, 2014; Campbell, 2019). This imbalance results in widespread difficulties with report writing, examinations, academic readings, and structured discussions, especially among international and EFL students in graduate programs (Al Badi, 2015; Singh, 2015). Proficiency in academic writing requires more than grammar and vocabulary knowledge; it demands higher-order cognitive skills, such as synthesizing multiple sources, organizing ideas according to genre- and discipline-specific conventions, and applying appropriate academic discourse (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2003). For Iranian graduate students, these challenges are compounded by the need to navigate differences between their native academic norms and the expectations of Korean academic discourse communities, a pattern widely noted in contrastive rhetoric and intercultural academic writing research (Singh, 2019; Wong, 1997). Insufficient institutional support—such as limited access to writing centers, individualized feedback, and sustained academic mentoring—can further hinder learners' writing development and academic success (Okuda & Anderson, 2018; Tiruchittampalam, Ross, Whitehouse, & Nicholson, 2018).

Over the past decade, research on Korean academic writing instruction has advanced, yet much of it has focused on textbook development (Bae, Woo, Jeong, & Kang, 2011; Hong, 2005) and content analysis (Yun & Jeon, 2013; Jeon & Choi, 2015), with relatively limited attention to learners' lived experiences. Genre-based and social constructivist approaches have gained traction since 2012, highlighting the recursive, context-sensitive nature of writing shaped by audience, purpose, and discourse community expectations (Kwon, 2019; Seo & Ahn, 2019), while cognitive constructivist perspectives have provided insights into learners' internal writing processes (Seo & Ahn, 2019). Nevertheless, important dimensions, such as affective challenges, learning environments, and technological dependencies, remain underexplored, despite their growing influence on academic writing development (Kang, 2022).

In this context, Iranian graduate students represent a distinct yet understudied group within Korean higher education. Their unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds likely influence how they approach and experience Korean academic writing, underscoring the need for pedagogical strategies that are both targeted and culturally responsive. Addressing this gap requires a deeper understanding of their specific challenges and coping strategies, which can inform more inclusive and effective instructional models. To this end, this study adopts a grounded theory (GT) approach to capture learners' lived experiences and systematically generate a conceptual framework grounded in empirical data. The research focuses specifically on end-of-semester reports—a core academic genre at the graduate level that demands logical argumentation, structural coherence, and accurate use of academic language. This genre provides a meaningful lens for examining learners' writing performance and coping mechanisms in authentic academic contexts.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What specific challenges do Iranian learners face in writing Korean for academic purposes?
2. What underlying factors contribute to these challenges?
3. What coping strategies do learners use to address these difficulties?

By answering these questions, this study contributes to the development of learner-centered strategies for academic Korean writing instruction. It offers a conceptual framework for understanding learners' challenges and coping mechanisms while providing pedagogical insights to enhance institutional support. Ultimately, this research aims to foster equitable academic integration and inform future curriculum development, particularly for underrepresented groups such as Iranian graduate students.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on academic writing challenges in second-language contexts, with a focus on international learners and Korean academic writing instruction. Section 3 examines the key factors influencing second language academic writing. Section 4 outlines the research methodology, including the rationale for adopting grounded theory and the procedures for data collection and analysis. Section 5 presents the results of the coding analysis, detailing the categories, dimensions, and properties that emerged from the data. Section 6 discusses these findings and highlights key pedagogical implications. Finally, Section 7 offers concluding remarks and directions for future research.

## **Literature Review**

Given the growing number of international students at Korean universities, it is crucial to understand the academic writing challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they use to manage them. This necessity is particularly evident for underrepresented groups whose distinctive linguistic and cultural backgrounds may influence their experiences in specific ways. This section is organized into: (a) challenges and strategies in Korean academic writing, and (b) educational implications and instructional methodologies.

### **Challenges and Strategies in Academic Writing**

Academic writing in Korean poses obstacles that surpass mere language proficiency. In research including 102 undergraduate and graduate Korean language learners, Hong (2005) found insufficient major-specific information and limitations in employing diverse phrases as the primary obstacles. Learners frequently employed an imitation strategy, using academic books as guides to follow established writing patterns. Likewise, Hong (2008) underscored that proficient academic writing in Korean requires not only linguistic proficiency, but also robust reading and listening abilities, as well as the capacity to uphold a formal and academic tone. Through focus group interviews with Chinese learners, Lee (2011) noted prevalent challenges in content organization, idea generation, and managing low Korean competence. These challenges were exacerbated by insufficient exposure to academic genres and difficulties in obtaining reliable data. Learners often requested assistance from peers or their academic communities; nevertheless, some also expressed irritation, disengagement, or resorted to unethical tactics under duress. Park and Bang (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with six international graduate students who had studied in Korea for at least three semesters. Utilizing Won Jin-sook's academic writing education model, they classified learner support into three phases: initiation (e.g., methodology courses, senior student mentorship, and self-directed learning), development (e.g., mentorship, peer assistance, and study groups), and conclusion (e.g., spellcheck tools and aid from Korean peers). Nonetheless, their research mostly

concentrated on generic learner support and failed to consider the distinct experiences of Iranian learners or the impact of digital tools. In a comprehensive study, Yuna (2017) conducted interviews with 30 Chinese graduate students. They identified several fundamental challenges: inadequate academic Korean proficiency, insufficient understanding of the topic, deficient critical thinking skills, and anxiety about writing. Learners managed by participating in self-directed study, utilizing first-language resources, requesting external assistance, and applying emotional control strategies.

### **Educational Implications and Methods**

A multitude of studies have concentrated on instructional design and pedagogical assistance for international students. Bae et al. (2011) developed a Korean academic writing curriculum specifically for Chinese students, including needs analysis, syllabus formulation, and formative evaluation. The course identified substantial shortcomings in students' academic writing skills and structural awareness, prompting the implementation of a genre-based education approach to address these needs. Yun and Jeon (2013) investigated learners' management of subject knowledge and found that many relied heavily on newly sourced references, lacking the ability to seek and assess academic texts effectively. Their research emphasized the importance of teaching content organization and integrating academic sources. Utilizing cognitive writing theory, Jeon and Choi (2015) employed think-aloud protocols and interviews to examine learners' writing processes. They delineated four recursive stages—topic comprehension, planning, drafting, and revision—and three categories of content knowledge: existent, intertextual, and integrated. Learners consistently struggled to structure their thoughts and comprehend subjects, underscoring the need for training that supports all phases of the writing process. In a study of Chinese intermediate and advanced learners, Jang (2016) identified a significant demand for teaching in underrepresented abilities, including citation, elaboration, and descriptive writing. While skills, such as comparison and contrast, were esteemed, they were adequately addressed, underscoring the need to broaden the instructional focus. In a similar vein, Lee (2021) integrated text analysis and interviews to investigate the challenges of academic writing faced by overseas graduate students. Recognized problems encompassed syntax, sentence structure, vocabulary, creativity, quotation utilization, and discourse context. The issues were associated with misaligned writing tasks, poorly focused activities, insufficient practice and feedback, and inconsistent instruction. Recommendations included the use of correction tools, imitation techniques, balanced grammar and vocabulary training, stratified classes, and pre-sessional writing courses. A recent study has emphasized the interactions among genre knowledge, anxiety, and writing performance. Using a conditional process analysis, Yuna and Park (2021) surveyed 175 international graduate students and found that writing anxiety was more prevalent among graduate students than among undergraduates. Genre knowledge and anxiety directly impacted writing obstacles, whereas information synthesis exerted an indirect influence. The understanding of subject matter influenced writing indirectly by its relationship with discourse synthesis, emphasizing the significance of genre education, anxiety regulation, and integrative skills. Building upon this research, Yuna (2023) utilized a mixed-methods approach with 190 Chinese exchange students to investigate the influence of genre knowledge, discourse integration, writing self-efficacy, and anxiety on writing performance. Cluster analysis revealed that discourse integration exerted the most significant direct impact on writing proficiency, whereas genre knowledge exerted an indirect effect. These findings indicate that academic writing instruction should enhance understanding of genres and integration strategies, and increase learners' confidence.

### Contribution of the Study

This study substantially advances Korean academic writing research by focusing on two underexplored domains: learner diversity and the influence of technology on writing challenges. Although most previous studies have focused on Chinese graduate students, Iranian learners—despite their unique linguistic and cultural characteristics—have received little academic attention. The study improves the inclusivity and cross-cultural depth of Korean academic writing pedagogy by concentrating on this marginalized population. This study expands upon Yuna's (2017) tripartite framework, which includes cognitive, affective, and educational environment components, by integrating technological dependencies as an intersecting dimension. It examines the interplay among access to digital resources, levels of digital literacy, and potential overreliance on writing assistance software in relation to conventional academic writing difficulties. This study examines technology not as an isolated element but in its integration with wider institutional, linguistic, and educational frameworks. The research utilizes grounded theory and meticulous dimensional coding to comprehensively reveal the inherent structure and interconnections of the academic writing issues encountered by Iranian graduate students. The study offers both conceptual contributions and a practical framework for curriculum creation, teacher training, and institutional support techniques designed for culturally and technologically diverse learners.

### Influencing Factors in Academic Korean Writing

Academic writing in a second language is acknowledged as a cognitively challenging and context-dependent endeavor, especially in university settings where linguistic precision, critical analysis, and disciplinary norms converge (Hyland, 2016; Karaca & Inan, 2020). This study identified five interconnected dimensions—cognitive, affective, linguistic, socio-cultural, and instructional factors—as sensitizing concepts, based on earlier research (see Figure 1).

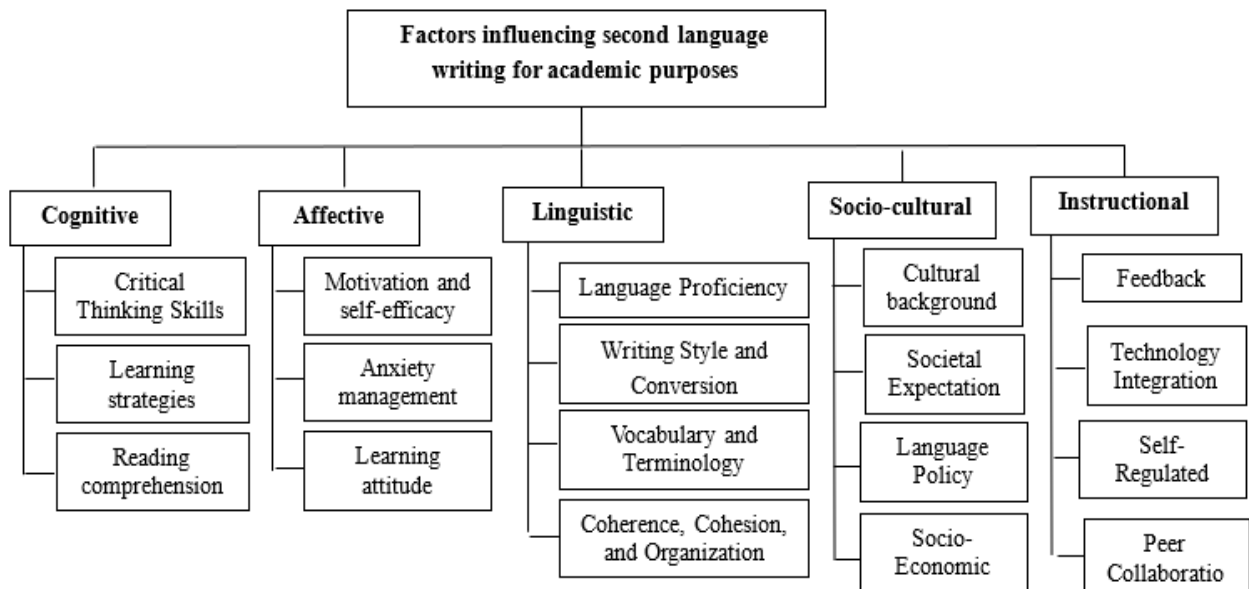


Figure 1. Factors influencing second language writing for academic purposes.

Source: Author's work based on a synthesis of relevant literature.

These dimensions provide a versatile conceptual framework for examining the difficulties discovered via grounded theory.

### **Cognitive Processes**

Cognitive processes are fundamental to academic writing, involving advanced skills such as critical thinking, strategic learning, and reading comprehension (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Sasaki, 2000). Critical thinking empowers students to evaluate arguments, integrate diverse sources, and construct evidence-based reasoning (Ennis, 2015; Paul & Elder, 2006). Learners from high-context rhetorical traditions, like those from Iran, may struggle to adjust to Korean academic norms that prioritize clarity, conciseness, and linear reasoning (Tapper, 2004; Tsui, 2002). Effective learning strategies, such as planning, self-monitoring, and metacognitive regulation, are essential for generating coherent writing (Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1987). Recent studies indicate that digital tools might enhance student autonomy by facilitating these strategies (Griffiths, 2020; Thomas et al., 2022). However, excessive reliance on automated assistance may diminish deep engagement with the writing process. Reading comprehension enhances writing by enabling learners to engage critically with source texts, extract pertinent information, and incorporate other perspectives (Allen, 2003; Harvey & Goodvis, 2003). Direct training in L2 reading skills may help overcome obstacles posed by structural and lexical disparities between Persian and Korean academic literature.

### **Affective Factors**

Affective variables, including motivation, self-efficacy, anxiety, and attitudes toward learning, significantly impact L2 academic writing ability (Dörnyei, 2014; Pajares, 2003). Motivation has a dual function: Inner motivation intensifies involvement in the writing process, whilst extrinsic rewards may improve task perseverance (Kulusakli, 2021; C. F. Ng & P. K. Ng, 2015). Self-efficacy, defined as learners' confidence in their writing abilities, is positively associated with performance and resilience in overcoming problems. (Bruning et al., 2013; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Conversely, writing anxiety might impede performance by eliciting perfectionism, work avoidance, and disengagement (E. K. Horwitz, M. B. Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Piniel & Csizér, 2015). In L2 circumstances, elevated anxiety frequently stems from adverse self-assessment and apprehension over critical appraisal (MacIntyre, Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). Learners' attitudes toward educators, classmates, and the intended learning environment influence sustained involvement and the use of adaptive techniques (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Girard, 1977). Promoting positive attitudes and resilience can assist students in perceiving writing challenges as chances for development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Yeop, 2006).

### **Linguistic Factors**

Linguistic elements are essential to L2 academic writing performance, including overall language ability, genre recognition, and command of academic lexicon (Campbell, 2019; Yoon, 2011). Proficiency encompasses not only grammar and syntax but also the pragmatic and rhetorical understanding required for discipline-specific discourse (Turner, 2004). Restricted vocabulary and lack of experience with academic genres can hinder learners from expressing nuanced arguments and ensuring consistency (Sabti, Md Rashid, Nimehchisalem, & Darmi, 2019; Schoonen, 2019). Genre awareness is crucial in Korean academic settings, where formality, intertextuality, and obvious structural structure are anticipated (Swales & Feak, 2004; Shin, 2008)). Academic writing necessitates proficiency in technical terminology, hedging, and precise referencing—abilities that EFL learners may lack without direct training (Benesch, 2001; Coxhead, 2000). Genre-specific instruction and vocabulary support can enhance learners' writing performance (Storch, 2013; Williams & Bizup, 2014).

### **Socio-Cultural Factors**

Academic writing is profoundly influenced by socio-cultural circumstances that determine how learners interpret tasks, organize arguments, and construct meaning (Canagarajah, 2002; Hyland, 2013). Cross-cultural disparities—such as collectivist vs. individualist ideals or inclinations toward indirect versus direct argumentation—can hinder the adaptation process for L2 authors (Connor, 2002; Kubota & Lehner, 2004). Iranian learners may face challenges in adapting to Korean academic discourse due to rhetorical discrepancies, particularly when their previous writing experiences prioritize implicitness and circular reasoning. Variations in expectations regarding academic integrity and citation standards may lead to confusion or inadvertent plagiarism (Pecorari, 2003). When students' prior educational standards differ markedly from the prevailing academic culture, they may misread assignment expectations or experience internal conflict over their academic identity (Braine, 2002; Zamel, 1997). Promoting cultural mediation and enhancing awareness can help close these gaps and foster greater confidence in writing.

### **Instructional Factors**

Instructional methodologies directly influence the cultivation of learners' academic writing competencies. These encompass task design, instructor feedback, and the overarching learning environment (K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006). Research indicates that effective education transcends isolated grammar exercises and employs genre modeling, scaffolding, and process-oriented strategies that enhance learners' understanding of audience, purpose, and structure (Badger & White, 2000; Flowerdew, 1993). Access to supportive learning settings is essential; inadequate, tailored instruction, insufficient feedback, or imbalanced classroom dynamics can intensify learners' challenges (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006). The pronounced focus on self-directed learning in Korean higher education may provide difficulties for students unaccustomed to independent study environments or those originating from teacher-centered educational frameworks (Chan, 2001). When integrated judiciously, technology resources can augment writing education; however, a disconnect between students' needs and institutional norms may limit the benefits of digital support and impede skill development. Culturally responsive and adaptable education is crucial for enabling various learners to attain proficiency in academic writing.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative research approach founded in grounded theory (GT) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to investigate the academic writing obstacles and coping strategies of advanced Iranian learners of Korean. The Straussian technique was chosen for its systematic framework, facilitating structured coding and continuous comparison while accommodating emergent data, in contrast to the Glaserian approach, which emphasizes naturally occurring theories without a predefined structure (Glaser, 1978). This methodology is especially suitable for research on second-language writing because context-specific variables are crucial (Creswell, 1998). A fundamental aspect of the Straussian methodology is the delineation of attributes (defining properties or characteristics of a category) and dimensions (the spectrum along which these attributes fluctuate), enabling this study to encapsulate the intricacy and diversity within learners' experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). An attribute like "error type" was examined across dimensions like frequency (low to high) and context (academic writing versus informal writing). These characteristics ensured that the ultimate theoretical model was grounded in participants' actual experiences. Figure 2 delineates the research methodology.

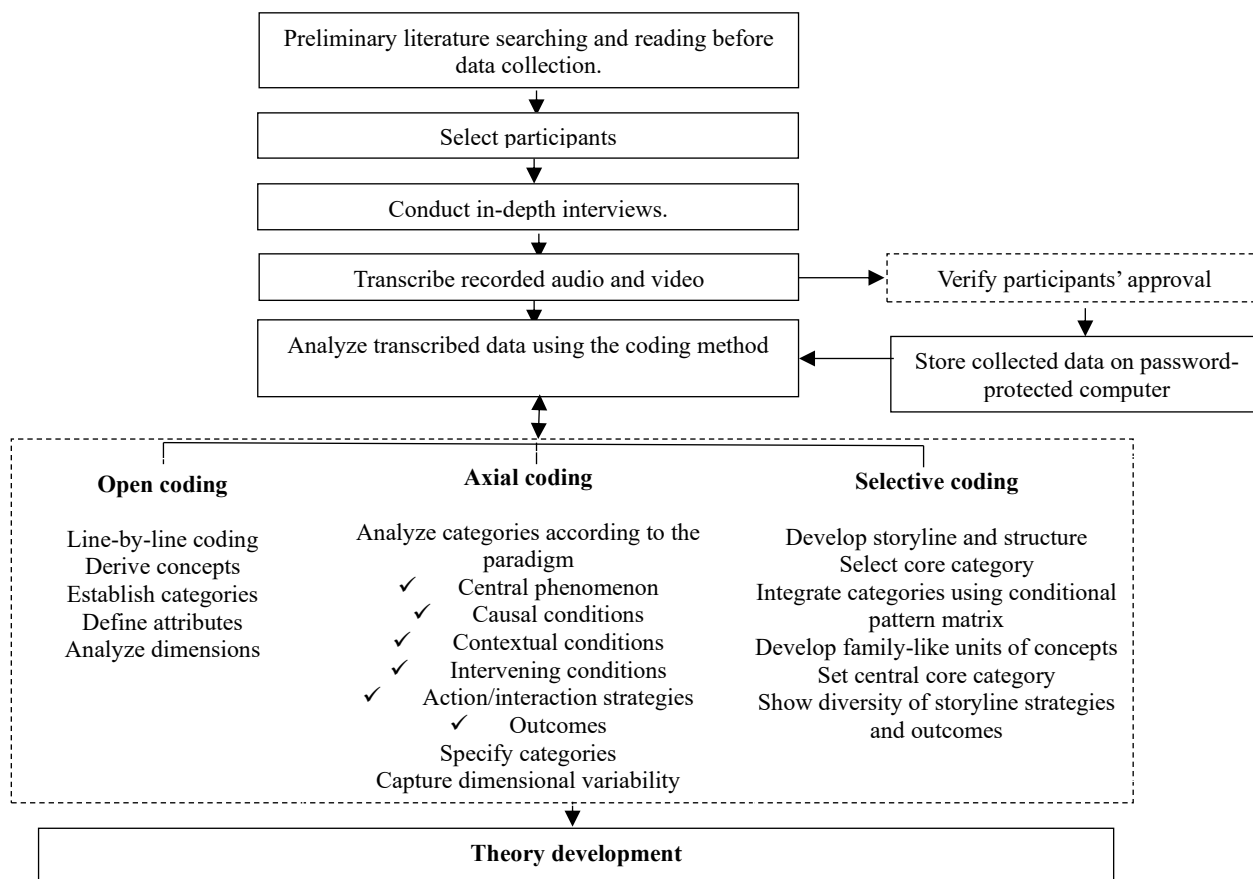


Figure 2. Research design. Source: Author's work.

## Participants

Participants were Iranian graduate students studying at Korean universities. The inclusion criteria mandated that participants be either in the last semester of a master's degree or enrolled in a doctoral program, and that they have experience composing theses and assignments in Korean for academic purposes. All participants demonstrated advanced proficiency in Korean, with Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) Levels 5 or 6. Their learning durations ranged from three to nine years, ensuring diverse perspectives across the stages of academic writing development. Sampling commenced as purposive sampling to discover learners fulfilling these requirements and evolved into theoretical sampling as new categories emerged from the preliminary data (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Snowball sampling enhanced recruitment by broadening access to individuals with relevant experience. In accordance with grounded theory principles, which advocate for continued interviews until saturation is achieved (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). The final sample comprised 30 learners (27 master's and three doctoral) from various disciplines, including Korean language education, business, computer science, and history education. Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was secured for all study procedures (IRB-No. 2403/002-014).

## Data Collection

Data were gathered from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive, triangulated assessment of participants' academic writing experiences. The principal methodology used semi-structured, in-depth interviews, supplemented with text message communications and written documents, including notes, assignments, reports,



and presentations. This triangulation enhanced the study's credibility by facilitating the comparison of findings across several data sources (Creswell, 1998). Participants were recruited through community announcements in Persian, Korean, and English on Iranian community sites to ensure broad outreach. Interested participants were provided with comprehensive consent and explanatory documents, granted adequate time for perusal, and submitted signed consent forms electronically. Interviews were then arranged at participants' convenience and done either in person or online, depending on location and desire. Each interview lasted roughly 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with agreement to guarantee transcription precision (Jamshed, 2014). Written materials were gathered to enhance interview data, offering insight into the organization and presentation of participants' academic writing. Figure 3 delineates the organized recruitment and consent procedure that established the basis for data collection.

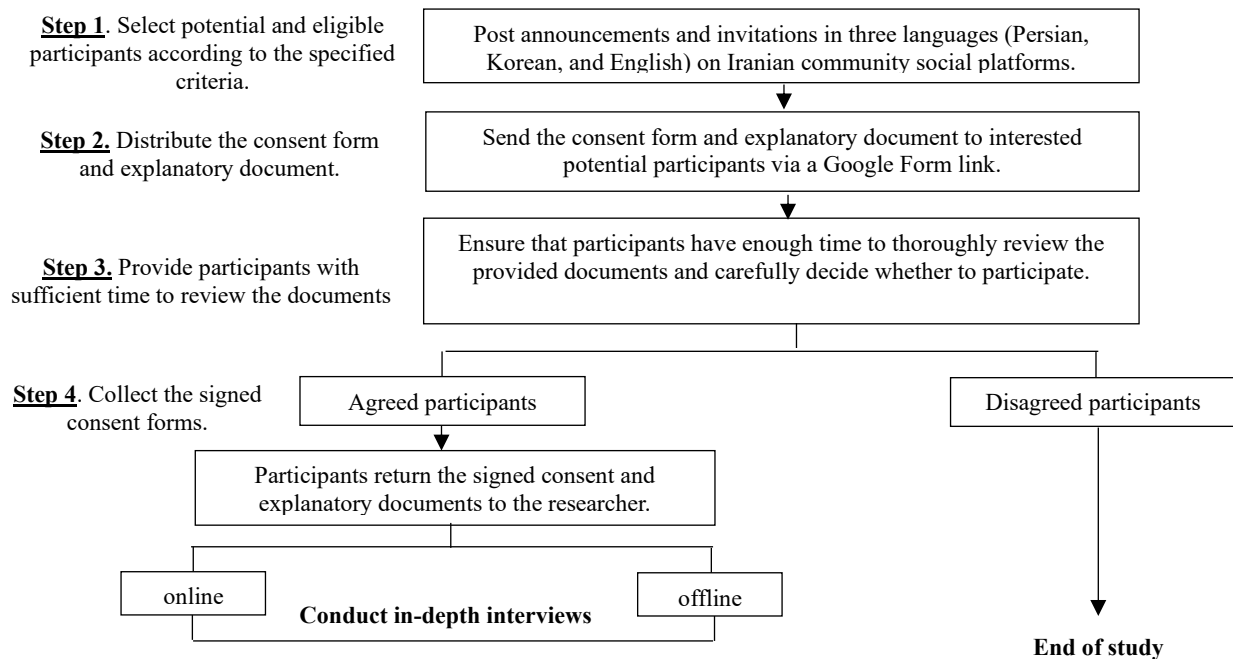


Figure 3. Participant recruitment and consent process. Source: Author's own work.

After recruiting, the interviews were conducted in two rounds to facilitate iterative category building and enhance theoretical understanding (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Interview Phases*

Phase	Dates	Focus	Methods	Example questions
1	2023:07~ 2023:10	General academic writing experiences and challenges.	Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions; initial data were compared across participants to identify emerging themes.	Major, study period. How did you learn Korean writing? What writing courses did you take? Describe your learning process. What challenges did you face and how did you handle them? What strategies did you use?
2	2024:03~ 2024:09	In-depth exploration of emerging categories	Theoretical sampling and constant comparison; semi-structured interviews were refined to probe categories in depth.	What challenges did you face with assignments or theses? Did you receive feedback? How did you manage thesis difficulties? What support or encouragement helped you?

## Data Analysis

Grounded theory employs the constant comparative technique initially described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which entails systematic coding and analytical processes. Four essential phases were identified: (a) comparing instances pertinent to each category, (b) integrating categories and their attributes, (c) delineating the theory, and (d) composing the theory. Strauss and Corbin (1990) characterized coding as a recursive process of data analysis and theorization, culminating in the integration of facts into conceptual narratives that produce theory. They highlighted that coding occurs in cycles of open, axial, and selective coding, reviewed as necessary to enhance emerging categories. Vollstedt and Rezat (2019) characterized coding in grounded theory as a process of conceptual abstraction that converts raw data into theoretical constructs by assigning codes to specific events or assertions. This study utilized a coding process that advanced through open, axial, and selective stages, bolstered by theoretical sampling to refine emerging categories (Kwon, 2016). This iterative method ensured that the ultimate theory was anchored in participants' actual experiences. Figure 4 illustrates the comprehensive data analysis methodology.

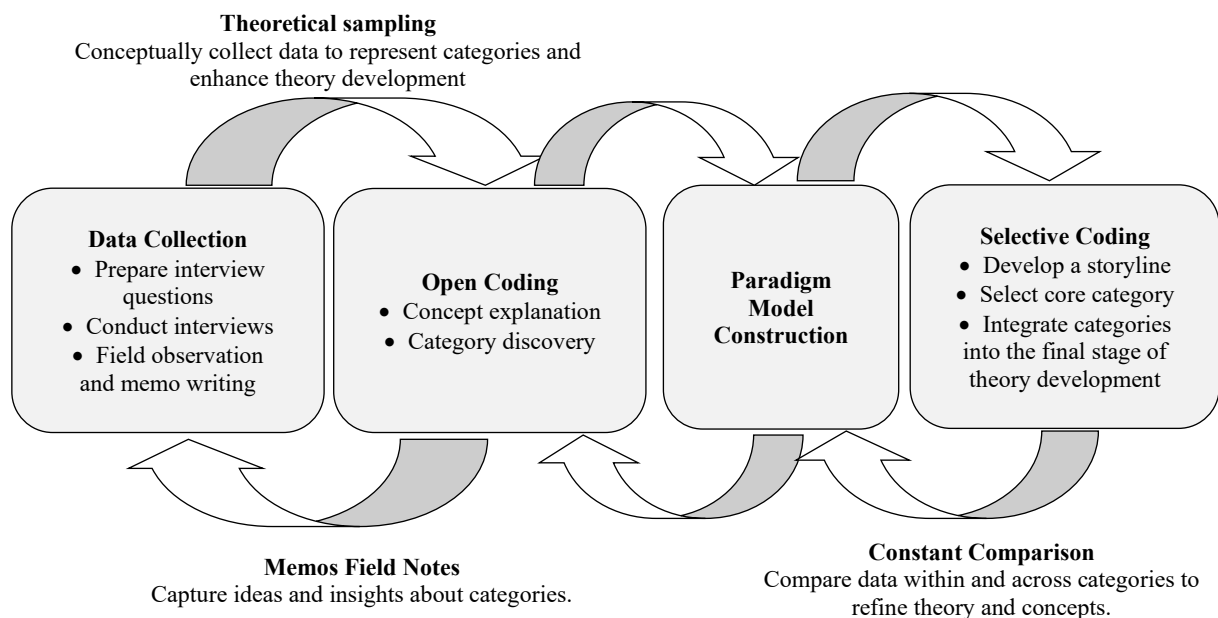


Figure 4. Data analysis procedure. Source: Adapted by the author, based on Strauss & Corbin (1990).

Line-by-line open coding was performed to discern essential concepts and categorize them into subcategories and overarching categories (Chandrasegaran et al., 2017). Attributes and dimensions were delineated to encapsulate the variability within each category (Holton, 2008; Jones & Alony, 2011). Written materials, including assignments and presentations, were analyzed and juxtaposed with interview data to validate and enhance emerging categories. Axial coding was employed to establish relationships among categories identified during open coding, using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) paradigm model. This approach associates causal, contextual, and intervening conditions with participants' actions and interactions, leading to particular outcomes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kim, 2008). This phase elucidated the various elements that influenced the learners' academic writing difficulties and the solutions they employed to address them. Selective coding synthesized all categories around a central occurrence, employing a narrative technique and a conditional matrix

to construct a cohesive theoretical framework based on participants' experiences. The central category integrated rising topics and elucidated how Iranian learners addressed significant hurdles and utilized coping mechanisms when composing Korean for academic purposes.

Data were processed with MAXQDA 2024 to organize and illustrate coding patterns (Rädiker, 2023). Microsoft Excel was used to record code frequencies and analyze trends among participants. Member-checking facilitated participants in validating their contributions, while triangulation of interviews, text interactions, and written outputs enhanced the study's credibility (Creswell, 1998). Researcher reflexivity was sustained by memo-writing throughout the coding and theory development processes (Charmaz, 2014).

## Results

The findings were methodically arranged into a paradigm model using open, axial, and selective coding, which depicts the dynamic links among situations, coping techniques, and outcomes.

### Open Coding

The open coding phase discerned the primary aspects influencing Iranian learners' experiences in Korean academic writing. Based on empirical evidence and previous research, the analysis established that cognitive, affective, linguistic, instructional, and socio-cultural aspects are essential to second-language academic writing. This technique identified 60 concepts, 27 subcategories, and 12 categories, illustrating the extensive range of learners' varied experiences. These criteria and their subcomponents informed the semi-structured interviews. To investigate cognitive elements, including learning methods and reading comprehension, participants were queried: "What strategies did you employ to surmount writing challenges?" and "In what manner have your reading habits impacted your academic writing?" Likewise, subsequent inquiries examined how emotional factors, such as drive, self-efficacy, and anxiety regulation, influenced writing performance. During the coding process, probes determined whether the obstacles pertained especially to academic contexts (e.g., academic vocabulary, advanced grammar, and genre conventions) or indicated more general writing difficulties. This iterative procedure also illuminated the distinctions and commonalities between learners' writing experiences in Korean and their native languages. The integration of data-driven insights with theoretical frameworks during the open coding process yielded a comprehensive array of concepts and categories that served as the basis for subsequent axial coding and the paradigm model discussed in the following sections.

### Axial coding

Figure 5 depicts how causal, contextual, and intervening circumstances interact with action/interaction methods to yield specific results in the academic writing process.

**Central phenomenon: Challenges in Korean academic writing.** The primary phenomenon that emerged is the intricate set of obstacles encountered by Iranian advanced learners in Korean academic writing. This illustrates the interaction between challenging cognitive activities and significant emotional pressures. Crafting proficient academic writing in Korean requires advanced cognitive skills, including selecting a topic, identifying research gaps, logically organizing concepts, and appropriately integrating evidence. Participant 12 stated, "Choosing a topic poses a challenge for me. I experience significant pressure to identify one that is both pertinent and impactful". Participants reported difficulties in sustaining a coherent progression: "Establishing a logical flow is particularly arduous. Occasionally, my writing gets lengthy and convoluted, hindering reader comprehension" (Participant 19). Emotional elements, including dissatisfaction, self-doubt, and performance

anxiety, exacerbated these demands: “Transitioning from everyday Korean to academic writing was overwhelming for me... it impacted my mental health” (Participant 16).

This phenomenon encompasses interconnected cognitive and emotional problems, characterized by task complexity, critical thinking requirements, and apprehension of failure. The dimensions vary from minor impediments to significant hurdles, underscoring the necessity for tailored, differentiated assistance.

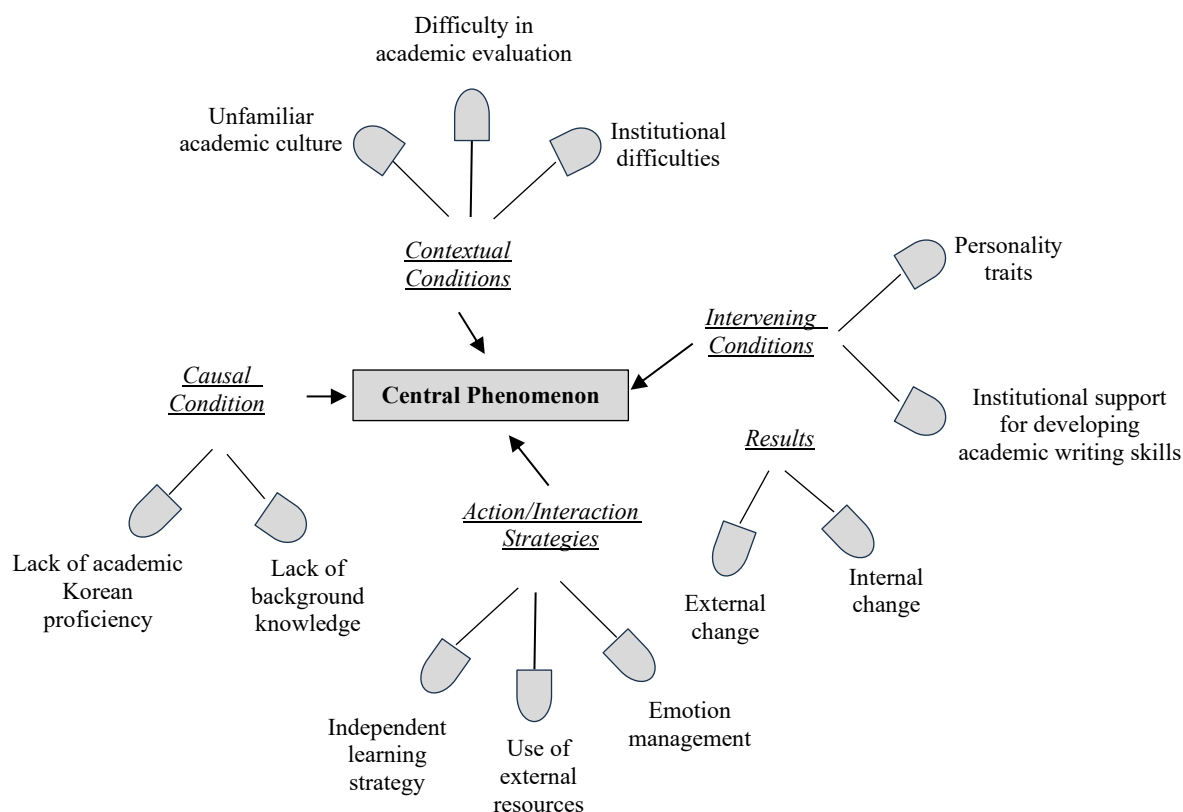


Figure 5. Visual representation of the paradigm model. Source: Interview results.

**Causal conditions: Factors shaping writing challenges.** Causal conditions denote the elements that directly influence the core phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two interconnected causal conditions emerged: limited advanced academic proficiency in Korean and insufficient background knowledge. Participants said that insufficient proficiency in advanced vocabulary, specialized terminology, complex grammar, and discourse markers impeded their comprehension of lectures and texts, as well as their capacity to express complicated thoughts. “I find it challenging to utilize academic vocabulary, often resorting to simplistic terms that are inappropriate for formal contexts” (Participant 2). Several learners noticed an excessive dependence on translation tools or grammar checkers: “I utilize grammar tools to correct my errors, yet I do not fully comprehend the rules, resulting in continued reliance on them” (Participant 22). The absence of adequate intertextual and contextual knowledge rendered topic selection and argument construction challenging: “Changing majors felt akin to beginning anew. I encountered difficulties in comprehending fundamental topics and employing appropriate terminology in my papers” (Participant 9). The challenges were exacerbated by little exposure to Korean academic materials and seminars: “Attending lectures in Korean is difficult”. “Instructors articulate rapidly and employ intricate terminology that I do not consistently comprehend” (Participant 29).

The properties of these situations encompass linguistic constraints, deficiencies in background knowledge, and reliance on technology as a coping strategy. Attributes encompass structural deficiencies in previous education and an absence of systematic instruction in genre-specific conventions. The dimensions range from moderate to severe, depending on each learner's background.

**Contextual conditions: External factors intensifying writing challenges.** Contextual conditions denote the cultural, institutional, and structural elements that indirectly influence and amplify the central phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An important contextual condition was the unfamiliar academic culture. Numerous participants struggled to acclimate to Korea's self-directed learning philosophy, which differs from the teacher-centered approach prevalent in Iran. The absence of reliable third-party support, including structured mentorship, collaborative peer groups, or accessible writing centers, resulted in a sense of isolation for many: "In Iran, teachers provide step-by-step guidance, but here I must navigate everything independently, from selecting materials to managing deadlines" (Participant 7). Intensive workloads, stringent deadlines, and substantial readings in both Korean and English increased stress: "I had numerous assignments that left me with minimal sleep". "I frequently felt unable to manage the workload" (Participant 16). Deficiencies in specialized writing teaching, elevated student-to-instructor ratios, and inadequate financial resources exacerbated these difficulties: "The courses inadequately equipped me for authentic thesis writing. I experienced a sense of disorientation when I had to undertake it independently" (Participant 19). Financial constraints compelled numerous students to engage in part-time employment, thereby diminishing the time and energy allocated for enhancing their writing skills: "Economic difficulties hinder my ability to commit to my studies fully". "I must allocate a portion of my time to work, resulting in insufficient time to revise my assignments or obtain feedback" (Participant 14).

These conditions' properties encompass cultural discrepancies, institutional restrictions, and structural limitations that indirectly exacerbate the primary phenomena. Attributes encompass the new self-directed learning culture, the absence of constant external support (e.g., mentoring and writing centers), and financial constraints that limit study time. The aspects range from moderate to severe, depending on learners' prior experience with autonomous learning and the presence of supportive networks.

**Intervening conditions: Factors mediating writing strategies.** Intervening conditions influence learners' responses to the central phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two primary groups emerged: learner personality attributes and institutional support. Motivation and disposition influence learners' engagement in writing assignments. Several individuals articulated a robust intrinsic motivation: "Even during challenging times, I reminded myself that enhancing my writing is crucial for my personal and academic development" (Participant 21). Others emphasized extrinsic motivation, like deadlines and career objectives: "Deadlines compel me to enhance my performance". "I understand that my academic performance and prospects are contingent upon it" (Participant 25). A constructive mindset enabled certain individuals to perceive writing as an opportunity for development: "I endeavor to regard each draft as a chance to acquire new expressions" (Participant 15). Institutional support, including customized writing classes or mentorship, enhanced coping methods; yet, obstacles such as insufficient promotion or schedule problems occasionally hindered access: "I wanted to join the mentoring program but found out too late" (Participant 26).

These conditions encompass sources of motivation, learners' attitudes, and the accessibility of institutional support. Attributes encompass the equilibrium of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as the coherence of

support systems. Dimensions range from robust, enduring support to tenuous commitment and constrained resources.

**Action/interaction strategies: Coping and interaction to overcome writing challenges.** These strategies illustrate how individuals actively manage obstacles, adjust to circumstances, and strive for desired results (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Learners utilized autonomous learning techniques, including vocabulary enhancement, model text analysis, and iterative drafting: “I frequently compose several drafts. Revision enables me to observe the enhancement of my ideas with each iteration” (Participant 15). They used collaborative interactions to enhance their work. Input from professors, senior colleagues, Korean acquaintances, or writing centers offered significant counsel and assistance: “My advisor’s feedback aided in elucidating my concepts and organizing my thesis” (Participant 11). Furthermore, participants utilized emotional regulation techniques, such as positive self-affirmation, scheduled intermissions, and support from peers or family, to sustain motivation and resilience: “Reminding myself that each draft improves aids my writing when I encounter obstacles” (Participant 28).

The properties of these techniques are autonomous endeavor, cooperative engagement, and emotional self-management. Attributes encompass proactive drafting, soliciting comments, and stress management. The attributes encompass proactive, goal-directed initiatives and reactive, context-dependent responses. This dynamic adjustment illustrates that proficient academic writing in a second language evolves through an ongoing interaction of self-directed efforts, supportive engagements, and emotional fortitude.

**Results.** The results indicate that learners’ coping techniques have consequences along two primary dimensions: external and internal change. Externally, learners enhanced the quality of their academic Korean writing, transitioning from unstructured writings to more ordered and coherent arguments: “Over time, my writing became clearer and more organized. I am now able to articulate intricate subjects more coherently” (Participant 14). This enhancement facilitated academic success, resulting in elevated grades and acknowledgment from faculty: “Enhancing my writing enabled me to fulfill thesis criteria and attain superior evaluations” (Participant 25). These results indicated a transition from self-doubt and anxiety to enhanced confidence and enduring motivation. Participants articulated that surmounting obstacles fostered resilience and self-efficacy: “I previously experienced anxiety regarding the presentation of my work, but each revision enhanced clarity, thereby bolstering my confidence” (Participant 10).

The properties of these results encompass quantifiable skill enhancement and psychological development. Attributes encompass improvements in writing organization and clarity, as well as heightened self-confidence and motivation. Dimensions vary from constrained performance and tenuous confidence to acknowledged competence and strong self-efficacy, indicating that outcomes evolve along a dynamic continuum influenced by resilience and persistent involvement.

### **Selective Coding: Mastery of Academic Korean Writing Through Continuous Challenge**

Selective coding integrated the axial categories into a cohesive explanatory framework that elucidates the development of academic Korean writing skills among advanced Iranian learners. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the core category must have significant centrality, regular occurrence, explanatory efficacy, conceptual profundity, and adaptability. The primary category developed following an extensive evaluation of participants’ experiences is “Mastering Korean academic writing through persistent challenge management”. This emphasizes that growth is not a simple accumulation of abilities but an iterative process influenced by cognitive, affective, contextual, and institutional connections.

Participants consistently highlighted the persistent nature of these issues, noting that initial obstacles—such as limited advanced vocabulary, insufficient competence with discourse markers, and unfamiliarity with genre conventions—do not resolve immediately but require ongoing effort and feedback. Participant 15 stated, “I struggle to articulate complex concepts due to insufficient vocabulary and grammatical proficiency for academic writing”.

Contextual factors, such as a foreign academic culture and limited access to continuous coaching, often compelled learners to rely on their own initiative. Many articulated that peer relationships and institutional support offered pivotal moments: “Here, I am expected to resolve everything independently, and it is daunting. However, after joining a writing group, I felt a heightened motivation to persist” (Participant 22).

The mediating circumstances influenced whether learners remained passive or adopted a proactive approach in addressing recurring problems. Extroverted or self-assured learners actively sought feedback: “Engaging in discussions about my work with my advisor enhances my motivation and sharpens my ideas” (Participant 11). Some individuals operated more reactively, depending on deadlines and self-regulation: “I prefer to address challenges discreetly, concentrating on the necessary tasks incrementally” (Participant 8). Institutional support, including mentoring and specialized writing seminars, helped both groups overcome persistent challenges. These changes demonstrate how the dynamic interaction between individual agency and supportive circumstances influences the process.

Key strategies included iterative drafting, memorization of colloquial expressions, effective use of online tools, and consistent feedback from peers and instructors. Participant 19 stated, “Composing multiple drafts and receiving feedback from my professor enhanced my structure”. Some learners observed that excessive reliance on tools can impede deep learning; therefore, they integrated technology support with proactive self-editing. Strategies for managing emotions proved equally essential. Participants reported employing affirmative self-dialogue, scheduled intervals, and peer support to maintain motivation. Participant 28 stated, “Whenever I feel stagnant, I remind myself of my progress”. In a similar vein, Participant 30 remarked, “Engaging in conversation with friends maintains my composure and motivation”.

The core category encompasses the ongoing management of complex challenges, the balancing of autonomous and cooperative approaches, and the cultivation of emotional resilience. Attributes encompass iterative practice, discerning utilization of external instruments, and adaptable responsiveness to diverse levels of help. The dimension extends from passive, dependent coping to proactive, self-directed participation. The range is depicted in the conditional matrix (see Figure 6), which charts contextual difficulty levels (low ↔ high) against learner engagement (passive ↔ proactive).

The matrix indicates that learners in high-challenge environments who maintain passive engagement depend significantly on organized institutional support, including mentoring and financial assistance. In the absence of this, their advancement may become stagnant. Conversely, proactive learners strategically use resources such as orientation workshops or peer writing groups to sustain resilience and advance. In conclusion, selective coding reveals that proficiency in Korean academic writing is an iterative, nonlinear process influenced by cognitive, emotional, environmental, and institutional factors. These findings highlight the need for continuous scaffolding, adaptable feedback, and culturally attuned mentoring to support learners at various stages of the passive-proactive continuum.

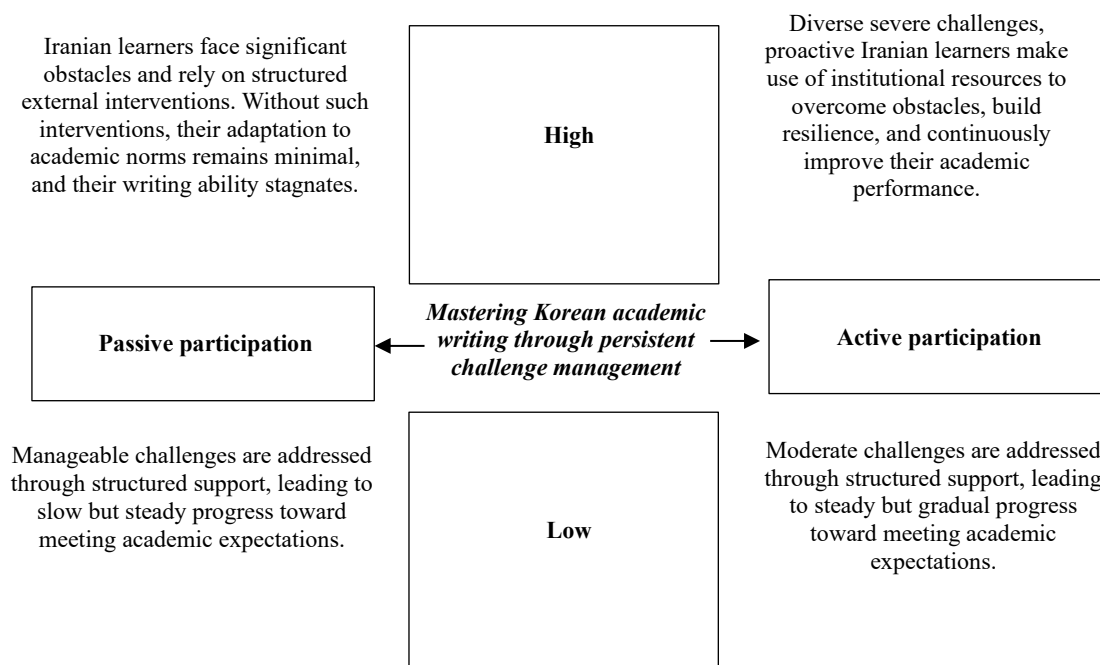


Figure 6. Conditional matrix. Source: Author's work.

### Formalization of Hypothetical Relationships Using the Conditional Matrix

The conditional matrix (see Figure 6) formalizes the interaction among contextual challenges, learner involvement, and institutional support to enhance the paradigm model. This matrix translates the theory into four testable hypotheses, each associated with recognized learning theories, including Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Sociocultural Theory (SCT).

Hypothesis 1: Passive learners in high-severity situations derive the greatest advantage from intense, structured scaffolding, such as individualized mentorship and focused skill-development seminars. In the absence of this, these learners risk stagnation or burnout due to the combined cognitive and emotional demands they face. This corresponds with the Zone of Proximal Development, which underscores the significance of expert advice in closing the divide between existing competencies and developmental objectives (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

Hypothesis 2: Proactive learners in high-severity environments excel when universities offer autonomy-supportive resources, like advanced workshops, orientation sessions, and research communities. In accordance with Self-Determination Theory, these resources sustain intrinsic motivation, leading to quantifiable improvements in coherence, genre awareness, and overall academic performance (Deci & Ryan, 2013).

Hypothesis 3: Passive learners in low-severity situations necessitate fundamental yet less intensive interventions. Access to explicit writing norms, self-directed resources, and periodic peer mentorship can facilitate consistent, sustainable advancement. This illustrates the idea of ZPD, indicating that minimal scaffolding may suffice when obstacles are less pronounced.

Hypothesis 4: Proactive learners in low-severity scenarios derive the greatest advantage from flexible, autonomous learning environments. Peer writing groups, digital tools, and feedback exchanges facilitate the enhancement of self-regulation and critical thinking abilities. This aligns with SCT's focus on cooperative learning and the use of cultural instruments to facilitate continuous skill development.



The conditional matrix delineates these links, connecting theory and practice, and offering explicit, actionable strategies for developing writing support that accommodates learner variation. It emphasizes that institutional scaffolding is not a static solution but must adjust to each learner's placement on the challenge-engagement continuum.

### **Developmental Process Analysis (Process Coding)**

Process coding elucidates how Iranian advanced learners traverse writing growth through overlapping, recurrent stages, capturing the dynamic, non-linear essence of learning trajectories. This analysis links the paradigm model to a time dimension, a crucial element in grounded theory. The procedure validates four essential phases (see Figure 7).

Stage 1: Initial confusion: Learners initially experience disorientation when confronted with unexpected academic traditions and expectations. Insufficient previous experience with structured academic writing in Korean or Persian results in deficiencies in fundamental skills, including concept organization, logical coherence, and genre recognition. Informal coping techniques, such as imitation and peer assistance, are prevalent yet frequently inadequate. "I emulated the style of my seniors' theses, yet I still felt uncertain about how to execute it independently" (Participant 18).

Stage 2: Crisis and frustration: As demands escalate, cognitive and emotional hurdles amplify. Students frequently depend excessively on translation technologies, obscuring fundamental deficiencies in reasoning and arguments. At this level, performance anxiety and self-doubt reach their peak: "I recognized the inadequacy of my ideas, yet I was too apprehensive to seek assistance" (Participant 4). Institutional deficiencies, such as the absence of customized writing instruction, exacerbate the situation.

Stage 3: Strategic adaptation: Through experimentation, learners cultivate more intentional coping mechanisms. They enhance subject knowledge, augment genre awareness, and employ technology with greater criticality. Personality factors influence learning: Outgoing learners use social connections, whereas introverted learners may require structured support to participate. Emotion regulation—recontextualizing errors and establishing attainable objectives—becomes essential: "I recognized that every error presented an opportunity for learning" (Participant 21).

Achievement (proficiency and confidence): Through consistent practice and feedback, learners progressively master genre conventions and cultivate increased autonomy. They start to perceive writing as an intellectual expression rather than solely an academic hurdle: "I feel more assured now. I am able to experiment with style and structure, and I no longer fear making mistakes" (Participant 10).

The stages are not strictly sequential. Numerous participants returned to prior phases when addressing new assignments or fields, illustrating that writing growth is iterative. This insight underscores the fundamental category: Mastery develops through continuous engagement with challenges, shaped by personal, contextual, and institutional factors. Research on the developmental process indicates that continuous scaffolding, prompt feedback, and adaptive mentoring are essential for helping learners overcome obstacles, refine their tactics, and maintain confidence.

In conclusion, the developmental process indicates that mastering Korean academic writing is not a linear progression but rather a cyclical series of obstacles and adaptations. This emphasizes the necessity for adaptable support as learners advance through various stages. The subsequent proposals convert these findings into actionable institutional measures.

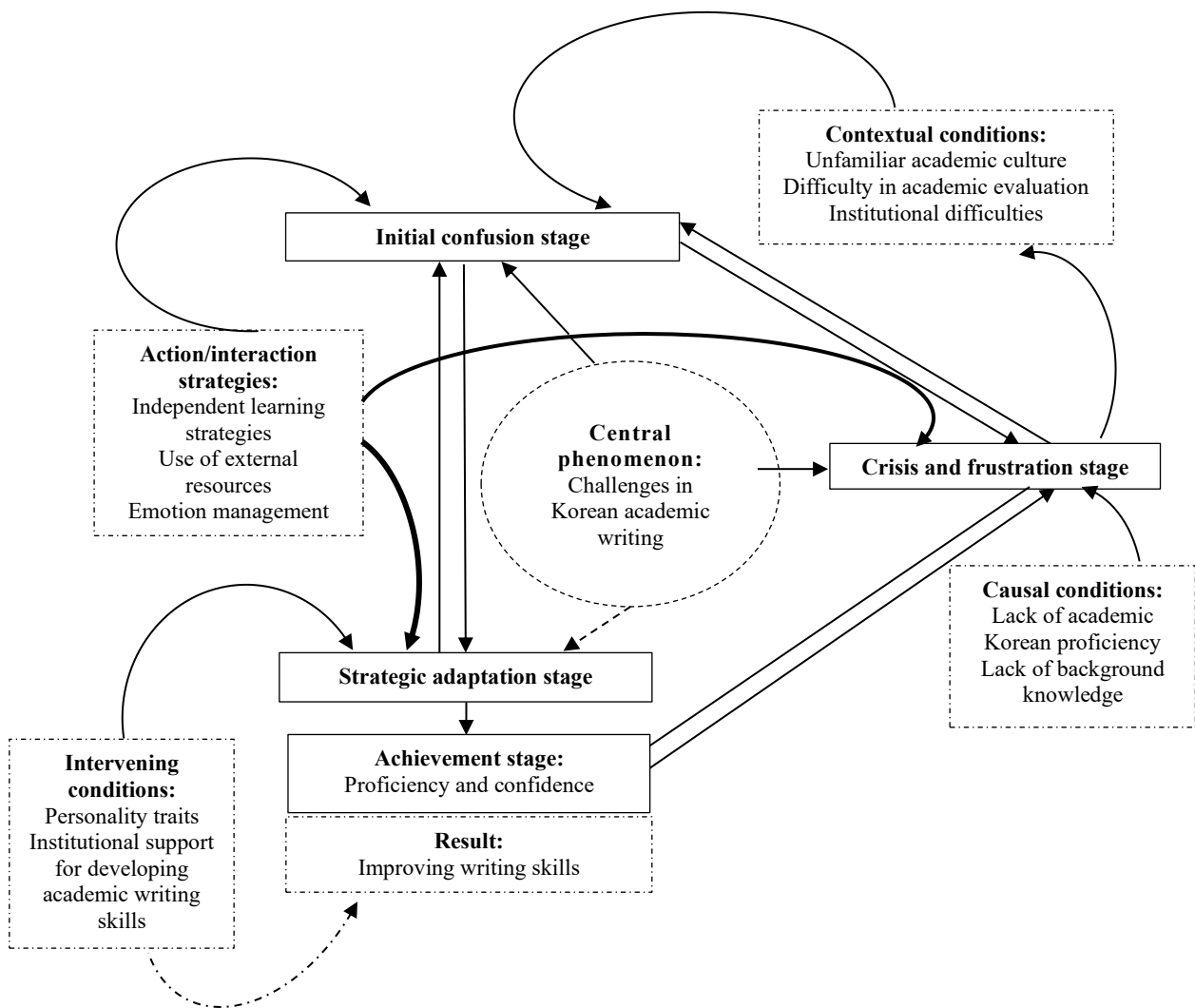


Figure 7. Developmental process. Source: Author's work.

### Translating Insights Into Action: Institutional Recommendations

These guidelines provide pragmatic solutions to meet the varied demands of learners, informed by the conditional matrix and developmental stages. They underscore adaptable scaffolding, explicit feedback, readily available resources, peer assistance, and a focus on emotional well-being to facilitate students' navigation of academic writing with greater efficacy.

Institutions should offer adaptable support approaches that cater to varying degrees of learner involvement. For passive learners, systematic mentorship and guided workshops can effectively address high-severity difficulties by providing consistent support. One participant stated, "Mentorship assisted me in comprehending how to organize my essays", underscoring the need for direct instruction. Conversely, proactive learners benefit from autonomy-supportive resources, such as self-paced writing tools, orientation sessions, and advanced seminars that promote independent development and enduring motivation.

Secondly, institutions want to enhance feedback mechanisms to direct learners towards anticipated academic norms. Consistent feedback mechanisms, including explicit rubrics and constructive remarks, facilitate alignment

of student endeavors with institutional standards, particularly for individuals unfamiliar with Korean academic norms. “I require comprehensive feedback to comprehend my professors’ expectations”.

Third, institutions must enhance access to educational resources to address deficiencies in language competency, genre comprehension, and content expertise. Advanced digital platforms, educational resources, and self-directed study materials promote autonomous learning for all students. Peer collaboration via writing groups and mentorship circles can overcome cultural divides and foster mutual support: “Collaborating with peers provided me with innovative ideas and confidence”, demonstrating how cooperative learning enhances both skill acquisition and emotional fortitude.

Ultimately, institutions must attend to learners’ emotional well-being. Counseling services, stress-management courses, and informal peer networks can assist learners in coping with anxiety and performance pressures, particularly in high-stress environments when emotional issues are heightened.

The framework established by the conditional matrix and process model shows that no single intervention is universally applicable. By customizing institutional assistance to the intricate relationship between learner agency and contextual obstacles, these initiatives can enhance academic writing proficiency and promote more equitable educational practices.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study aimed to elucidate the academic writing obstacles encountered by Iranian learners in Korean universities and the solutions they employ to mitigate these difficulties. The research utilized a qualitative methodology to explore graduate learners’ perceptions via in-depth interviews. Although these selections align well with the study’s objective, they also indicate domains that may warrant further exploration.

The participant pool was deliberately restricted to graduate students whose academic writing requirements are rigorous and present advanced difficulties. Subsequent research may broaden this focus to encompass undergraduate students or individuals at diverse competence levels to investigate the variations in writing obstacles and coping methods across educational stages. A comparison analysis may uncover changes in requirements across the academic journey, facilitating more focused and developmentally suitable interventions.

Secondly, although the study’s qualitative design provided comprehensive insights into learners’ experiences and coping mechanisms, subsequent research may adopt mixed-methods approaches that incorporate quantitative elements, such as surveys or writing performance evaluations. This would help validate and generalize the qualitative findings, thereby offering a more thorough understanding of the factors affecting academic writing development.

Third, the emphasis on Iranian learners fills a significant vacuum in the literature; nevertheless, this particular constraint limits the generalizability of the findings to other international student populations. Future studies may expand the cultural scope to encompass learners from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Comparative research could clarify whether the reported obstacles are specific to Iranian learners or indicative of broader trends among international students in Korean academic environments.

Finally, the dual role of technology in aiding and challenging academic writing necessitates further examination. This study identified the overall impact of technological tools. However, future research could examine individual tools—such as grammar checkers, plagiarism-detection software, or collaborative writing platforms—to evaluate their efficacy and potential limitations. Longitudinal studies may elucidate the evolution of learners’ utilization of these tools over time and their impact on their writing autonomy and critical engagement.

In conclusion, although the study's scope and methodology were suitable for its aims, additional research could further enhance these findings by expanding participant demographics, using mixed-methods, comparing diverse learner populations, and examining the evolving influence of technology on second-language academic writing. Such studies will enhance educational methodologies and support frameworks better to address the varied and evolving requirements of overseas students.

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