Factors Influencing the Acquisition of Writing Skills

M.Dhanya, C.Alamelu

ABSTRACT: Students often quote "writing" as the most challenging aspect of acquiring a language. An inherent fear of not being able to construct sentences coherently in the first few attempts coupled by inadequate writing instructions are certain reasons why students feel demotivated to write. Teachers too seem to carry the opinion that it is very difficult to teach 'writing' and that it can only be 'learnt' with proper guidance. Writing requires a deliberate and sustained effort from the learner. However, like any other skill, writing too can be 'learnt' provided the right set of conditions exists. These conditions or influencing factors, can significantly enhance the process of 'learning to write'. Some of these factors include a positive student-teacher relationship, classroom environment, intrinsic learner motivation, and positive feedback systems. These factors have varying degrees of influence on learning writing. This paper seeks to understand the perspectives of teachers and students on the influence of these factors in a real learning environment and their impact on the learning outcomes with specific focus on writing.

KEYWORDS: Student Motivation, Positive Classroom Environment, Student-Teacher Relationship, Feedback-based system.

INTRODUCTION

Learning to write is the most important skill for students in acquiring a language. Writing equips students to enable their thinking and craft their communication effectively. Writing is an important and effective means of self - expression, communication and information gathering Grabe and Kaplan (1996).writing is not only significant skill but also a difficult task to acquire. Writing requires more focus, cognition and diligence. As writing needs more sustained and conscious effort from the learners, they are most likely to show greater interest in other skills. Writing could be a difficult skill to be learnt or taught due to the fact that it is not a simple cognitive activity; rather it is believed to be a complex mental production which requires "careful thought, discipline and concentration"(Grami, 2010, p. 9). This results in aversion towards writing and it poses as one of the greatest challenges facing language teachers today.

There are several factors that make 'Writing' difficult for students and teachers alike. Nunan (1989) argues that writing is an extremely difficult cognitive activity which requires the learner to have control over various factors. For students, writing is a highly demanding task. To achieve optimum results in writing tasks, students would need strong comprehension ability involving grammar, vocabulary, conception, rhetoric and other parts of the language (Zhang and Chen, 1989).

For teachers, there is also a constant need to sustain students' interest by keeping a tab on their writing abilities and regular realignment of teaching methods to suit student preferences. This means that every lesson requires careful preparation where teachers need to adopt a variety of techniques, customize their lesson plans and use up to date and relevant teaching aids to make writing tasks more interesting. Teachers also have the daunting task of getting beyond a student's perception of writing as being a mere 'testing or evaluation tool'.

There are Challenges related to writing which manifest in students and teachers simultaneously i.e. while teachers find it challenging to *teach* writing skills, students find it equally hard to *learn* the same from their teachers.L2 learners find writing difficult, stressful and get demotivated. Writing is a complex procedure. Teachers need to assist these students with discourse, cohesion, coherence of ideas, grammar vocabulary and sentence structures. It is extremely critical for a student to succeed hence special attention is required. Thus, it becomes a teacher's primary responsibility to not only encourage students to write but also write effectively. Without proper writing skills, students cannot claim to have learnt the language. Though considered formidable, writing skills can be successfully imparted by teachers provided they are aware of the underlying factors influencing the acquisition of these skills.

The insight from this current study is expected to throw light on the factors that influence teaching – learning process of writing and also help teachers to relook at their approach currently being adopted to impart writing skills. A clear understanding of the influencing factors will not only ease the process of learning, but also make it more interesting for teachers and students alike. Writing is, of course, not easy, but it is less difficult than many students and their teachers imagine (Brookes. A, Grundy, 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is not just an academic requirement, but also an essential skill for success beyond tertiary. It is one of the most important skill that students need to acquire. Learners encounter abundant difficulties while writing. A learner can express his thoughts better through writing. Teacher can ascertain the mistakes of the learner instantly through writing. There are a lot of factors that affect writing for both learners and teachers in this process of writing. The acquisition of writing skill is based on several factors such as the motivation of the learners, a positive and engaging environment conducive for writing, a healthy teacher-

student relationship backed by an effective, precise and constant stream of feedback and last of all the use of modern technological tools and techniques.

Motivation

The key element in acquiring writing skills is Motivation. Motivation helps learners to improve their interest towards writing. It also encourages the learner to engage in writing. A Motivated learner contributes in the classroom activities and shows interest in developing writing skills. Though Authors have frequently referred to the "anguish" and "agony" of written composition (Widdowson, 1983; Raimes, 1983). Through constant support and guidance of a teacher the student feels motivated and becomes prepared for language learning. Thus a clear and constructive motivation-based approach is required to stimulate the interests of the learners towards writing. Learners with high levels of motivation take a more active role in their learning, while students who are less motivated to perform, may have difficulty performing to expectation in the classroom (Otoshi & Heffernan, 2011). Learners with high level of motivation do good learning and writing and achieve good results. Students with low level motivation find writing complex and also sense failure. The teacher needs to find the student who lacks motivation and give continuous writing exercise to improve his/her writing ability.

Positive Environment

Writing is often an inherently social activity often done for readers to understand. Creating caring classroom atmospheres has been shown to reduce behavior problems and allows students the opportunity to place their focus on learning (Brannon, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2007).It is an essential component that a positive environment help in language learning. The focus on writing becomes more clear, advent and precise. The activities rendered for learning would have improved. According to Ulicsak (2004) and Rollinson (2005), teachers have to create the environment that supports students to collaborate with each other. "At least initially, academic writing too, is most often undertaken in isolation, For this reason, not only the physical environment where we write matters, but also the social environment within which we write"(Nate Kreuter, 2014). Thus the learning 'environment' plays a key role in language acquisition.

Teacher-Student Relationship

A healthy teacher-student relationship is vital in the acquisition of new skills and teachers play a key role in building these relationships. The more the student and the teacher communicate, the more ideas generate. This helps in a better development towards language learning. According to Hamre et al. (2008), positive interactions between teachers and students have proven to be an asset, as they help students adjust to school and promote learning development. Teachers are the biggest asset for student's improvement. The interaction with students, help them in endorsing language learning. The interaction among teacher student and their relationship is a preparatory stage in language development. The supportive relationship with the teacher helps to break down the barrier of language learning and writing. Here, the gap becomes reduced and effective writing takes place. Student feels free to work together and clear doubts if any. This helps the students to write better and perform well. A positive teacher-student relationship enables students to feel safe and secure in their learning environments and provide scaffolding for important social and academic skills (Baker et al., 2008; O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005).

Digital Technologies

The advent of digital technologies has significantly influenced in the manner in which students acquire various skills and 'writing' is no exception. Students feel the need for technology-based learning. Internet and digital technologies such as social networking sites, smart phones and texting, facilitating teens' to express their thoughts and become creative. The digital tools aid them to learn, understand and express their thoughts in writing which also reaches wider audience.For example a study by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) claims that learners love Facebook as it provides them opportunities for writing practice and increased motivation to post in English. Prichard, 2013; Blattner and Fiori (2009),(qtd in Zarate& cisterna) states that Learners writing in this public setting may feel their text has greater authenticity and purpose in comparison to traditional writing which may only be viewed by a teacher. Students' writing ability can be improved by fostering their interest, motivation and enjoyment for writing, through technology (Graham & Perin, 2007). Teachers are also exploring how online tools and technology gadgets can be integrated into formal L2 learning. However, teachers do consider plagiarism on students writing.

Assessment and feedback

Writing becomes a commitment in student's scholarly life. Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning Ajayi (2016) through regular assessments students learning can be monitored. Assessment provides the necessary feedback that is required for students writing. Feedback is another factor in learning. Feedback can provide powerful instances in writing. When a student's work is reviewed, he/she has immediate feedback. A record of student's work over a long period of time provides long term feedback on how a student's writing is developing. (**P.D Havel, 1995**, pp 330). For Most students' feedback helps in mastery over the skills. However, feedback mechanisms can misfire, if they do not comply with some basic rules like being objective, positively worded, qualitative and problem-centric rather than person-centric. The students have to be given regular assignments. These assignment should be assessed for their academic performance.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of the current study is to understand the various factors influencing acquisition of L2 writing skills through the perspectives of students and teachers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) What are the factors that influence learning writing from the perspective of students?
2) What are the factors according to the teachers which will improve Students' writing skills?

METHODOLOGY

A field study was done and a Questionnaire was prepared for data collection. The purpose of the questionnaire was to find out the factors that influence acquisition of writing skills. A total of 20 teachers and 80 students were taken as a sample for the study from Arts and Science Colleges in South Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. The students and teachers were administered the questionnaire and asked to respond appropriately. The responses were validated through discussions with the respondents to ensure that they had interpreted the questions correctly, before providing their views. The students were asked to rank their priorities from 1 to 8 : rank number 1 being the top priority and rank number 8 being the least priority. The rankings provided by the respondents for each of the eight options were first tabulated; the frequency distribution for each of them calculated individually and finally ranks order correlation was calculated.

FINDINGS

It is imperative to understand teachers responses and students responses; the results depict the factors that play a major influence in writing from teachers and students perspectives. The students and Teachers were asked to rank priorities from the factors like, positive environment, motivation, student teacher Relationship, regular assessment, giving deadlines to finish the work, positive feedback, using electronic gadgets to improve writing and time management. The priorities that influence writing according to students and teachers response are listed below in Table – 1:

Teachers Response			Students response		
Options	Total	Rank	Options	Total	Rank
Positive Environment	128	1	Positive Environment	449	1
Students Teacher relationship	105	2	Student Teacher Relationship	428	2
Motivation	101	3	Positive Feedback	244	3
Regular Assessment	58	4	Motivation	231	4
Positive Feedback	54	5	Using E gadgets	178	5
Time management	29	6	Assessment	144	6
Using E gadgets	26	7	Time management	110	7
Giving deadlines to finish the work	16	8	Deadlines to finish the work	102	8

Table 1 ranking preferences on Factors Enabling Acquisition of Writing Skills

From table 1, it is clear that the teachers ranking order has positive environment factor as the highest followed by students teacher relationship. Motivation, regular assessment, positive feedback, time management, using e gadgets, giving deadlines are ranked from 3rd to 8th respectively.

Students have ranked positive environment in class room as the most influencing factor to improve writing followed by Student Teacher Relationship as the second factor. The factors like positive feedback, motivation, using e -gadgets, Assessment, time management, deadlines to finish the work are ranked from 3rd to 8th respectively.

Teachers Response			Students response		
Options	Total	Rank	Options	Total	Rank
Positive Environment	128	1	Positive Environment	449	1
Students Teacher relationship	105	2	Student Teacher Relationship	428	2
Motivation	101	3	Motivation	231	4
Regular Assessment	58	4	Assessment	144	6
Positive Feedback	54	5	Positive Feedback	244	3
Time management	29	6	Time management	110	7
Using E gadgets	26	7	Using E-gadgets	178	5
Giving deadlines	16	8	Giving deadlines	102	8

Table -2 Comparison of Teachers and students responses

From table 2, comparing the priorities of factors, it is found that both teachers and students prefer creating a positive classroom environment as the key factor facilitating writing skills among students and Student-teacher relationship as next priority of factor in facilitating writing skills. Teachers have ranked motivation to be the third important factor enabling writing. Positive feedback is ranked third among all the factors since it helps students in improving writing skill. From the ranking it is clearly understood that using E-gadgets (electronic gadgets) and giving deadlines to finish the work and Time management was given the least preferences by teachers and students. Since r = 0.83, p < .01, the correlation between teachers and students view is significant.

Thus this study observes that there is significant commonality among top influencing factors among both teachers and students. It is also to be noted that both these

groups ranked the 'use of e-gadgets' and 'giving deadlines to finish the work' as the least priority, when it comes to acquiring writing skills.

A Teacher's Pivotal Role

A teacher's role is crucial in building a can-do attitude with respect to writing. From our study it is apparent that a majority of teachers view positive classroom environment as the key factor facilitating writing skills among students. "A classroom is a place where students can find their voices, meet mentors and explore with wondrous words" (Kathleen Neagle Sokolowski, 2015). In such an environment, students and teacher develop mutual respect and connect with each other at an emotional plane. Mutual respect is a vital component in learning. This emotional connect and mutual respect in turn leads to higher student engagement and better learning outcomes. It also leads to a healthy student-teacher relationship. This motivation will create a positive environment in the classroom. Every element in the classroom should not only encourage writing but also highlight the importance of it. While writing whether a teacher should focus on the flow of ideas or the lexical accuracy of what's been written is an eternal conflict. Teachers need to be aware of the fact that committing mistakes and imperfections are part of the learning process.

SUGGESTIONS

A Conducive Classroom Environment

A conducive classroom environment allows for the free exchange of ideas between the students and teachers. The physical and non-physical environment of the classroom is required to spark students' interest in writing. A conducive classroom environment is a result of emotional and physical parameters blending in perfectly, and students optimise learning. Students tend to do a writing activity better when they collaborate rather than doing it alone. An exercise in 'Circle Writing' for instance, involves students sitting in a circle and passing pieces of paper writing a sentence each time. Each student is expected to add to a meaningful sentence to the ones already written by other these activities encourages them in better writing

The constant use of the same teaching methods time and again, leads to an environment of monotony and boredom. Suspense and surprise are key elements in the attention span of the learner's mind; hence, every writing lesson should be a new experience. Teachers can inspire students to write more by providing assignments that are beyond the usual scope of the syllabus. Customising writing topics to the student's own experiences and background can further alleviate the anxiety towards writing and make it an activity worth cherishing. For instance this could be as simple as asking the students to write review of a product or a movie they watched recently. By enabling students publish their own work: Publishing could be in the form of a collaborative book, on the bulletin board or even online.

By making Writing exercises interactive: it is imperative for teachers to make writing tasks interactive. The outcome of the activity is the building of a coherent and interesting story. Teachers can further enhance the environment by finding contemporary topics of their student's interest rather than that of their own choice or knowledge level. Thus a productive and engaging classroom environment goes beyond the mere physical layout of the class.

Student-Teacher Relationships

It is observed that students rank 'Positive Student – Teacher relationship' to be of second priority in the acquisition of writing skills. Elaborative discussions with the students also affirmed the much debated notion that many of them were apprehensive of writing and that a good working relationship with their teacher considerably allayed their fear of being judged or criticized for their writing. In a conducive environment where student-teacher relationships thrive, learning complex skills such as 'writing' becomes easier. A positive student-teacher relationship also provides the space for ideas and views to be shared in a free and open manner. Arum(2011) White,(2007) (qtd in Blackmore.J.H) states that maintaining positive social relationships with students is vital in creating a safe and orderly learning environment.

Learner Motivation

It is observed from this study that motivation is the third most influencing factor in teaching writing. Students often view Writing as a mundane aspect of learning a language. Thus it becomes all the more important for teachers to constantly motivate their students and transform an apparently dull task to one that is exciting and relevant to their students.

The easiest way to motivate students to write is by providing them the encouragement to write as often as possible in spite of all the mistakes they make. Teachers can provide positive comments for a student's well written work while reassuring them whenever they struggle to meet the writing objectives. Jarvis (2005) argues that in order to motivate students in L2 writing, teachers should write positive comments on learner's exercise books and verbally reinforce good language responses as part of their instructions. The more motivated the students are, the better the output. By using the right motivation techniques, a teacher can make '*writing*' a continuously improving and interesting activity.

Positive Feedback

Is ranked as third option by students, it can be inferred that positive feedback from teachers enables students in improving their writing skills. Hattie and Timperley (2007) propose a model of feedback that distinguishes four levels: (1) feedback about the task (such as feedback about whether answers were right or wrong or directions to get more information), (2) feedback about the processing of the task (such as feedback about strategies used or strategies that could be used), (3) feedback about self-regulation (such as feedback about student self-evaluation or self-confidence), and (4) feedback about the student as a person (such as pronouncements that a student is "good" or "smart"). Butler and Winne's (1995) research showed that both external feedback (such as teacher feedback) affects student knowledge and beliefs. Positive feedback does not merely

refer to the teacher commenting on the nicer aspects of students' writing, but also the manner in which 'developmental areas' are highlighted to them. The tone, language, clarity and timeliness of the feedback should reflect the good intentions of the teacher.

CONCLUSION

Our study finds that a conducive classroom environment, positive student-teacher relationship, positive feedback and constant motivation are the key ingredients that will enable students to write well. These factors are very closely interlinked that at times it is challenging to differentiate between them. While classroom environment is a sum total of the physical and emotional aspects, the Teacher is the common link who becomes accountable for ensuring a conducive classroom environment and acts as a source of constant motivation for students. Finally it is important for teachers to remember that irrespective of students approach to writing, it is essential to always care and provide encouragement to them at all times. It is of paramount importance for teachers to never give up on any of their students or they will give up on themselves

REFERENCES

1. Ajayi, Victor. (2018)"Difference between Assessment, Measurement and Evaluation in Science Education.https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322908173_Difference_between_Assessment_Measurement_and_Evaluation_in_Science_Education citation
2. Alsamadani, H. A. (2010). The Relationship between Saudi EFL Students' Writing Competence, L1 Writing Proficiency, and Self-regulation. European Journal of Social Sciences, 16, 53-63.
3. Al Murshidi (2014) UAE University Male Students' Interests Impact on Reading and Writing Performance and Improvement. English Language Teaching; Vol. 7, No. 9.
4. Baker, J. Grant, s., & Morlock, L.(2008). The teacher–student relationship as a developmental context for children with internalizing or externalizing behavior problems. School Psychology Quarterly, 23(1), 3-15.
5. Blackmore,J H., (2011).Teacher-Student Relationships and Student Writing Achievement
6. Brannon, D. (2008). Character education: A joint responsibility. Kappa Delta Pi, 44, 62-65.
7. Brookes, Arthur, and Peter Grundy(2006), "Beginning to write": New York :Cambridge, print
8. Butler, D. L. and Winne, P. H. (1995). Feedback and self-regulated learning: A theoretical syntheses. Review of Educational Research, 65(3), 245-281.
9. Graham,S.,Perin,D.(2007) "Writing next effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools."The Elementary School Journal.94(2), 169-181.
10. Grami.G.M.A.,(2010)The effects of integrating peer feedback into university –level ESL Writing curriculum Retrieved from https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10443/933/1/grami.
11. Grabe, W. and Kaplan, R.B. (1996) Theory and Practice of Writing: An Applied Linguistic Perspective. Longman, New York.
12. Hattie.J.,Timperly.H(2007)"The power of feedback" Review of Educational Research Vol. 77, No. 1, pp. 81-112.
13. Hamre, B., Pianta, R., Downer, J., & Mashburn, A. (2008). Teachers' perceptions of conflict with young students: Looking beyond problem behaviors. Social Development, 17(1), 115-136.
14. Jarvis, M. (2005). The Psychology of effective Learning. Cheltenham : Nelson Thornes.
15. Kabilan, M. K., Ahmad, N. Abidin, ,(2010). " Facebook: An Online Environment for Learning of English in Institutions of Higher Education?" *Internet and Higher Education, 13, 179-187.*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2010.07.003.
16. Nunan,D (1989) "Designing tasks for the communicative classroom. Cambridge University press. United Kingdom.
17. Nate Kreuter(2014) https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/12/10/essay
18. Otoshi & Heffernan, (2011) An Analysis of a Hypothesized Model of EFL Students' Motivation Based on Self-Determination Theory.Asian EFL journal p66-86
19. P. D. Havel, (Sep. 1995), Journal article An Important Means of Learning Subject Matter & the Writing Process The American Biology Teacher Vol. 57, No. 6,pp. 330-335
20. Sokolowski, Kathleen Neagle (2015) Creating classroom environments: places for writers to grow https://twowritingteachers.org.
21. The Impact of Digital Tools on Student Writing and How Writing is taught in Schools, (2013).PEW Research Center.
22. Ulicsak, M. H. (2004) ' 'How did it know we weren't talking?': An Investigation into the Impact of Self-Assessment and Feedback in a Group Activity', In Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, Vol. 20, pp 205 – 211.
23. Widdowson, H. G (1983) New starts and different kinds of failure in "Learning to write: First Language/Second Language", Friedman, A. Pringle and Yalden, J.(eds.), Harlow, UK, Longman,
24. Zhang, X., & Chen, J. (1989).The techniques to teaching writing. English Teaching Forum, 27(2), 34.