Fostering Students' Motivation to Write

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Abstract

Despite decades of significant increase of motivational research on the one hand, and the remarkable development of writing studies, on the other, the topic of the intersection of the two fields has only been partially explored. In fact, studies on the motivational aspects of writing are scare because most motivation researchers have been focusing on students' general orientation to learning as learning goals, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, expectancy, self efficacy rather than on students' approach to specific disciplines. The present paper reflects on the learners' difficulties in writing. It also proposes ways of enhancing the students' motivation in this language skill.

Introduction

Decades on motivational research, on the one hand, and on writing research, on the other, have emerged into a great development in both fields separately. Yet, studies on the motivational aspects of writing are but recent. Though recent, these studies have particularly investigated the most salient motivational variables, their relations to writing in particular, interest, self-efficacy, and self regulation.

The practitioners' usually posed questions are:

- Why are learners so often demotivated?
- How can their motivation be enhanced?

Such pertinent questions which trigged off research on motivational aspects of academic writing are the main concern of the present paper. Therefore, this paper will address the basic question of how motivation to write can be fostered. We also

believe that analyses of conceptual and theoretical issues of the topics of motivation and writing will provide insights of what demotivate our students to write.

1. Motivation and Writing: What Relation?

The research field on motivation is so vast that it is almost impossible to analyze its various aspects. Wiegfield and Eccles (2002) suggest a useful way of organizing the variety of motivational constructs. Such an immense field can be divided into three main areas. Then, their inter-relationship can be considered.

The first area focuses on the motives that activate a student's behaviour. Among these motives, there are the goal orientation (mastery vs performance vs avoidance goals) needs, values, and interests.

As an illustration of this area, Boscolo and Mason (2002) choose the example of a middle school student and a novelist. The former is interested in expressing his ideas on an assigned topic in written form. The latter intends to narrate an involving story. Both are unmotivated. The student lacks motivation because he has an assigned task to do. The novelist lacks motivation because of a different reason. However, the two of them have an orientation to write or not to write.

The second area regards the writer's perception of his abilities to write in relation to the difficulty of the task and the resources of the context. The two writers have different worries and constraints. The novelist, on the one hand, will face critics, comments, and responses to his work. The student, on the other, has to face his teacher's evaluation.

The two authors have positive and negative representations of themselves as writers. The representation the two writers includes self-efficacy and self perception of competence.

The final area regards the strategies the writer uses when writing. The professional and the novice writers alike adopt certain

strategies when facing a given task. They both try to manage their time by planning it, or by adopting metacognitive tools, or by resisting the temptation of quitting the task altogether. In other words, they regulate their cognition, affect, and behaviour to achieve the objective of a writing task.

Motivational researchers like Hidi, Berndorff, Ainley, (2002); Pajares, Britner, and Valiante, (2000); Zimmerman & Kitsantas, (1999), confirm that these three areas are rarely, if ever, separate from one another. Whether a writer is willing or not willing to write is tightly linked to his self-perception ability as well as to the tools he can adopt for self-regulation.

When showing the complexity of the writing processes and above all the difficulties the students have to deal with, the cognitive approach has largely contributed towards understanding the students' demotivation. Writing is a too demanding activity for novice writers. Various kinds of writing difficulties have been discovered to which effective instructional strategies have been identified (e.g. Bereiter and Scardamalia, (1982, 1987); Harris and Graham, (1992, 1996)).

Another de-motivating aspect of school writing is the fact that the traditional curriculum includes not only the rigidity of genres but also the separation of writing from other school subjects (Boscolo & Carotti, 2003).

Like reading, writing is a cross-disciplinary activity. It is used to produce texts within disciplines different from language skills such as a scientific report. It is also used to record and organize knowledge such as notes, outlines and summaries. Reading, however, develops its cross-disciplinary identity quite early. Writing, on the contrary, at all school grades is essentially perceived by teachers and students alike in its disciplinary function. Furthermore, this perception is strengthened by teachers' methods of teaching and evaluating writing.

The teachers' attention when writing is used as an aid such as in the case of essays or scientific reports is focused on evaluating

the amount of organization of knowledge conceived by the text. Notes, outlines, and summaries are considered as personal strategies used by the learner. They are not evaluated.

Hidi (2003) states that this institutional conceptualization of writing will limit the students' opportunity to write, to discover interaction between subjects, and to use writing as a communicative tool, and thus, to find writing an interesting activity, not only an academic task.

As a matter of fact, the importance of writing is rarely understood by the learners. They are unaware of this communicative tool that enables them to fix, use, change, and relaborate their ideas and knowledge (Boscolo & Carotti, 2003). Most of all, this skill is a tool that creates collaboration with other people, schoolmates as partners in the constitution and negotiation of meaning outside and inside the classroom context. Unfortunately, this type of writing is hardly encouraged by teachers. The above negative view of academic writing instruction does by no means, mean that students are hardly ever interested in this skill. There are occasions where learners write with interest and satisfaction. This, unfortunately, is often due to the writer's own engagement in the topic rather than to the writing instruction aimed at fostering motivation. Hidi states:

> *The motivational salience of written composition tends to decrease progressively, except when it involves an interesting topic, and written production often becomes a routine and rigidly scheduled task, aimed almost entirely at assessment. (2002:142)*

2. Writing on an Interesting Topic versus Writing as an Interesting Activity

What makes a writing task an attractive one to students? The answer to this question may contribute to a long lasting positive

orientation to writing. In the light of the distinction between situational and individual interest, a study on the role of interest in writing was conducted by Hidi and McLaren (1990). The hypothesis of the study was that situational interest, namely the interestingness of themes and topics, has both an influence on the learners comprehension and an influence on the learner's production of expository texts. The findings of that study were: positive effect of topic and theme interest on the quality and quantity of the written expositions was confounded by knowledge factors, that is, the level of the students' knowledge of the content they were required to write about. To Hidi and McLaren (1991) interest is generated by text topic. However, Benton, Sharp, Downey, and Khramtsova , (1996) see interest on topic as an individual difference that is to say, the writer's high and low level of topic interest is associated with particular aspects of writing quantity. The studies reveal that the basic motivational source of writing is the topic and how far it attracts the learners. Interest is commonly viewed as static, that is, students are viewed to be interested or uninterested in a topic. Hidi (2003) considers interest in writing on a specific topic as an example of situational interest that is triggered by a stimulating and involving topic. The type of task in which the topic is treated is an aspect of situational interest. Hidi, Berndorff, and Ainley (2002) claim that the social activity determines the interest. When the students find the social activity meaningful, and they view themselves competent, the task will be performed with a great interest.

Therefore, interest is the result of the activity in a situation (Khramtsova, 1996). The learner will be interested in writing if the instructional situation allows him to discover and practise the attractive, unusual, and challenging aspects of the task. The traditional writing tasks do not provide that challenge; the learner will experience and enjoy the new aspect of writing

where he finds himself more competent and capable to face the difficulties of writing.

3. The Self Perception of Competence in Writing

Researchers like Brophy, (1999); Harter, (1992); Pajares and Valiante, (1997); Renninger, (1992); Shell, Colvin, and Bruning, (1989, 1995) have conducted researches on students' self-perception in the 1990s. They focused mainly on the role perceived competence and control in students' motivational orientation and their relationship with the stimulating features of an instructional environment. Bruning and Horm (2000) define a learning environment of writing as being one that provides students with tasks and activities at an appropriate level of difficulty and autonomy. For students to perceive themselves as competent, they should be able to choose and manage challenging yet solvable tasks and problems. Gambrel and Morrow (1996) believe that the students' self perception will foster their engagement and motivation in literate activities.

Studies on writing apprehension were conducted in 1970s. Within these studies, writers' self-perceptions of competence were tackled. Daly and Miller (1975) defined apprehension as the tendency to avoid writing situations or to react in an anxious manner if forced into them, because of the anticipation of negative consequences (1975:243). The authors make a clear-cut distinction between dispositional or trait-like form and situational anxiety. The former can be measured by self-report questionnaire and the latter was perceived to be transitory and dependent on the particular characteristics of a writing situation. However, the two forms were seen complementary. As a trait, writing apprehension was measured by a 26 item questionnaire that includes items like:

- I am nervous about writing
- I don't like my composition to be evaluated.

Used by many researchers in the late 1970s and 1980s, this construct showed that:

- Low apprehension writers scored significantly higher on test of grammar, mechanics, and writing skills.
- High apprehension students tend to develop avoidance behaviour.

Kean, Glym, and Britton (1987) find that differences in writing competence is only partially related to apprehension. They state that writing apprehension affects writing quality when the writer is limited by time constraints. Other scholars like Faigley, Daly, and Witte (1981) state that the quality of writing is affected when the writer writes personal texts. Madigan, Linton and Johnson (1996) introduce the term "paradox of writing apprehension" to refer to the writer's feeling of distress not accompanied by any objective shortcoming of writing.

Researches on self-efficacy have been gaining ground over writing apprehension. This is due to the fact that studies in writing apprehension represent an isolated research area. It is also due to the fact that self-efficacy for writing represents the individuals' beliefs of their ability to write certain types of texts (Pajaras & Johnson, 1996).

A relationship between self-efficacy for writing and writing measures has been discovered. For instance, Schunk and Swartz (1993) discovered 4th and 5th graders' writing self efficacy was highly productive of their writing skills and use of strategies. They concluded that self-efficacious writers are more likely to choose and persist at writing tasks than students who do not feel competent. Other investigations conducted by McCarthy, Mever, and Rinderer, (1985); Meier, McCarthy, and Schmeer, (1984) for example, show that adult learners' self efficacy was predictive of their writing performance, intrinsic motivation to write, and self regulatory processes. Zimmerman and Bandura (1984) found out self perceptions of writing competence is linked to the writers' goal setting. That is, increased levels of

writing self-efficacy resulted in higher goals that learners set for themselves.

Bandura and Schunk (1981) argue that increased interest was an outcome of increased self-efficacy. Though the two motivational factors-interest and self-efficacy- develop separately, Hidi et al (2002) state that the two may reciprocally influence each others' development.

Conclusion

To develop and foster students' motivation to write, the prerequisite components of motivational teaching practice in the L2 classroom must be fulfilled. These components are by no means separate. On the contrary, they are interrelated. They form the foundation, the principles for a complete theory of instruction and teaching. Simply put, fulfilling one component and ignoring the other will be ineffective in the teaching of the four language skills in general, and in the teaching of writing in particular. The components of teaching practice as proposed by Dornyei (2001:29) are

1. Creating the basic motivational conditions. This includes:
- Appropriate teacher behaviours
- A pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom
- A cohesive leaner group with appropriate group norms
2. Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. This consists of
- Promoting motivational attributions
- Providing motivational feedback
- Increasing learner satisfaction
- Offering rewards and grades in a motivating manner
3. Maintaining and protecting motivation. The main concern of this component is:
- Making learning stimulating and enjoyable
- Presenting tasks in a motivating way
- Setting specific learner goals

- Protecting the learners' self-esteem and increasing their self-confidence
- Allowing learners to maintain a positive social image
- Creating learner autonomy
- Promoting self-motivation strategies
- Promoting cooperation among the learners
4. Generating initial motivation. This embodies:
- Enhancing the learner's L2 related values and attitudes
- Increasing the learner's expectancy of success
- Increasing the learner's goal-orientedness
- Making the teaching materials relevant for the learners
- creating realistic learner belief

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