

Affective Factors in Second Language Writing: Is It a Matter of Concern?

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Abstract

This personal narrative delineates the effect of affective factors: anxiety, self-efficacy, and motivation in second language learners' writings. The author discusses factors affecting ESL writing performance and shares her experience of tutoring an English as a Second Language (ESL) learner with a focus on the impact of affective factors in writing outcomes. The findings support the portion of Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) relating to the affective filter hypothesis. Therefore, this study seeks to build upon theoretical knowledge by reviewing related literature, and presenting researcher's personal tutoring experiences. Finally, the implications for pedagogy are considered with suggestions on how teachers can motivate students to master writing with confidence and success. Educators might consider paying special attention to improving teaching practices and support services (such as individual assessment, counseling, writing centre...etc.) to assist the ESL learners.

Keywords: ESL writing, affective factors, writing self-efficacy, writing anxiety, Iran.

Introduction

Writing in a second language is a challenging task since the writer must be aware of the second language while maintaining coherence and organization in writing. Recently researchers (Zabihi, 2018; Cheng, 2002; Lee, 2005; Pajares & Johnson, 1994) have started to investigate self-efficacy, anxiety, and motivation as factors that adversely affect second language (L2) learning. In this paper, I am going to construct a narrative about my personal experience tutoring an ESL learner. This kind of narrative inquiry often focuses on "the study of an individual's personal experience found in single or multiple episodes, private situations, or communal folklore" (Creswell, 2012, p. 504). In this case I spent a total of eight hours, two days per week for a month, with an Iranian ESL learner. After coming to an English-speaking country, the learner realized the importance of English. What I learned from tutoring her was not only the problems the students faced while writing but also how different affective factors could affect the fluency and accuracy of second language learners' writings. Reflecting on prior relevant literature and my personal experience, I make some suggestions for both learners and instructors so that my perspective will give food for thought.

Experience with an ESL Learner

As part of the experiential learning, I got in touch with an ESL learner whose name is Sonica (pseudonym) from Iran. About six months earlier, she had come to St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, with her husband, who is doing a PhD in the Faculty of Science at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). She was planning to apply to a diploma program. After coming to Canada, she realized that if she wanted to study further, she would need a good command of English. She wanted to make herself ready to compete with other students. Eventually, she consulted with a local NGO and joined free English language classes there. Additionally, she has started learning English as a second language through an ESL program at MUN. My role was to help her write in English. She already knew some grammar rules, so I assisted her in the sentence structure, vocabulary, and so on. At the very first meeting, I came to know about her educational background, the educational system in Iran, and the purpose of her ESL learning. She had completed her undergraduate degree in Chemistry in Iran and worked for two years then. Thereafter, when she came to Canada, she became exposed to Canadian culture and Canadian English through everyday communication.

She could read in English, understand English through listening, and even make people understand through her emerging English speaking skills but she struggled most with writing. She said she had grammar knowledge, but still she could not write well. She felt nervous when she had to write, and a lot of thoughts moved into her brain, but she could not translate them into written words in the second language. Frankly speaking, I was surprised to see a person who had completed her undergraduate degree but was weak in English as in my experience in my home country, Bangladesh, English is the medium of instruction in all Universities (public or private), so those who obtain a university degree have good English skills. Sonica said the medium of instruction at her university was Persian, also known as Farsi. In her first year at university, she was required to take two English courses which included grammatical rules, reading comprehension, and paragraph or composition writing. The focus of these courses was on reading and writing only. The courses did not include creative writing. Students could easily pass the examination by memorizing some composition. Thereafter, she did not need to use English in any form.

The Status of English in Iran

To understand the background of the learner, I want to shed light on English in Iran. In this section, I will refer to my conversation with Sonica as well as to the literature that examines the status of English in Iran.

Teaching English in Iran is not effective because of a number of “shortcomings like the absence of a well-formed syllabus, weakness in application of educational technology, limitation of class time and teacher's burn out” (Khajavi, & Abbasian, 2011, p. 91). I noticed that Sonica was already acquainted with English grammar. As she studied under the grammar-translation method, she was aware of grammar rules. Yet, she made mistakes in her writing, and this made me ponder of the reasons behind these mistakes. According to her, it was because she had not practiced writing before and English was taught as a course from primary to high school with the goal of enhancing students' reading comprehension ability and to knowledge of new vocabulary as well as grammatical rules. Moreover, English teaching at university relied on the grammar-translation method, which enabled students to read and understand written materials.

Communication competence in English is totally ignored. The schools and colleges lack the support for developing conversational skills. Therefore, if students are personally interested in learning English, they would take shelter in private English language institutes. Being a student of that setting, Sonica memorized paragraphs and compositions. Thus, writing in English seemed challenging to her. She felt tense when she started writing and was not confident in her writing, as the construct and style of writing in English were different from her native language. However, through my teaching and her relentless reading, she was able to demonstrate an improvement in her writing on the 6th day (appendix B).

Factors Affecting ESL Learners' Writing

If we take a look at ESL learners, we notice some learners learn a new language quickly and successfully, while others work hard and practice and are still unsuccessful. Basically, a number of psychological and cognitive factors influence the progress of English language learners. However, in this paper I will focus on the factors that affected my ESL learner's learning, providing my opinion based on the experiences that I encountered and the literature review. Now, let me ask- what is ESL writing? Then what are the factors influencing ESL writing?

English as a Second Language Writing

Writing is a productive skill of language learning. In writing "too many interdependent skills are involved, and all seem to be prerequisite to one another. To pay conscious attention to handwriting, word choice, spelling, punctuation, syntax, textual connections, purpose, organization, clarity, rhythm, euphony, and reader characteristics would seemingly overload the information processing capacity of the best intellects" (Scardamalia, 1981, p. 81). Writing is considered even more difficult when it is in a second language (L2). Therefore, writing in English as a second language (ESL) is really a challenging task for students because "writing in second language requires conscious effort and much practice in the ability to compose, develop, and analyze ideas, among a host of other factors related to the second language acquisition" (Li, Myles, & Robinson, 2012; p. 156). ESL students primarily think in their native language, then translate ideas from their language into English. With a view to writing in L2, learners need to organize and reorganize their ideas to write on a given issue. In the process of writing, learners need to know specific words, sentence structures, gather their thoughts, and also make the correlation of thoughts. Sometimes it happens that learners are unable to write on a subject despite having all knowledge of writing. This is because different social, emotional, and psychological factors adversely affect the writing skills of the students. There have been numerous efforts to classify the factors that affect second language learning. In *Teaching ESL in Canada*, Li, Myles, and Robinson (2012) classify the factors into three different categories that contribute to language learning – Developmental Factors, Cognitive Factors, and Affective Factors.

Contribution of Affective Factors in L2 Writing

Among all these factors, I intend to explore how affective factors are hampering the development of ESL learners' writing skills. There are some "affective factors" that play a significant role in

second language learning. The term “affective” denotes “an important psychological domain to explore in trying to understand the process of second language acquisition” (Brown, 1973, p. 231). These affective factors are shown in diagram 1:

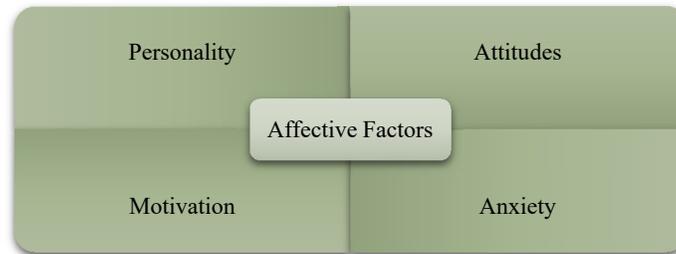


Diagram 1: Four affective factors

All four variables have been shown to directly affect second language learning. **Personality** plays a major role in second language acquisition. “This factor includes *self-esteem, risk-taking, extroversion, introversion, empathy, and inhibition*” (Li, Myles, & Robinson, 2012, p. 50). **Attitudes** toward learner’s writing, the teacher, the learning environment, and the way they live affect learning the second language. Negative attitudes can become an obstacle to learning and positive attitudes lead to success. **Motivation** also plays a significant role in second language learning. As Gardner (1980) says, a “motivated learner” is, therefore, defined as one who is: (a) eager to learn the language, (b) willing to expend effort on the learning activity, and (c) willing to sustain the learning activity (as cited in Ushida, 2005, p.52). Motivation is a complex and multi-faceted construct, “with many components such as interest, intrinsic motivation, task values, self-efficacy, and goal orientations” (Ong, 2015, p. 137). **Anxiety** is “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 125). Anxiety plays a vital role in second language learning. There is a significant negative correlation between anxiety and writing performance (Cheng et al., 1999). Furthermore, this factor might have directly damaged the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of L2 writing performance (Choi, 2014; Lee, 2005; Zahibi, 2018).

Writing Self- efficacy and Writing Performances

Self-efficacy is the most influential factor for second language learning. According to Bandura’s (1997) **social cognitive theory**, self-efficacy refers to “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Learners’ strong beliefs in their capacities can help them to perform well. That is why students’ self-confidence is considered to be a significant factor in learning a second language. However, for learners of the second language, **writing self-efficacy** refers to a strong sense of self-confidence for writing a task in the second language. If the learner has self-confidence in his or her writing ability, s/he can easily grasp the mechanisms or complexity of second language writing. Writing self-efficacy could directly affect the student’s learning L2 writing. Writing self-efficacy may result not only from the student’s own psychological and emotional reactions but also from past experience and feedback from others (Bandura, 1986).

Additionally, Bandura’s findings suggest that higher writing self-efficacy can contribute to better writing performance irrespective of a student’s writing ability. High self-efficacious learners are

willing to work hard and learn quickly compared to less self-efficacious ones. Less self-efficacious learners are afraid of challenges, give up when criticized, and therefore take a longer time to learn. Ong (2015) found from his study that “interest level in writing is marginally significant, but familiarity with and self-efficacy in writing are not significant” (p. 136), which contradicts several previous findings (e.g. Pajares & Johnson, 1994) that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of writing performance.

As Schunk (2003) believes “compared with students who doubt their learning capabilities, those who feel efficacious in learning or performing a task participate more readily, work harder, persist longer when they encounter difficulties, and achieve at a higher level” (p. 161). First, we need to assess student’s confidence in their ability to perform a writing skill, and second, try to discover their confidence to complete specific writing tasks (Pajares & Johnson, 1994). They also say that “students who lack confidence in skills they possess are not likely to engage in tasks where those skills are required; they will more quickly give up in the face of difficulty” (p. 327). Sonica, for example, couldn’t focus on her writing due to less confidence. She used to say she did not have writing capabilities in English. I tried to motivate her to write on my given topic, and also suggested reading more story books, articles, etc. In fact, less self-efficacy results in writing anxiety. “If self-efficacy beliefs are a cause of variables such as writing apprehension, interventions designed to improve writing by decreasing anxiety may be useful to the degree that they increase students’ confidence in their writing ability” (Pajares, 2003, p. 146). Therefore, there lies a kind of cause-effect relationship between confidence and anxiety regarding writing.

Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance

Much research has been conducted on the speaking anxiety of second language learners, but very few studies have been done in the area of L2 writing (Cheng, 2002; Lee, 2005). There is a direct correlation between writing anxiety and writing performance. Cheng et al. (1999) posited that writing anxiety is a “language-skill specific anxiety” (p. 417). This language skill-specific anxiety might well be one of the negative sentiments and attitudes designed during the progression of second language learning. Daly and Miller (1975) first used the term ‘Writing anxiety’ which means the tendency of an individual either to approach or to refrain from writing. Thus, it reflects the nervousness and negative feelings of the writer that disrupt part of the writing activity (McLeod, 1987; Dacwag, 2014). Learners with anxiety face a stringent condition wherein they need to write. It does not mean that learners do not know the writing procedure; rather they are intellectually capable of writing but have difficulty with it. In my experience, I noticed the anxiety in my learner when she was asked to write something. This emotional state disrupted her writing. Pajares and Johnson (1994) have considered writing anxiety as a “common mechanism” that is greatly influenced by learner’s self-efficacy.

Barwick (1995) did a case study on anxiety in adolescents in which he found that learners with writing anxiety could be classified into three categories: non-starters, non-completers, and non-exhibitors. Nonstarters feel anxiety before starting the process of writing and are always afraid of loss and criticism. Non-completers repress their aggressive impulses to avoid feelings of loss or rejection. Non-exhibitors repair the loss through the obsession with taking apart and re-creating essays. His findings suggest that student’s anxiety stems from past experiences and is expressed in the way they avoid, revise, and complete writing. I may identify my learner as a non-

completer as she did not go beyond writing some sentences. One of the examples is in Appendix A. She stopped abruptly after writing a few sentences. She said she knew how to write and what to write, and I noticed her motivation to start writing, but she lost herself in the middle.

There is a negative relationship between writing anxiety and writing performance. Second language writing anxiety focuses “primarily on items relating to attitudes towards writing in English followed by self-derogation for the process and fear of negative evaluation by the teacher and/or by fellow students” (Gkonou, 2011, p.267). Nonetheless, writing anxiety is not a constant variable, rather it can be changed by time. Writing anxiety level would be the highest at the beginning stage of second language learning, but it decreases with time when writing proficiency increases. The result of Cheng’s (2002) study points to a different direction that “proficiency might not be the only or even the primary factor that determines the rise or decline of language anxiety” (p. 653). He also argues that the reason could be some social, contextual, and learner variables, such as institutional requirements, parental or societal expectations, teaching and evaluation procedures, motivation, personality, self-confidence, learner’s beliefs, L2 proficiency, and even gender.

However, Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) share a different opinion that “sometimes a little anxiety is needed for more concentration and accuracy of the students on their writing performance” (p. 2578). They examined Iranian EFL learners in Sistan & Baluchestan University where they found that when students experienced the higher level of L2 writing anxiety, they achieved higher scores in writing compared to their writing performance when they had a low level of anxiety. They found the glazes of a positive relation between writing anxiety and performance. Sometimes the situation itself is responsible for the learner’s writing anxiety, which is known as “situation specific anxiety” (Choi, 2013, p. 2). For example, Sonica would never think that she would be in need to learn English writing specifically but to get the admission she wanted, she had to learn to write in English. She was anxious because her writing would be evaluated by a native English teacher at college. She was aware of the backdated English language education she had received in her home country which might affect her ability to write skillfully and effectively in a college context. She felt she had more difficulty balancing between her capability and the expectations of native English teacher.

Krashen’s Theory on Second Language Acquisition

A recurrent question kept arising in my mind throughout my tutoring experience. Even though Sonica was suffering from low self-confidence in her skills and writing anxiety, she had a strong will and motivation to learn English. So, why was she not able to achieve her goals after about two months in an ESL program? Stephen Krashen’s (1982) “The Affective Filter Hypothesis” explains how affective factors: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety relate to second language learning. He claims that learners with self-confidence, high motivation, and low anxiety are better prepared for success in second language learning.

The Affective Filter hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a

high or strong Affective Filter--even if they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device. Those with attitudes more conducive to second language acquisition will not only seek and obtain more input, but they will also have a lower or weaker filter. (Krashen, 1982, p. 31)

At this moment, low motivation, low self-efficacy, and high anxiety can combine to raise the filter and make 'mental block' which prevents language learning. Most probably, Sonica was motivated, but the level of motivation was not high enough to overcome anxiety and low confidence because these three variables are somehow correlated with one another. If learners have high motivation, they can mitigate others two. Therefore, Krashen (1982) asserts that "our pedagogical goals should not include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter" (p.32).

Pedagogical Implications

Zahibi (2018) studies the effects of some cognitive and affective variables on the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of L2 learners' writings. In order to improve L2 learners' writing self-efficacy, he claims that it is crucial to assist the learners in "developing substantive knowledge of the L2 writing process and to train them in practical writing techniques" (p. 49). To reduce anxiety in writing, it is important to provide engaging and motivating materials for the students. Both teachers and schools have an important role to take the initiative and help students develop their competence and confidence as students progress through school. Bandura (1986) argued that

educational practices should be gauged not only by the skills and knowledge they impart for present use but also by what they do to children's beliefs about their capabilities, which affects how they approach the future. Students who develop a strong sense of self-efficacy are well equipped to educate themselves when they have to rely on their own initiative. (p. 417)

Dacwag (2014) suggests that "the students generally employ preparation, positive thinking, and relaxation as their coping strategies with the anxiety they feel or experience in writing in English" (p. 469). Students can help themselves to win over these factors; they can also develop their writing performance through "free reading" (Lee, 2005, p. 339). The more a student reads, the more s/he can build a fundamental concept and knowledge of writing.

I think in the painstaking process of learning to write in an L2, teachers should help students learn to embrace their failures to be self-confident. The writing teacher should pay special attention to the factors that create/cause the barriers to learners' learning. More importantly, teachers need to instill in their students a positive and motivational perception of their writing competence by giving constructive feedback. The knowledge acquired from my experience is that at the beginning stage of second language writing, a teacher should provide positive feedback. If students get negative comments, they will lose their confidence and, eventually, will fail to learn how to write effectively. Therefore, motivational, positive feedback will encourage learners and thus help them overcome their anxiety. ESL instructors need to be supportive and

aware of the learners' various learning styles, proficiency levels, and motivation to help them in writing activities. ESL writing instructors should be cognizant of these factors before designing the lesson plan.

Conclusion

Affective factors play an integral role in second language learning. If we want to be successful in teaching second language writing, we need to look into these socio-psychological factors of students. There is a correlation between self-efficacy and writing anxiety that directly influences students' writing performance. Students' self-confidence in writing can minimize the anxiety in writing. A confident student feels less anxious and has the strength of risk-taking in writing. Learners with more competence in writing feel less anxious, and subsequently become fluent and proficient writers (Zahibi, 2018). Pedagogically, "the identification of the link between low self-confidence and anxiety underscores the importance of providing a non-threatening and supportive instructional environment where a boost to learners' self-confidence is likely to occur" (Cheng, 1999, p. 436)

Needless to say, it is important for ESL writing students to be aware of their affective factors and their feelings. They should try to minimize the blockage of the affective filter. Free reading can positively influence students' writing capacity. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of instructors to build students' self-efficacy about their ability. Open discussion with the students about their needs and problems of writing can assist the instructors to design the lesson plan. Teachers could find ways to make the learner comprehend writing in L2 and to take it in gradual steps. From my experience, I can say, the teacher can help to develop students' confidence and reduce writing anxiety through positive feedback. Finally, the teacher should give time to his/her students, build rapport with them so that students can improve their performance.

The Author

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Appendix A

English in Iran

English is considered as ^a foreign language in Iran. Persian is ^a native language. English is ~~teach~~ ^{taught} ~~in~~ ^{at} the age of 12 or 13 when you ^{are} ~~will~~ in Grade 7. Iran is an Islamic country, so English language and culture ~~is~~ ^{are} not accepted cordially. cordially ~~accepting~~ ^{accepted}. Only ~~studied~~ ^{study} English compulsory courses ~~is~~ ^{are} in university, high school, college.

English is study because of necessity, not interest. we never think to learn English. we live ~~easily~~ freely, so we don't need English.

Appendix B

How do I feel in St. John's

St John's is located in the most ^{eastern} east part of Canada. It is one of the large city in this province. It ^{looks} like an island surrounded by ^{the} Atlantic Ocean. It is the windiest city. The weather ~~temperature~~ ^{temperature} is cold than other parts of Canada. The weather changes rapidly. That's why we should keep warm cloth everytime. I think, a year in the city ~~can~~ ~~will be~~ can be classified into two categories, cold temperature and cool temperature. There is snow fall in the winter.

There are beautiful natural environment. There are a lot of parks and lakes, places with history. During summer, people came to the city to visit, and people also go ~~another~~ ^{another} other place. The downtown is awsome with beautiful shops and buildings. people give ^{smile} laugh when see you. They are good. Finally, It is a good place to live, because people love foreigners.