

Exploring vocational undergraduates' L2 writing motivation: From cognitive and affective dimensions

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Abstract

The multifaceted nature of writing makes it a daunting subject for L2 (second language) learners, which requires a high level of motivation. The case study investigates a group of students' writing motivation level in the vocational university, and analyses their motivation change from cognitive and affective dimensions. Results show that undergraduate students' writing motivation are influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and motivation change was intricately connected with affective experience and cognitive learning. Pedagogical implications for devising more practical and systematic L2 writing instructional approaches.

Keywords

L2 writing motivation, vocational university, English as second language (ESL)

1. Introduction

As writing is one of complicated but crucial skills for students that required co-ordination of large cognitive and affective resources, its motivation has gradually been identified as a central part in English learning achievements. The study of motivational beliefs has experienced several phases and revealed that it positively links to academic achievements in specific area such as writing. However, particular learning-related events and experiences can also pose cognitive (i.e. overrating

writing competence) and affective problems (performance anxiety, stress), thereby demotivating their English writing engagement in the current and future study. In write-learning process, students' motivation may vary when they face a foreign language, because it is a challenging task of L2 learning. Furthermore, vocational university is a new concept in these years and students have different level of learning competence and attitudes compared to other college students. So, there is urgent need to understand how motivation factors (cognitive and affective) may influence vocational undergraduates' writing ability in L2 writing context, especially the vocational universities students.

The study intends to investigate a group of vocational undergraduates' motivation in English writing class from cognitive and affective perspectives, which can clarify their extent of being motivated to write in English and the motivational factors behind writing. Such information can offer insights into vocational university' teachers on how to optimize their curriculum and seek better teaching strategies to meet their complicated demands in terms of students' personal learning potential.

2. Literature review

Before considering the L2 writing motivation level and beliefs, it is essential to define the motivation in this paper. Motivation explains "why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it" (Dörnyei, 2001). During past decades, "the study of L2 motivation has evolved as a rich and largely independent research field", and its research had focus on three stages: social-psychological, cognitive-situated and the process-oriented period (Boo, Dörnyei & Ryan 2015; Dörnyei, 2001). Whereas scant study on the level of L2 writing motivation. As Dörnyei pointed out, motivation theories aim to understand the basic reason behind human's behaviour and it can be conceptualized as intrinsic and extrinsic. Refer to different kinds of motivations, intrinsic desires could provide a strong impetus and inspire people to engage in various tasks; while external motivation varies because of the environmental changes.

Cognitively, self-efficacy and achievement-expectation are chosen as specific domains to explore vocational undergraduates' English writing motivation. "Self-efficacy for writing as defined as individual's perception of their ability to produce certain types of texts" (Shen, Bai, & Park, 2020), it is connected to pupils' past learning experience (Bai & Wang, 2020). More high self-efficacious students are willing to make efforts in English writing, and a wide range of surveys have confirmed that self-efficacy and writing motivation have close association with English writing proficiency (Lee, Yu, & Liu, 2018). Whilst students will evaluate their own writing competence through previous learning achievements. The value of the rewards and difficulties in a given task were key factors in deciding whether engaging in writing, thus "the greater the perceived likelihood of goal-attainment and the greater the incentive value of the goal, the higher the degree of the individual's positive motivation" (Dörnyei, 2001).

From affective perspective, students' emotion can provide feedback about motivational events (Baumeister, 2016). As Hayes revealed: "Students who believe both they are poor writers and that writing is a gift are likely to experience writing anxiety." (Hayes, 1996). Many students may encounter challenges and embarrassment while learning, which leads to relatively low motivation level, and vice versa.

In addition, learning motivation can differ when it is in different local conditions, and the feature of vocational university should be considered. Since 2019, the Ministry of Education has successively approved the establishment of 32 vocational undergraduate schools, which triggers a variety of thinking. The slim body of studies have centered on: 1) What kind of students we develop and how? 2) What is the relationship between vocational universities and other types of universities and so on. Of few studies, little is known about English subject (General English, GE), not to mention its writing domain.

As shown above, more research into students' writing motivation in vocational universities and how did their motivation alter in the learning process deserves more attention, and our paper aims to answer these questions from cognitive and affective angles.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants were part of undergraduates from a vocational college in Zhejiang, China. Students were from different majors in the same institute and their learning background is complex, some of whom were learning Japanese in high schools, and some came from technical secondary schools without English subject. In English teaching, so, this school adopted hierarchical teaching in General English (GE), which means students were divided into several classes according to their achievements in English learning and Japanese learners would have specific classes. There are two English lessons of 90 minutes per week, and their assignments included paperwork and E-learning app called Welearn. Previous teaching experience and academic grades have confirmed that the vast majority of the students are unwilling to writing even if the outline was presented by the teacher.

3.2 Measures and procedure

3.2.1 writing proficiency evaluation

In order to assess undergraduates' real English writing level, all students' compositions in previous terms were collected. These writing assignments contain several topics like traveling, working, and studying, and students were required to produce approximately 250 words. To ensure its validity, a new evaluation principle adapted from (Hashemian, & Heidari, 2013) was set to rate their writing level according to content, language and text organization. Each criteria had its sub-component. For instance, as for content, 3 key elements were considered: 1) if all questions can be answered, 2) if ideas are well-developed, 3) if ideas are creative and rational. Refer to language:

1) is there appropriate vocabulary, 2) different grammar rules are used correctly, 3) spelling and punctuation are used correctly. In terms of text organization: 1) appropriate topic sentence and paragraph, 2) views are presented logically, 3) proper conjunctions are used.

3.2.2 Motivation questionnaire on English writing

The questionnaire (see Table 1) was conducted from two main dimensions: cognitive and affection aspects, which measured undergraduates' motivation level. One example item of cognitive aspect was 'I believe I can master topic sentence of writing skills well'. Another sample of interest was 'I can write about topics interesting to me'. All these questions were adapted to (Shen, Bai, & Park 2020) and rated on a *five-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree*.

Table 1. Sample items of cognitive and affective questionnaire in English writing

Scale		Sample items (number of items)
cognition	grammar	I am sure I can write complete sentence with appropriate grammatical structures and punctuation. (6)
	process and content	My creative ideas can be outlined smoothly. (4)
	language	I can find the vocabulary to express my views. (3)
	text organization	I can organise several paragraphs into a composition well. (3)
affection	interest	I enjoy English writing. (3)
	significance and usefulness	I believe English writing is useful. (3)

3.2.3 Interview

One-on-one semi-structured interview was conducted in this part to learn about past English learning experience from cognitive and affective dimensions. From cognitive aspect, questions about 'what was your goals in English writing', and 'what was your learning expectation?' were included. Regarding the affective dimension, the interviewer would empower participants to talk about their feelings about writing composition, when those feelings were changed and why. For instance, "Tell me about a time when writing was really good/bad for you" or "What is writing like for you right now?" (Cleary, 1991) Due to time limit and personal willing, not all participants were involved in the interview, and students felt nervous and shy to express opinions while taking videos during the interview, so we chose an informal interview.

To ensure all students can fully understand the questions in the questionnaire and interview, every question would be translated into Chinese.

4. Data analysis

Centering on our face-to-face interview and combined with another questionnaire data can give more implications for teachers, that's why the statistics came from three parts. First, composition raters divided samples into three groups according to their writing scores: high, average and low achiever, and actually, the number of high achiever was small. Second, as for our questionnaire in motivation level, some random responses or blank questionnaires were cleaned to ensure the validity of the data. Data in this section would be examined again combined with our interview results, which was another way to keep our data reliable. For instance, S9 marked as low achiever expressed he was always forced to writing, which was consistent with the answer in questionnaire. S3 described her enjoyment in English writing and she also got a high mark in almost every paper; but she changed her answer when we were in the middle of the interview, and said she couldn't tell the exact feeling of English writing, just her high test results pushed her to say "yes, I enjoy writing English composition". Third, data from the interview followed a qualitative and inductive method. 17 samples were selected to take part in the interview (5 high and average achiever respectively and 7 low achiever). Two more students were in low achiever group because they handed in blank papers, which was regarded as special cases. The conversation focus on the cognitive and affective aspects of their writing motivation. For example, most students were coded as affective group as they experienced the depression and disappointment; S10 and S15' accounts of the desire for high GPA and future vocational development were marked as cognitive motivation (positive outcome expectation). Finishing the code round, every student' experience or significant events would be compared chronologically to analyse motivation change.

5. Results

5.1 Motivation in English writing

The undergraduates' in the survey indicated predominantly extrinsic motivation (i.e. teachers' requirement and examination need) and considered English writing was a painful process. By summarizing the feeling from S6, S7, S9:

I found it hard to engage in writing task, I don't like writing since I was in primary school no matter Chinese or English (S6); The only reason I finish my writing assignments was my teacher's requirement (S7) and I want to graduate on time (S9).

While participants had negative feeling of English writing, they still treated it seriously. There were complicated causes behind the phenomenon. In some cases (S2, S8, S10), they were willing to join various vocabulary contests and writing contests partly because of the award and certificate of honor. It was worth noting that S8 was aware of his average level in writing and forced himself to practice through different competitions:

I know I was not good at English learning, especially in writing, but it is difficult for me to improve. The biggest challenge for me is motivation, I can't complete my plans without having deadline or other mandatory regulations. So I attempted to participate many programs to reinforce my learning motivation". (S8)

In addition, university's graduation requirements were another key points to promote students to learn. CET 4 as one of standards of graduation, students exert more attention on the result. The majority of students had difficulty in translation and writing part, which gained a relatively low mark, that's why students paid attention to their writing competence and took more time to practice.

Some internal motivational values also play crucial roles in completing English composition. A few students thought their poor writing skills would influence their English grade and their future learning goals. For example, S1 had a clear goal after entering the college, and she wanted to pursue a postgraduate degree. For passing the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination (NPEE), she actively registered different kinds of English activities like presentation, grammar projects led by school's club or course instructor, and firmly believed these experience could help her future study.

Finally, two low achievers (S16,S17) may elicit extra thinking. During previous final examinations, the two students gave up writing assignment even if the course instructor had emphasize the significance of the exam and urge students to make an outline by providing writing samples in similar genre and topic:

...(keep silence), I don't understand the meaning of learning English because it was no connection with my future career. I would finish other parts of the exam (i.e. reading, listening) because it is easy to write down. (S16)

Failing my GE test won't bother me much and I haven't thought about too much about my graduation and future job. (S17)

Overall, the findings showed complex motivations from internal and external aspects, which prompted them to take actions.

6. The alteration of motivations during the academic year

In fact, not every participant's motivation changed during the learning process. For the students in vocational university, they might endure more pressure and felt frustration when writing English composition because their language competence was relatively low.

Considering the reality, we paid more attention on those students whose motivation fluctuated during the learning process, and maybe it could have enlightening on teaching English writing. Take S2 for example, driven by the competition award and sense of achievement, the participant always

gleefully engaged in "post-reading essay" writing contest several times. Consecutive failure in writing competition reduced his self-efficacy, which contradicted his former outcome expectation:

"After experiencing two matches, I found my writing competence was vastly overrated".

Other students (S4, S5, S6, S7, S9, S11, S12, S13, S14) also complained the much workload during writing process: Brainstorming, outline, text organization, proofreading and so on, which resulted in negative feeling.

While cognitive problem of writing mentioned above demotivated many students, some samples also profited by teacher's feedback. As S13 reflected,

"Nearly every paper I handed in previously was identified numerous errors, and it was difficult for me to correct all mistakes. But recently, I found the number of mistakes was decreasing and my teacher also give me detailed revising advice, which inspired me to improve my writing proficiency. I began to interested in writing". (S13)

S4, S5 shared similar feelings after they received a focused written corrective feedback. But what motivated them most is their internship experience. When students took an internship in a foreign trade corporation, business correspondence writing was one of their job responsibility. This was the first time that they had recognized the necessity of English writing and began to take school's writing task seriously than before.

To sum up, most of students' motivation growth was contributed to external factors, like further vocational development and appropriate writing feedback, which provided new guidelines on curriculum design and the method of feedback. Besides, these cases also proved the significance of cognitive and affective assistance.

7. Discussion and implications

The result unveiled the primarily extrinsic feature of English writing of undergraduates in the vocational university, and internal incentive (interest, self-efficacy) occupied the small proportion. Most participants was in a lower-middle motivation level during the previous academic years (except S16, S17 without any writing motivation temporarily) and their motivation state was relatively steady. Emotional experience and cognitive elements together induced the shift of motivation.

From the cognitive domain, the complex and difficult degree in writing tasks directly formed the motivation, which was evidenced by S2, who subjected to low self-efficacy due to successive defeat in writing competitions, and he gradually understand his perception of abilities were exaggerated. Meanwhile, S2's outcome expectation was another cognitive reason in his motivation change. He had been assailed by self-doubt for a long time and began to lose confidence in English

learning, especially in writing. In contrast, a few students' motivation (S4, S5) was heightened by the career development and professional duties.

Affection was another key element deeply associating with their motivation like positive and negative mood. The students who perceived significance and usefulness of writing were more likely to be efficacious in different parts of writing. Students' setbacks, sense of frustration and other passive feeling decreased writing enthusiasm when confronting challenges (i.e. cognitive difficulties); improvement in writing or validation from others would stimulate their writing passion, which could turn into positive consequence (i.e. put more efforts into writing).

Additionally, the findings also suggest an intricate interplay between cognitive and affective factors of vocational undergraduates' writing motivation. Indeed, students' confidence in English writing motivated them to practice more and engaged in different competitions actively. Apparently, positive experience from the learning experience provoked students' interest in writing, but experiencing failures several times, the positive emotions would be replaced by negative feelings. The situation could also be improved with new round of cognitive engagement (self-cognitive).

The research can contribute to the practical implications for different university professors and educators. First, many undergraduates in vocational universities cannot perceive the usefulness of English writing, thus, how to incorporate curriculum into career development and revise writing tasks aligning with their vocational goals are necessary. It is also important for higher education teachers to provide more diversified external incentives such as certificate or prize, students are more motivated by practical benefit. More importantly, educators should find the causes of students' superior and inferior competence in English writing, differentiate their writing instruction accordingly.

8. Conclusions and limitations

Our participants maintain a lower-medium level of writing motivations, which could alarm university teachers and educators to devise practical and effective pedagogical support for vocational undergraduates, providing a clear and appropriate suggestions on how to identify their strengths and weakness in English writing. Students can also learn to regulate their emotions and bounce back quickly from failures. Moreover, promoting teacher professional development is far from enough, especially most students have lower interest in writing, it is urgent to seek systematic approach to make their writing process motivating and meaningful.

The present research is not exempt from limitations. First, due to the small sample size and a randomly self-selected interviewees, this study may not reveal a full picture of the relationship between cognitive and affective dimensions. Second, our study mainly focus on qualitative approach (i.e. interview) and our questionnaire is an auxiliary measure, a detailed and specific quantitative method of questionnaire can be designed in the future to enrich the finding.

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