

# Malaysian teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of the choice of topic on ESL learners' motivation in writing

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## Abstract

A number of researches have investigated whether or not the choice of topic for writing will impact ESL learners' motivation to write. Yet, most of these studies were conducted in the environment where English is used as first language. Though several studies were conducted in a second language environment, the socio-cultural backgrounds of the environment do not reflect the situation in Malaysian education system. This study thus investigates Malaysian teachers' points of view regarding the impact of the choice of topic on ESL learners' motivations in writing. Specifically, this research aims to identify whether the suggested motivating factors to be considered in selecting topics for writing by previous researches are applicable in Malaysian context as well as to identify other factors Malaysian teachers believe should be considered when selecting topics for writing in order to increase learners' motivation to write. A number of school English teachers were interviewed regarding the relation between the choice of topics and learners' motivation in writing. A group of pupils were interviewed to find what factors affect their motivation to write. The findings suggest that learners' socio-cultural background, prior knowledge and audience are important determiners of their motivation in writing, while learners' experiences and teachers' rewards are other factors that matter in the Malaysian context.

**Keywords:** writing; motivation; socio-cultural background; prior knowledge; audience

## 1.0 The problem

### 1.1 Introduction

Learners' success in academic is very much related to their motivation to learn. According to Dev (1997), learners' high motivation can encourage them to achieve academic success. This is supported by Majnemer (2011) who mentions that motivation is an important factor that can influence children's learning. As Majnemer (2011) continues, motivation can encourage individuals to master skills that are at least moderately challenging to them. Therefore, motivation can be seen as an important force that drives academic achievement among learners. According to Dornyei (2001), motivation is important in language learning as it lowers learners' anxiety and creates positive attitudes towards language learning. However, this is not the case in the Malaysia context as the education system in Malaysia is extremely examination oriented (Ong, 2010), whereby the learning of English is highly motivated by extrinsic desires for school achievements as well as admission into boarding schools and universities.

This research focuses on the issue faced by Malaysian ESL teachers regarding young learners' lack of motivation in learning English specifically in writing. As in many second language (L2) settings, most young learners have poor self-confidence in writing which may be attributed to low exposure of English as well as their perceived lack of purpose for writing (Daly and Sharko, 2010). It may be the result of the

tasks assigned to them being far removed from their prior knowledge, socio-cultural background and interest. This is supported by Tran (2007) who found that the norms of L2 countries such as Malaysia's education system is quite traditional, teacher-authority, and the lessons are mainly based from text books.

The textbook is usually developed by teachers and other academicians. However, the question is how far they incorporate the factor of socio-cultural background, prior knowledge and learners' interest in developing writing activities in the textbooks. Hence, this study seeks to investigate the relationship of the choice of topics for writing with learners' motivation to write.

This research is aimed at exploring Malaysian English language teachers' point of view whether the choice of topic for writing will have an impact on learner's motivation as well as to see if the motivating factors suggested by Lo & Hyland (2007) and Hidi & McLaren (1991) such as prior knowledge, socio-cultural background and audience are applicable in the local environment or not. This is important as writing is regarded as an important skill in language learning. Walsh (2010) supports this by saying that, apart from speaking, writing is a skill students need to master as it is used extensively in many aspects of life. As Walsh (2010) continues, the ability to write well will help individuals to communicate better as it is a very basic function in society. Thus, understanding what kind of topics can motivate learners to write is crucial to encourage them to better master the writing skill and function well in society.

This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are Malaysian teachers' points of view regarding the impact of writing topics on ESL learners' motivations in writing?
2. What are the factors teachers believe should be taken into consideration when selecting a topic for writing activity?

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### *2.1 Motivation and Language Learning*

Motivation to learn an L2 can be defined as the degree to which the individual attempts to learn the language because the desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in the effort (Gardner, 1985). However, according to Gardner (1985), motivation in learning L2 is crucial as compared to learning a first language because learning an L2 is commonly regarded as not absolutely necessary. In the same way, Gardner (2006) maintains that as language is an integral part of growing up, it has to take the factor of motivation into account to enable one to communicate and participate in an environment. By relating a successful L2 learning with learners' motivation to learn, Gardner (1985) believes that motivation can play an important role in L2 learning.

According to Tran (2007), learners' motivation does affect their motivation to write. She maintains that most of the problems faced by L2 teachers are related to learners' lack of interest in writing. Accordingly, Dornyei (2001) links motivation and writing by stating that learners' motivation to write can be enhanced by making the lesson relevant to their socio-cultural context as well as providing social interaction and self-expression. According to Hidi and McLaren (1991), learners' motivation to write will increase if they are given topics of their interest provided that they are familiar with them. Hidi and McLaren (1991) added that knowledge factor also plays a major role in the quality of the writing that learners produce. Thus, it can be understood that topics of interest increase learners' motivation in writing but it is the knowledge behind it that determines their quality of writing. Therefore, as Hidi and McLaren (1991) maintain, topic of interest as well as learners' knowledge are important determiners of their motivation in writing. However, as this study was conducted in an English speaking country, the results might not necessarily reflect the L2 situation of Malaysia as English is being used as an L2 instead of L1.

Other research on L2 motivation in writing which can be compared to the situation in Malaysia is the study by Lo and Hyland (2007) which was conducted in Hong Kong. This study highlights the importance of the topics chosen for writing by comparing the impact of the new topics for writing tested to the one from the curriculum. They suggest the topic chosen for writing activity must relate to learners' prior knowledge, their socio-cultural background as well as to include the factor of the audience. Although this study was conducted in an L2 environment in Hong Kong, it took into account the local conditions, socio-cultural contexts and the background of the place where the study was conducted which is obviously different from the situation of L2 in Malaysia.

In response to these situations, this research is intended to fill in these gaps by interviewing Malaysian school teachers in order to investigate the factor of topic in increasing primary learners' motivation in writing by considering the factor of learners' socio-cultural background, prior knowledge and audience as well as other factors they consider in selecting topics for writing.

### 3.0 Research Methodology

The sample of this study consists of two English teachers and 4 ESL learners from an upper Malaysian primary classroom aged ten to twelve years old. This qualitative study was divided into four stages which are the pre-observation one-on-one interviews with two English teachers (T1 and T2), the teacher-researcher's observations of the teachers' writing lessons and followed by an interview session with four students (two from each teacher's lesson (S1, S2 and S3, S4)) as well as a post-observation interview with the same English teachers. The teachers' opinion will be considered in selecting the students to be interviewed. The teachers' pre-observation interview session aims to explore what they think about the effect of writing topics toward students' motivation to write, what kinds of topics they believe could enhance students' motivation and what are other criteria they take into account in selecting topics for writing activities for the students other than suggested by the literature (socio-cultural, prior knowledge, audience). Meanwhile, the post-observation interview is to know what the teachers think about the lessons they conducted and whether or not it could motivate the learners and how. The students' interview sessions are to investigate their feelings and perceptions regarding the teacher's assistance and the topic of writing applied. The collected data were transcribed and analysed for emergent themes and patterns.

### 4.0 Findings

#### 4.1 Introduction

The interview data is compared with the data of the observation before a conclusion is made to see whether they synchronize or not. The findings are divided into two, which are T1 (with S1 and S2) and T2 with (S3 and S4).

#### 4.2 Data gathered

	<b>Interview data</b>	<b>Observation</b>
<b>Teacher 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree the choice of topic will impact learners' motivation to write.</li> <li>• Agree the three factors (prior knowledge/socio-cultural background/audience) are important factors to consider when selecting topic for writing.</li> <li>• Other factor – choosing topic based on what the students have experience (sports day/festivals)</li> </ul>	The topic chose considered pupils' prior knowledge and socio cultural background as well as their experience.

<b>Student 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likes to write about something she used to do at home as well as about her family (the factor of prior knowledge and socio-cultural background are considered).</li> </ul>	She finds the activity was easy and manages to finish it in time.
<b>Student 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likes to write about something about himself or his family (the factor of socio-cultural background and prior knowledge are considered).</li> </ul>	He likes the writing activity and manages to finish in time.
<b>Teacher 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agree the choice of topic will impact learners' motivation to write.</li> <li>Agree the three factors (prior knowledge/socio-cultural background/audience) are important factors to consider when selecting topic for writing.</li> <li>Other factor – choosing writing activity that suits the learners' need for examination purposes.</li> </ul>	The topic chose considered the factor of audience though it was based from the textbook.
<b>Student 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likes to write to people although he would prefer reading rather than writing. (The factor of audience can be considered. However, the learner might interest more on using the computer).</li> </ul>	Though student 3 is not keen on writing, he manages to finish the writing activity.
<b>Student 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likes to write to people and tell them about herself (the factor of audience is considered).</li> </ul>	She manages to finish her writing as well.

#### *4.2 Summary of the findings*

I found that both teachers agree that the choice of topic does impact on pupils' motivation to write. This is observed from T1 lesson which incorporated the factor pupils' prior knowledge and socio-cultural background in the lesson. In the same way, it is also observed in T2 lesson which incorporated the factor of audience in the writing activity. Thus all the three factors suggested to be infused in selecting writing topics can be seen from both writing lessons.

Accordingly, the four pupils think that they like to write when it comes to writing about themselves, their family as well as writing to somebody. Therefore, it can be said that the factors of prior knowledge, socio-cultural background and audience are the important determiners in selecting writing topics to increase pupils' motivation to write.

#### *4.3 Other findings*

Although the three factors mentioned above are important, both teachers also commonly agree that before having the pupils to write, their interest in writing must be enhanced. In this case, T1 believes, by considering what the pupils have experienced in selecting topics for writing will increase their motivation to write as they would have content to write. In the same way, T2 believes, by incorporating ICT in writing will get the pupils to write although if they do not really have the interest in writing. Additionally, T2 also mentioned about giving rewards to the pupils to attract them to write.

### **5.0 Discussion and conclusion**

The findings proved that pupils' socio-cultural background is interrelated with their motivation to write. Myles (2002) notes that social factors affect language learning and it is the reason why there are differences in pupils' rate in L2 learning. This is indeed true as S1 and S2 agreed that the infusion of their socio-cultural background in the writing is also one of the reasons why they were interested to write. Similarly, McInerney & Van Itten (2005) suggests sociocultural factors shape the way pupils' think and how they respond. In relation to this, Bransford (2000) states that if the pupils were thrown out of their socio-cultural context, they would not be able to perform well. As Dornyei (1994) suggests, this includes the learners' daily lives or anything that happen around their family or society. Interestingly, S1 and S2 agreed that they loved the activity as they can write about themselves and their family which they were familiar with. This provides evidence that socio-cultural contexts affect pupils' interest in writing.

As McInerney & Van Itten (2005) continue, pupils' prior knowledge is always derived from their socio-cultural background. This is observed from T1 lesson where as it is related to the pupils socio-cultural context, pupils were writing about something they know; their family activities in the weekend. From the interview, both S1 and S2 mentioned that they liked the activity as they can relate to what they used to do at home during weekend. This is true as DeGroff (1987) affirmed, high knowledge would result a greater proportions of information for writing. Therefore, this is the reason why the activity appealed to the pupils and they managed to finish it in the time given. Queensland Studies Authority (2009) supports that pupils' writing can be enhanced when they see the topic as worthwhile and relevant to their lives. This explains why S1 and S2 mentioned the writing activity was easy and both of them managed to finish it in time.

T2's lesson revealed that the factor of audience has a deep impact on pupils' interest to write. From the interview, both S3 and S4 agreed that they like to write to somebody as they can tell about themselves. Therefore, it is interesting to note that my finding differs from Myles (2002) who states that, many students would prefer conversation instead of writing. For example, S3 who usually does not like writing liked this writing activity as he can write to other people apart from writing using computer. Hence, it can be concluded from the finding that, if the writing activity infuse conversation or interaction, pupils will find it interesting. Chesky & Hiebert (1987) said, student who had a strong sense of audience wrote better than those not. Hence supported by the study, the factor of audience is indeed a crucial factor that determines pupils' motivation to write.

Apart from the three aspects discussed above, it is suggested that pupils' interest need to be aroused before they do the writing. This is supported by Scrivener (2011) who said that it is vital for teachers to get students interested with a lesson by showing pictures or discuss some key issues. Indeed, this is in line with T1's statement that a teacher might arouse pupils' interest by talking about what they have experienced such as the sports day or school carnivals.

Accordingly, Davis (1999) recommends the used of praise and rewards to arouse L2 learners to learn whenever they behave, volunteer or manage to answer questions correctly. In fact, T2 suggests giving pupils token of appreciation to attract them to write. Though the three aspects discussed above are crucial in determining pupils' motivation in writing, English language teachers of the Malaysian context believe making them interested in writing is also important to motivate them to write.

The findings suggest that this research has managed to provide new insights that apart from the three factors investigated, pupils' interest in writing should at first be encouraged to make them interested in writing. It is hoped that this research benefits English language teachers in general and me particularly by being aware on the importance of selecting the right topic for writing activity to motivate primary school learners to write.

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