

Motivation and Testing Writing: A Brief Review of Literature

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Abstract

There are several factors affecting students' test performance in English as a foreign language (EFL) writing. This paper focuses on "motivation" as one of these factors and investigates why and how it influences student performance in writing by reviewing the literature. In recent years, a number of studies have been conducted to examine writing motivation and some variables that increase motivation hence students' writing performance. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between motivation and writing. Students who have higher intrinsic or extrinsic motivation perform better than those who do not. Creating a learner-centered writing environment and choosing the writing tasks properly affect both motivation and performance. As a result, EFL teachers can try out new methods and materials to teach and test writing in a way that will foster their students' writing motivation. In this way, they cannot only help the students gain positive attitudes towards writing but also provide curriculum developers and policy makers with feedback in order for them to include motivational aspects in EFL writing courses and tests.

Keywords

Second and foreign language; writing; testing; motivation.

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Introduction

Writing effectively is a crucial skill for language users and learners. Thus, this productive skill has an important role in EFL and English as a second language (ESL) learning for a number of reasons. First, writing in second language (L2) requires learners to integrate different language skills such as vocabulary and grammar. It also

gets writers to utilize background knowledge gained through reading and listening activities. As implied through the “contact zone” model by Canagarajah (2002), multilingual writers can successfully transfer the cultural and linguistic skills that they attained in their own discourses into academic writing. According to Constantino (1995), as ESL students read more, they tend to write more and feel more comfortable while writing. Moreover, acquiring writing skills trains language students academically and makes it easier to access, utilize and synthesize scientific information in the future. Second, writing activity enables learners to express their opinions in another language and, thus, broadens their horizons. It gives them the freedom to think about different concepts and share ideas without any limitations. Likewise, writing skills can be practiced in real-life situations and online communities, which is particularly important for the young generation. Finally, effective writing is a concrete indication of the language progress that makes it possible to monitor learning process. Apart from that, as an outcome of first language (L1) and L2 interaction, it is also natural to observe the transfer of some writing skills. As put by Silva (1990), “from a process perspective, writing is a complex, recursive, and creative process or set of behaviors that is very similar in its broad outlines for first and L2 writers” (p. 8). In this sense, teaching writing skills should aim to draw learners’ attention to the whole learning process rather than the products. Yet, several factors have profound effects on the writing process among language learners. Among those, motivation and testing procedure constitute significant variables in the writing process.

Motivation as one of the most indispensable prerequisites for language learning relates to several components including self-efficacy beliefs, interest, perceived task value, attitudes, goal orientations and attributions for success and failure (Troia et al., 2013). Thus, it affects L2 learners’ writing performance and achievement in different ways. First, motivation helps learners to attain high self-efficacy beliefs. Motivated learners are aware of their potentials so their previous achievements encourage them to continue their language progress. They are eager to use the written language as much as possible in contrast to unmotivated ones who usually prefer short and simple sentences not to take any risks. Therefore, they are open to progress and they do not miss any chance to practice writing. Second, motivation has an important role in language learners’ test performance. As for writing, students put necessary effort during

tests when they have a clear purpose to write. They are aware of what is expected from them in terms of writing skills so they try to display best performances in writing. At the same time, they are able to use the time and prompts efficiently by employing effective writing skills and techniques. Correspondingly, motivated learners feel more self-confident and it increases their writing performance by lowering test anxiety.

There has not been a consensus on how testing influences writing motivation. To start with, testing can create positive attitudes on learners towards writing as long as they have good results through objective evaluation. The feeling of success encourages learners for the future tests and they start to compete with themselves in a way. Next, the learners may turn failure into an opportunity by practicing more and improving their writing skills for upcoming tests. In other words, tests create beneficial backwash by getting students learn from their mistakes. On the other hand, testing may lead to some negative consequences about writing motivation. First, the disappointment that comes with failure might harm the learners' self-efficacy beliefs. Such students may end up with "learned-helplessness" at the worst scenario. However, according to Roderick and Engel (2001), some low achievers can escape from this "vicious circle" and improve their writing skills when they are supported by the teachers, peers or parents. Second, being tested on writing skills may cause anxiety on the students. This anxiety may stem from the fear of making mistakes, the stress caused by time limitation or the learners' insufficient language proficiency to produce. Last, in institutions where there is too much emphasis on test results, learners may tend to give more importance to summative assessment than formative assessment. Students might start to regard grading as the most important thing so they may apply some undesirable ways such as memorizing, cheating or plagiarism. Moreover, this kind of testing may reduce intrinsic motivation and lead to 'surface' learning (Deci and Ryan, 1985). To conclude, as research does not show a consensus on the relationship between testing writing skills and motivation, it is necessary to obtain a research synthesis on the issue. Thus, this paper aims to present a brief review of the literature on the relationship between testing writing skills and motivation for implications for practice and future research. However, before presenting the research synthesis, it seems necessary to give a theoretical background on the issue.

Theoretical Background

There are three main approaches that have a significant impact on EFL and ESL writing research. First, the *Product Approaches* pertaining to the results of the writing process are widely employed in language classrooms. According to Pincas (1982), these approaches emphasize accuracy in writing and they are concerned with the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices. Hedge (1988) also states that these approaches require the skills of “getting the grammar right, having a range of vocabulary, punctuating meaningfully, using the conventions of layout correctly, spelling accurately, using a range of sentence structures, linking ideas and information across sentences to develop a topic, developing and organizing the content clearly and convincingly” (p.8). Although the Product Approaches have some advantages such as training students for rules, structures and the organization of sentences and paragraphs, there is a risk of neglecting the content while focusing on the form. Second, as an alternative to the Product Approaches, the *Process Approaches* have been quite popular in EFL and ESL writing contexts. As explained by Richards et al. (1992), the Process Approaches draw attention to “the composing processes of planning, drafting, and revising” (p. 290) that aid students while writing. Thus, the aim is to improve their writing skills through the practice of these processes. In short, the Process Approaches regard writing as “the exercise of linguistic skills” and writing development as “an unconscious process” which occurs with the help of teachers who facilitate the exercise of writing skills. Dörnyei (1994) described one of the roles of writing teachers as “socialization of student motivation” which refers to stimulating and promoting the students by modelling, task-presentation, and feedback procedures. However, according to Zen (2005), it is the product, not the process, what is actually evaluated so the students are supposed to observe the conventions of academic writing and meet the expectations of the academic community. Therefore, adopting only the process-oriented approaches may not be suitable for some language contexts. Third, the *Genre Approaches* are concerned with teaching particular genres of writing that may help students to succeed in particular situations such as sales letters, research articles and reports (Flowerdew, 1993). According to Badger and White (2000), genre approaches have many similarities with product approaches in terms of writing development. The genre literacy has a wheel model that consists of three stages: modeling the target genre,

the construction of a text by learners and teacher, and the independent construction of texts by learners (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). The genre approaches are based on the notion that language cannot be separated from the social and cultural context so the main purpose of adopting genre approaches is to enable students to use appropriate registers in related contexts. Yet, Hyland (2003) points out to a “tension between expression and repression in genre teaching” (p. 22). Thus, there is a risk of adopting explicit genre approaches in L2 writing because students might consider the course as a set of rules and this might affect their creativity and motivation negatively. As a result, in the literature, it is commonly suggested that teachers should follow a writing approach that is the most suitable for their students’ needs and goals. It is also possible to synthesize different approaches to writing and apply them in appropriate teaching contexts.

In psychology, motivation is generally defined as the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors. As for language acquisition and learning, it is difficult to define motivation simply as it is a very complex phenomenon with many facets (Gardner, 2007). For Gardner (2007), in addition to *the integrative-instrumental* or the *intrinsic-extrinsic motivation*, there is a recent classification of motivational constructs that play a significant role in second language acquisition and foreign language learning. The first one is “language learning motivation” and as the name suggests, it refers to the motivation to acquire a second language. It is seen as a general characteristic of individuals who utilize any chance to learn the language. The second type of motivation is “classroom learning motivation” and it refers to the motivation in the classroom situation or in any specific situation (Gardner, 2007). Factors such as the classroom atmosphere, the teacher, the course content and materials, and the personal traits of students have a great effect on the classroom learning motivation. Both types of motivation have socio-educational and psychological links. Similarly, Dörnyei (1994) also defines motivational components that are specific to learning situations as course-specific motivational components, teacher-specific motivational components, and group-specific motivational components. It is clear that motivation is a major determinant of ESL and EFL learning and it influences students’ achievement in oral and written performance. Boscolo and Hidi (2007) mention the role of *motives*, namely the goal orientation, needs, values and interests in writing and regard

them as the factors activating a student's behavior. They state that one's motivation to write relates to their positive or negative *representations* of themselves such as *self-efficacy*, *self-concept*, and *self-perceptions of competence*. Students' attitudes toward writing in L2 also affect their writing motivation and performance. According to Lam et al. (2002), instructional contexts have six features that motivate students' learning: *challenge*, *real-life significance*, *curiosity*, *autonomy*, *recognition*, and *evaluation*. These elements are to enhance students' motivation to write (Bruning & Horn, 2000). According to Ushioda (2010), it is crucial to understand the effect of motivation on L2 learning, which is a dynamic system comprising the human agency, meaning-making processes and spontaneity. Thus, there is an interactive relationship between writing motivation and L2 writing performance.

Language testing is interested in measuring scores that reflect "a candidate's ability in a particular area" such as careful reading to extract main ideas from a text, writing an argumentative essay or spoken interaction with peers (Weir, 2005). It is also expected to observe the strengths and weaknesses of language teaching, including all the related aspects such as the contribution of teacher and teaching materials, or the effect of students' individual differences. According to Bacha (2002), there are many reasons for testing writing in EFL classrooms, such as meeting *diagnostic*, *proficiency*, and *promotional needs*. Hence, there is a need to measure L2 writing performance properly to understand the students' language development. Although it is easy to test receptive skills such as reading and listening, it might be difficult to get *reliable* and *valid* results on the students' oral and written productions. Cooper and Odell (1977) claim that examinations are not valid measures of writing performance but they can be utilized for prediction or placement for the criterion measure in a research study with a narrow *correctness* hypothesis. Moreover, the use of test scores for purposes affecting the status or future of students, teachers or schools may lead teachers to "focus teaching the test content, training students in how to pass tests, and adapting teaching styles which do not match the preferred learning style of many students" (Johnston & McClune, 2000). Besides, negative factors like *test anxiety* and *lack of motivation* influence students' performance in L2 writing. Thus, it is necessary to study underlying reasons for students' writing performance in tests for better understanding their needs and to improve writing instruction. As one of the most influential factors in writing

performance, motivation and its components need to be investigated more in L2 writing research. Therefore, this paper attempts to review the literature to comprehend the connection between L2 students' writing performance and their motivation to write as well as expecting to discover new directions in writing research.

Research on Motivation and Testing Writing

Data from several studies have identified the relationship between motivation and writing emphasizing the effect of motivation on testing writing. The research to date has tended to focus on revealing a positive relationship between these two concepts. For instance, Troia et al. (2013) aimed to explore how sex, grade level, and writing ability influence writing motivation, activity, and performance in order to see how writing activity is related to writing motivation and performance. The *Writing Activity and Motivation Scales* (WAMS) instrument was administered to 618 students from different levels and some writing tasks were employed to measure their writing ability. The study revealed that writing activity directly influenced students' motivational beliefs and goal orientations. Likewise, it was seen that motivational beliefs contributed to the quality of the stories written by the students. In another study by Lo and Hyland (2007), which is a longitudinal action research project, the evaluation of a new ESL writing programme was done and its effectiveness on writing engagement, motivation, and interest was examined. The qualitative data for the research were collected through a number of methods such as teacher-researcher's journal, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and log entries by the students. At the end of the study, it was observed that students felt more successful in a setting where content and meaning were given priority over form. Thus, the study suggests that giving students autonomy in writing increases their motivation and engagement, being especially effective for low-achiever students. Sasaki (2011) also observed Japanese students' in the long term to investigate the role of overseas experiences on their English writing ability and motivation. The findings of this quantitative study revealed that spending time overseas was an advantage for the students nurturing them to develop their L2 writing ability and to sustain their motivation to write better. It calls

for we also need more detailed studies of how various contextual factors affect these changes individually.

Several studies have revealed that there is a close link between EFL students' motivation and writing performance. For example, Hashemian and Heidari (2013) studied the relationship between motivation and attitudes and their role in L2 writing achievement. The *Attitude/Motivation Test Battery Questionnaire* (Gardner, 1985) and *Writing Proficiency Test* adapted from Arnold (1991) were administered for thirty Iranian M.A. students of TEFL. The results of the study showed that the participants with higher integrative motivation were more successful in L2 academic writing in comparison to those who were instrumentally motivated. It was also seen that the respondents who had positive attitudes toward writing displayed better L2 writing performance than the ones with negative attitudes. Similarly, Kormos (2012) evaluated the influence of three individual differences factors, which are *aptitude*, *working memory capacity*, and *motivation* on L2 writing processes. It was concluded that both cognitive and motivational factors affect L2 learners' writing task performance and this effect might vary depending on the task types. It is claimed that the role of individual differences should be studied elaborately using qualitative methods such as think-aloud and retrospective interviews. Lam and Law (2007) explored the relationships between six specific instructional practices related to motivation - which are challenge, real-life significance, curiosity, autonomy, recognition, and evaluation - and writing performance. After collecting data through questionnaires and the essays written by the students, it was reported that students have better writing performance when they are motivated. Moreover, the study suggests some ways to maintain motivation such as assigning challenging tasks, stimulating curiosity, ensuring real-life significance in activities, recognizing students' efforts, granting autonomy, and giving useful feedback for improvement.

However, research also shows that the relationship between students' motivation and writing performance might not always be in a positive direction. In other words, some writing activities and testing methods might have negative effects on students' motivation to write. For instance, in a study by Boscolo et al. (2007), 'writing' and 'interest' was investigated with the aim of analyzing the relationship between cognitive and affective variables and their role in writing tasks. The data were collected

from 318 high school students in Italy through pre- and post-test questionnaires in addition to text-based writing tasks on a specific topic. In contrary to the expectations, it was found that writing had a negative impact on students' interest. The researchers claimed that the writing tasks applied in the study caused boredom and anxiety among students.

Discussion and conclusion

All three main writing approaches referred to in this paper – Product, Process, and Genre - have some powerful and defective features which require writing teachers to carefully select and apply the best one(s) in their teaching contexts depending on the needs and purposes of their students. It is essential to remember that the approaches and methods employed in teaching and testing writing impress the learners' performance and motivation. As suggested by Gardner (2007), language learning motivation and classroom learning motivation are closely related to ESL and EFL students' learning performance and achievement. Therefore, it is vital to design writing courses and tests in a way that will improve the students' writing skills rather than destruct their motivation to write. Studies investigating the link between EFL/ESL writing and motivation have shown that there is a positive relationship between them in general. It is clearly seen that highly motivated students perform better in writing tasks and tests than those who are less motivated because they have positive attitudes toward writing. Research shows that the type of the writing tasks and giving students autonomy in writing process also influence both their motivation and performance.

The relationship between motivation and writing performance might be modified by a number of variables. Hence, there is a need to investigate underlying reasons and different aspects of this relationship in various contexts. EFL teachers can observe the problems that their students face in writing classrooms. Examining these issues in a systematic way through action research and classroom research, the teachers can provide sufficient data which could be used to redefine EFL writing students' needs and goals. Thus, they can not only help students improve their writing skills and maintain motivation in writing, but also assist curriculum developers and policy makers to include motivational aspects in EFL writing courses and tests. In addition, it is

possible for the teachers to diversify their teaching in the light of the findings related to writing motivation.

This paper has mostly emphasized some concepts in writing and motivation and implicitly offered some new ideas on their relationship. A possible research idea might be ‘to explore the reasons for students’ lack of motivation to write both from the students’ and teachers’ perspectives’. Correspondingly, some solutions to the identified problems could be explored. Apart from that, testing research might benefit from such studies that will examine affective factors having an impact on EFL students’ writing performance in particular. In this way, testing procedures can be enhanced and even new assessment techniques can be developed. Hereby, the present article has attempted to provide an introduction to the relationship between testing writing skills and motivation in addition to presenting a theoretical background and results from previous studies on the subject briefly. It was also expected to help the researcher set a ground for future studies on testing writing.

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