Factors That Influence Writing in English Language Classrooms: A Case Study of a Secondary School in the Maldives

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Abstract

The research presented in this paper focused on studying the factors that influence writing in English among a group of secondary school students in Male', Maldives. Face-to-face interviews and a self-administered questionnaire were employed for data collection. The findings revealed that motivational factors such as self-efficacy, interest, and attitude of students affected students' performance in writing. Also, subject knowledge, composition skills, and the context of writing such as time allocation, classroom setting, and examination oriented teaching were primary factors which hindered students' writing. These factors which hinder students to write are blended with research on self-efficacy to discuss strategies to develop competence and confidence in writing among adolescents struggling with writing in a second language.

Keywords: factors, writing, self-efficacy, second language learning

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1. Introduction

Maldivian children, whose mother tongue is Dhivehi, are expected to develop not only writing skills in Dhivehi but also in English since the curriculum at national level is delivered using English as the medium of instruction. All subjects excluding Islam and Dhivehi are taught in English in almost all of the government-funded and private schools in the Maldives. English as a second language is taught as a separate mandatory subject from Grade one to Grade ten. This indicates the importance given to English language proficiency by Maldivian parents and by policymakers, to ensure that all Maldivian children have equal access to further education and employment.

Maldivian children between the age of 14 and 16 attend secondary grades from Grade Eight to Grade Ten. All of the secondary school students follow Cambridge IGCSE English as a Second Language Examination syllabus from Grade Nine to Ten. Writing is an assessment objective that is allocated a weighting of approximately 35% in the examination. The writing component of the syllabus requires students to communicate clearly, accurately and appropriately; convey information and express opinions effectively; employ and control a variety of grammatical structures; demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a range of appropriate vocabulary; observe conventions of paragraphing, punctuation and spelling; employ appropriate register/ style (CIE, 2015). Exercises 6 and 7 of the examination paper require students to write in two different styles, keeping in mind, purpose, format, and audience. Writing an informal letter or an opinion piece are frequent forms of questions found on the exam paper. Students are asked to write approximately 100-150 words of continuous prose. Since English Language lessons in Maldivian schools are exam-oriented, teachers often ask students to write for similar questions, and students are frequently assessed on past paper questions.

Several of the researcher's English Language teaching colleagues have commented on the slow progress of writing in English Language classrooms. Simultaneously, students complain about being assigned with writing tasks and often delay submission of writing projects. Since there is so much emphasis on writing in the curriculum, parents continuously raise concern about their children's underperformance in writing tasks. If students do not master fluency in writing, their final examination results are likely to be poor. Failure to achieve fluency in writing in English will reduce chances of success in other subjects where students are expected to write in English both in class and for examinations. Therefore, fluency in writing in English is directly linked to further qualifications and to future economic opportunities which demand high levels of writing skills.

Hence, all mainstream teachers, including English language teachers need to have a better understanding of how children learn English as a Second Language and they must know

which techniques meet the needs of their learners most effectively. The purpose of this study is to identify factors that influence writing in Secondary English language classrooms as is experienced by both students and teachers. Motivational, cognitive and environmental factors are investigated.

2. Literature Review

The complex interplay of contextual factors and personal characteristics of learners, which influence writing and more specifically writing in English, are reviewed here before outlining the cognitive complexity of writing in general. There is growing evidence that perceptions of self-efficacy as writers influence the way students engage with writing and their wider participation in learning in school (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Pajares, 2005; Hsieh & Kang, 2010). Hence, social-cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory are used to explore how writing can be taught within a context of developing self-efficacy of adolescents struggling with writing.

2.1 Factors Which Affect Learning to Write

There are many contributing factors which inter-relate in a dynamic process in learning to write. Teachers' level of writing fluency, attitudes, and beliefs towards writing in English can directly influence classroom instruction (Watson, 2015). The role of the teacher is critical for students to engage in talk for writing, and reading for writing. Direct instruction and scaffolded learning are essential for children to develop awareness of metalinguistic features of language and to compose for different genres of text (Myhill, Jones, & Wilson, 2016).

Hawthorne (2008) observed that for students, who are comfortable in their ability to write and who enjoy writing overall, their interest in a topic and its perceived relevance to them is by far the most significant factor influencing their engagement in writing. The level of choice students have in the topics they write about can influence how inspired they are to write.

Graham, Berninger, and Fan (2007) assert that students' attitudes play an integral role in writing. They stated that those students who have a more positive attitude towards writing will put considerably more effort into their writing and complete more writing activities than those with low attitude levels, which may contribute to individual differences in writing success. If a student has a negative attitude towards writing this may inhibit the student from writing.

Individual factors which influence the process of writing include age, gender, handedness, fine motor control, language aptitude, working memory and ability to self monitor (Ellis,

2008; Ferrier, Horne and Singleton, 2013). Use of two languages simultaneously is linked to functional brain changes and connecting patterns (Rosselli, Ardila, Matute, & Vélez-Uribe, 2014) which are beginning to be linked to verbal and conceptual fluency in the second language (Portocarrero, Burright, & Donovick, 2007; Danesi, 2016). Rosselli et al. (2004) also highlighted that maturation of executive functions used for strategic retrieval required for fluency may be not fully achieved by adolescence. Children with learning disabilities, behavioural disorders and speech and language problems can experience considerable difficulties in learning to write (Graham & Harris, 2005).

Values about education and life-goals from families and communities as well as level of home exposure to English can have an indirect influence on children's attitude and interest towards learning English. Children's socio-economic status, socio-cultural backgrounds, and life circumstances can also impact students' writing achievement (Wyatt-Smith & Castleton, 2008). Living in rural or urban settings can influence children's personal agency (Elder, 1995), motivation, interest and exposure to English language. Level of awareness of grammatical structure, syntax, and metaphorical patterns in first language can affect writing in English (Auerbach, 1993; Connor, 1990).

2.2 Cognitive Complexity of Writing

Writing is a complex, multifaceted task and a challenging skill to acquire. Children and adults commonly struggle with producing written text. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) explain the cognitive complexity of writing by breaking down the process into three main stages. Firstly, construction is when the writer plans what he/she is going to write by brainstorming, using a mind-map or an outline. The second stage is transformation, in which language rules are applied to transform intended meanings into the form of the message when the writer is composing or revising. Finally, execution is the stage which corresponds to the physical process of producing the text. They describe the first two stages as "setting goals and searching memory for information, then using production systems to generate language in phrases or constituents" (p.42). Writers move back and forth between planning, transformation and execution stages.

During the process of constructing a written composition, the student firstly has to decide what to write and how to write it. Making a good decision also involves deciding how much effort he or she is going to put into the writing process. Secondly, the writer has to decide the purpose and audience for the writing. The writer will have to be able to state his or her own beliefs in a positive way, by providing reasons and explanations to support the beliefs. Additionally, the writer will need the skills to acknowledge someone else's opinion as proof of own opinion or to refute that opinion in a positive manner. Thirdly, when the writer has decided on a purpose for writing, he or she will need to set a writing goal for what he or she wants to accomplish.

Fourthly, the writer needs to be confident that he or she has the self-efficacy to accomplish the task. To complete a writing task successfully the writer needs to have self awareness of their own skills and areas for improvement. Then the writer needs to use problem solving skills to apply writing strategies successfully.   Finally, as the writer converts the information into meaningful sentences, the writer needs to be able to monitor how he or she is doing and be able to evaluate the end product to revise and edit the writing (Cuenca-Carlino, Mustian, Allen, & Gilbert, 2015).

From a linguistic perspective, as illustrated above, text production is not an easy task. For a Maldivian child, who is at the same time learning to read and write in their mother tongue, Dhivehi as well as in Arabic for Islamic studies, writing in English can be a daunting task. While some cognitively able students with aptitude for languages excel in writing in English, the majority of students struggle with producing advanced text requiring several paragraphs and use avoidance strategies.

2.3 Developing Self-efficacy to Write

Self-efficacy is a component of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) which describes human functioning as a dynamic interplay of cognitive, environmental and motivational influences. Self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1995, p. 2). According to Bandura, self-efficacy is a consistent predictor of behaviour and achievement. Self-efficacy describes how self-perceptions of capabilities to complete a task strongly influence engagement in the task and successful completion of a task (Bandura, 1982). Young people will engage in tasks that they perceive are within their capabilities and avoid those they believe are beyond their competence. Self-efficacious adolescents persist and persevere in adversity contributing to improved academic performance (Pajares, 2005).

Developing a strong sense of self-efficacy as a writer is crucial for adolescents to engage in the challenging task of writing. From a classroom perspective, when the teacher models text forms, composing processes, the socio-cultural purposes and functions of writing (Cummins, 1995), the students will mimic the writing processes, internalising the processes as their own. However, the amount of attention a young person gives to the teacher's modelling will depend on their intentions, motivation and the classroom environment. Children are more likely to imitate the behaviour if the behaviour was rewarded by an adult. If the child anticipates being rewarded for imitating the model's behaviour, the child is more likely to pay attention, remember and reproduce that behaviour (Bandura, 1982).

Teachers engaged in promoting self-efficacy for writing work towards developing confidence

and competence in writing simultaneously while altering the environmental conditions to support writing. They engage with altering the social conditions to promote stronger self-efficacy (Pajares, 2005).

Self-efficacy comes from four main sources: (a) personal mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion and, (d) emotional state (Bandura, 1986). The most effective way to achieve self-efficacy is through mastery experiences. Past successful mastery experiences raise mastery expectations while repeated failures lower them. Acquiring the cognitive, behavioural and self-regulatory tools to master the experience successfully can contribute to a robust belief of one's self-efficacy. Accomplishment of difficult tasks through opportunities to complete tasks independently and opportunities to complete tasks successfully step by step can lead to improvements in students' writing skills thereby leading to improved self-efficacy beliefs.

Besides personal mastery experiences, students also rely on vicarious experiences as a source of information concerning their level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Seeing others perform the activity can generate comparisons in observers' abilities to the abilities of others. For instance, a student writing a newspaper article sees that another student is more successful in writing the article. While a student with high self-efficacy beliefs might heighten their effort and persistence, a student with low self-efficacy might give up. If the degree of perceived negative discrepancy between perception of ability and expected outcome is large, this can undermine the student's perception of his or her own performance capabilities. Research shows that students with high levels of self-esteem will readjust their goals so that this will not undermine their self-esteem while those with lower self-esteem will give up on that goal altogether (Bandura and Cervone, 1983).

Verbal persuasion involves a person receiving feedback from another person that convinces him or her of his or her ability to perform a particular task. Teachers' and parents' expectations and verbal persuasion regarding a child's writing talent can influence the child's self-confidence and motivation. Motivation can also come from writing development being recognised and valued both within school and in out of school contexts, such as through being publicly shared in the class, in print or on the Internet. Feedback is considered most effective when the teacher's expectations are slightly higher than the student's present mastery level but within realistic bounds of achievement for the time allocated for the task if extra effort is applied (Bandura, 1982). Myles (2002) asserts that L2 (second language) writers require and expect specific overt feedback from teachers not only on content, but also on the form and structure of writing.

Emotional state is another constituent source of information that can affect perceived self-efficacy. Fear reactions generate further fear of impending stressful situations through

anticipatory self-arousal. For example, fear of failure while writing may be interpreted by the student as lacking competency. A student will only execute tasks which are within his or her range of perceived coping capabilities. When a teacher models effective strategies for coping with challenging writing tasks, this can improve the controllability and predictability of the task, thus reducing fear. Bandura (1982) suggests that self-efficacy can be increased by providing enactive experiences which disconfirm mis-beliefs about what the children fear and from which they gain new skills to manage challenging, threatening experiences. Children will hold weak self-perceptions of efficacy provisionally as they test newly gained knowledge and skills. If a child finds a learning task intimidating, their perception of their capabilities can leave the child shaken despite successful attainment. As they gain increasing ability to manage their fear and potential threats, they can develop self-assurance which can enable them to master composition.

3. Research Design

Qualitative research focuses on discovering and understanding the experiences, perspectives, and thoughts of participants by exploring meaning, purpose or reality (Conrad & Ronald, 2011). This study was conducted as a case study. Semi structured interviews were used as the research instrument with the children. A self-completion questionnaire was completed by the teachers. Self-completion questionnaire was the cheapest, least time-consuming data collection method available to the researcher and did not involve interviewer bias as the researcher did not interpose with real time remarks or feelings which may have influenced responses of participants known by the researcher as colleagues (Phellas, Bloch & Seale, 2011). Data collection took place in October 2015.

Interviews were used to explore how the students perceive writing lessons. The interview included questions on three broad areas with a focus on cognitive factors, motivational factors and environmental factors which influence writing. The interviews were conducted in Dhivehi so that the students would be comfortable to openly talk about their writing in English classes.

3.1 Selection of Participants

The study was conducted in a secondary school of Male', Maldives. The students were approached at the end of the school session, so that consent of parents could be obtained at the same time. The students were asked whether they wanted to be interviewed regarding their English language writing performances. Four students volunteered – two girls and two boys. Three of the students who volunteered were from Grade Eight and one was from Grade Nine.

Three English Language teachers from the same grades were chosen to participate in the study using purposive sampling. Oral consent was sought by telephone and all information required for informed consent was provided verbally.

3.2 Procedure

One to one, face-to-face interviews were used to obtain data from children. Each interview lasted approximately ten to fifteen minutes. Since the interviews coincided with the school end of semester examinations, the researcher approached the students at the end of their examinations to avoid any disturbances.

As the interview commenced, the purpose of the research was explained to the participants so that they understood why the research was conducted and what information was needed and were informed of their rights. The researcher ensured that each child was comfortable and at ease about being interviewed. With the permission of the participants, audio recording of all the interviews were made.

A semi- structured interview with open ended questions was used to guide the interview process. The questions were on three broad areas, focusing on cognitive, motivational and environmental factors which influence writing in English as a second language. The open ended questions helped to keep the conversation on the right track and enabled the researcher to make further clarifications by adding probing questions based on the interviewee's responses.

For the purpose of triangulation and corroboration of data, self-completion questionnaires were e-mailed to four language teachers, and were returned by three, via e-mail. The questionnaire included eight open-ended questions which asked about how students experience writing in class, common errors found in their writings, students' attitude towards writing tasks and factors that influence children's writing.

3.3 Data Analysis

Field notes were written up during the interview and after each interview the audio recording was transcribed. The transcribed interviews were subjected to a discourse analysis which involved initial open coding. The content was further analysed and axial coding was used to categorize them into broader themes. Finally, the data were selectively analysed based on the previously mentioned themes: cognitive, environmental and motivational factors which inhibit writing among children.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The research participants were informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point. The participants were also made aware that they had the right to not respond to any question that they did not want to answer. The participants were informed that their personal data would be kept confidential and the information given used solely for research purposes and that the data would be anonymized.

4. Results

4.1 Motivational Factors

The participants' responses demonstrated the importance of motivational factors such as self-efficacy, interest and attitude in students' performance of writing. Two out of the four students interviewed said that they did not like writing tasks. When asked whether they thought writing was important, two students said that they did not think that writing was important or useful. Furthermore, all the three teachers who participated in the study said that most students did not like to write or were reluctant in doing writing tasks.

All of the three teachers had noticed students were interested in informal writing rather than formal writing. For instance, one of the teachers said, "My students feel very reluctant if given a writing exercise, like writing an article or a summary but most of them seem to show interest in informal letter writing. This might be because they do not score high in formal writing." On another instance, she reported that, "They (students) like to write mostly informal conversation type writing, maybe because they watch English movies and serials a lot and are able to show informal features of communicative language". Similarly, one of the students said that she likes writing mysterious, horror stories. This shows that interest of the students is a strong factor which influences their engagement in writing.

Attitudes toward writing may shape students' beliefs about their ability to write. One of the interviewees reported that she loves writing and believed that it is an important skill which one must possess in order to pass in examinations and also to get a good job. Later on she said that she is quite confident with her present writing skills and she believed that she had the potential to do even better.

Self-efficacy was another important factor which influenced students' writing. A student who believed that she was not confident with her writing said that she thought she was not able to

write the way she ought to. Personal mastery experiences are a source of self-efficacy where repeated failures may lower students' mastery expectations. This was evident in the study, as one teacher pointed out that, "They are not hard working and when they get lower marks, they lose confidence." Another teacher elaborated on this by stating, "Their past experiences in English Language Learning inhibit students to write." This shows that fear and anxiety may lead struggling students to avoid writing in English.

Findings of the study also indicated that verbal feedback and persuasion were a source of self-efficacy which affected students writing ability. Giving effective feedback and encouraging students to practice were the most favoured mode of help proposed by the teachers. One of the teachers interviewed said that she gave frequent oral feedback on students' writing and that oral feedback worked.

One of the teachers emphasized that primary teachers must focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary at the very beginning. Two of the teachers mentioned modelling as an effective technique. They said that they used sample written articles which helped students to identify features of a good article. Teachers also shared students' writing with other students as peer modelling of good writing. One teacher explained, "I also prefer to pass good writings of students around the classroom so that everyone reads and know what is there in a good writing."

Teachers believed that it was important for teachers to keep extrinsically motivating students in order to help them improve writing. One teacher asserted, "If properly motivated even the worst, attempt to write. For example, I give sweets and select best 5 and give badges."

Students were instrumentally motivated towards writing, when they understood the utility value of writing. For example, one of the students believed that, "Writing affects the future, it is important as we might be able to use it in the future when the time comes...for example, in job applications." Another student responded, "I think it is (writing) important because we pass in exams when we write well. Also, if you want to get a good job, you have to be a good writer." It was evident that the students' motivation towards writing comes from the goals they want to achieve. If the students had a goal, they tended to see a purpose for learning to write, which in turn motivated them to work hard.

4.3 Environmental Factors

Data from the research revealed that students faced difficulty in completing writing tasks due to lack of subject knowledge. All of the teachers who participated in the study identified low levels of vocabulary, knowledge of grammar and sentence structure as challenges faced by the students in their classes.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to writing is not knowing what to write, and not knowing how to begin writing. A young teacher reported, "When they are asked to write an article, they say they don't know how to start."

Being creative and imaginative was challenging for the students while writing in English. While a teacher highlighted, "lack of creativity and poor imagination," a student pointed out the difficulty, "To find points which are related to the topic." All the students said that they need to be able to think very hard and concentrate in order to complete their writing tasks. A student explained why she dislikes writing tasks. "When writing we have to use our thinking ability. Using the brain squeezes a lot of energy out of me."

Two teachers identified the importance of brainstorming ideas and planning for writing as significant prewriting tasks which can support development of writing skills.

> Make them form groups and have a debate or a discussion for the given topic. Since writing activities cannot be carried out in a single period, the teacher can use first twenty minutes of the double period for brainstorming their ideas. After that, can ask them to make a plan by making a graphic organizer.

5. Discussion

The findings from this study indicated that students' interest was a significant factor in writing in English language classrooms. The three teachers reported that students are interested in informal writing rather than formal writing and one teacher suggested that students like informal writing because the children watched English films at home and were able to use informal features of communicative language. For these students, who use English to communicate on social networks, informal communication can be authentic tasks which relates to success outside of school learning. Authentic tasks that link the taught curriculum to the complex problems of the world and time the student lives in are good examples of motivating activities (Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2008). This finding also matches with what the researcher had experienced personally, as many students were seen to be interested in topics related with teenagers in the classroom.

Since all of the teachers in this study have reported students' lack of interest in attempting formal writing tasks, this area requires further study, to seek ways to help students to master formal writing skills and motivate them to write for an unfamiliar audience. It is possible that inhibition to complete formal writing tasks may be due to weaknesses in the modelling of

formal writing tasks by the teachers. If the teacher being observed by the children for imitation of behaviour, does not model the formal writing task effectively, the students will refrain from engaging in that activity. Unless the teacher verbally and visually identifies the key features and mnemonic devices for formal writing, the children will have no mechanism for imitating formal writing processes. Modelling and initial enactive successes heighten self-efficacy which in turn improves future attainment (Bandura, 1982). Research indicates that children can be taught complex writing skills such as planning, drafting, editing and revising which goes beyond surface levels of performance (Schumaker & Deshler, 2009). Englert, Raphael, Anthony, Anderson and Stephens (1991) suggest that teachers should "think aloud" as they make visible the inner dialogue that skilled writers go through as they plan, draft, and edit their work.

Teachers in this study emphasized the role of feedback in improving students' writing skills. They identified individual feedback in written and oral form as crucial and useful. Given the importance of perceived competence to develop self-efficacy, extra care should be taken to ensure that students see the benefit of their own efforts in completing a challenging task. One teacher had reported that students hate teachers commenting on their books and they sometimes tear the pages. As was indicated by one teacher, formative oral feedback prior to completion of work with information regarding strengths, weaknesses, and ways to reduce discrepancy between current and expected level (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) could ensure successful learning as well as student satisfaction of own performance mastery. Rather than teacher feedback after completion, self-evaluation of writing, with goals for future performance can be utilised to develop personal agency and self-efficacy in writing. The teacher can then add a comment to encourage and reinforce the habit of accurate self-evaluation. Feedback needs to be given at the right level of challenge as children can avoid writing if they believe the expected outcome is beyond their coping capabilities. Children relate more to feedback given with passion. Students will perform assuredly if they believe themselves capable of completing the task successfully (Bandura, 1982).

Peer feedback can be a useful tool for children to generate ideas and to get feedback on how to improve writing which is at their own level of attainment. Students who participated in a study done by Hawthorne (2008) believed being able to share their writing with a partner or group helped them feel good about what they had written and also gave them further ideas. Working as a team of collaborative writers who share their writing with each other, children can practice "out loud" the inner dialogue of the writer, and make the concept of audience visible (Englert et al., 1991). This can also free teacher's time to give in-depth individual feedback to struggling writers.

Additionally, teachers believed that students do not work hard when they get low marks as they lose confidence due to their past experiences. According to Bandura (1982), those

with low self-efficacy will slacken their efforts and give up altogether in the face of aversive experiences. Working in the exam oriented culture of Maldivian schools, motivating students in a non-competitive setting where children's self-esteem and belief in their own capabilities can be developed was a challenge for the teachers.

Lack of subject knowledge and its adverse effects on writing was seen to be a prominent result of the responses given by the participants. This was also noticed in previous research such as Hawthorne (2008) and Vyncke (2012). Teachers who participated in the current study have supported the idea of giving collaborative prewriting tasks where students can discuss and plan their writing. These prewriting tasks need to go hand in hand with explicit instruction on how to acquire information and how to store, record and transform information (Schumaker & Deshler, 2009).

Traditional Maldivian culture values collaboration and is an oral culture. There was very little evidence that this facet of culture is exploited to support writing. While the examination paper is designed keeping in mind potential areas of interest to youth, language teachers can plan for opportunities for collaborative research, talk for writing and oral presentations of content in the initial stages of the writing process to enhance the motivation to write and improve personal capabilities for writing. Use of visual imagery, visual literacy techniques (Messaris, 1995), and acting out characters, roles and audiences can enable inclusive instruction, and depth in communication and writing (William, 2010; Anderson, 2015).

Students in the present study have said that they prefer to do writing at home where they can sit peacefully and even get help from other family members and this is backed by the findings of Hawthorne (2008) who found that most students preferred to do writing at home in their own environments. Writing at home gives children the space to do online research on the topic and discuss their ideas with an adult while having a quiet place to compose. All these elements can be incorporated into English language classrooms which are considerate of children's learning needs, allowing children to post their research and self-directed writing on a classroom blog, or in a correspondence journal (Bloem, 2004) bringing home and school learning together.

The finding of the present study is slightly different from the observation of Hawthorne (2008) where many students raised concern about not getting enough time to complete their work. Two of the four students who participated in this research did not find time a challenging factor. It is possible that some students "perform" to a prescribed task which is fitted to the time they are given rather than engaging creatively to express ideas and emotions and take ownership of the writing process.

Motivational, cognitive and environmental factors play a key role in inhibiting students to write.

This study revealed that these factors are inter-related. For example, students reported that they prefer to write at quieter places where they can easily concentrate. One student mentioned she preferred to write in the exam hall. In a very crowded, busy school, the examination hall might be the quietest place in which the student might have ever written and the desire to do well in the examination would have been an added motivation. This shows that environmental factors such as setting can be associated with the cognitive factors as well.

The results of the study have several implications for practitioners. It is vital for teachers to know the significance of giving authentic tasks which may arouse students' interest. Furthermore, they should be aware of students' background knowledge and self- efficacy beliefs which proved to have a profound effect on students' writing performances. It is also clear that motivating students, assigning group activities and giving them feedback are successful approaches practiced by the teachers.

In Maldivian classrooms, teachers often teach writing lessons during double periods of 70 minutes. The first 40 minutes or so are used for clarifying the question, explaining the structure and helping students to recall their prior knowledge. However, when asked to write, many students spend time on planning and fail to complete the task on time. This is also evident during examinations where several students do not complete their writing tasks. Thus, it is important to plan for lessons to complete prewriting tasks. This will enable students to complete writing tasks satisfactorily. It can also ensure avoidance and incompletion of writing tasks does not become habitual. Similarly, when asked to write at class, students complain about getting distracted and struggle to concentrate on writing. This may occur due to disruptive students or noise from children and teachers in the corridors and other classes. Teachers must use effective classroom management strategies to minimise distractions and to create a calming environment in which to write. Using flipped classroom models (Adas & Bakir, 2013) where learning expectations and audiovisual instructions are provided online before class time with expectations to engage in completing tasks and to give feedback of online learning within the class time, is an instructional strategy which can be explored further.

7. Limitations and Lessons Learned

Throughout the study, the researcher's experiences of data collection and analysis were recorded in a reflective journal. Issues that were faced during the research process and the lessons learned were recorded on an ongoing basis. Such insights were recorded along with ideas that were generated throughout the research process.

The students who took part in the study spoke very little. More time needed to be spent on introduction and building rapport with the students to help them get engaged. Often

responses were short and lacked detail and needed repeated probing for clarification or further explanations. Upon reflection, I could have used reflective journal writing with both students and teacher participants as well, so that they could elaborate and reflect on their experiences of what was asked in the questionnaire and in the interviews, thus, providing rich data for the qualitative research process. This could have also helped me to identify strengths and weaknesses in individual children's informal writing practices.

Interviewing in the noisy environment of a large secondary school was problematic. It required the researcher to repeatedly listen to the same audio to understand a phrase because of noise distractions. A more advanced recording instrument might be more productive than the personal mobile phone which was used.

Use of a self-completion questionnaire limited the depth of information gained from the teacher participants. Follow up interviews after completion of the questionnaire would have enabled the researcher to share her own learning and to explore whether certain practices which support L2 writing such as visual literacy, talk for writing (Willinsky, 1991), collaborative writing and process writing approach (Graham & Perin, 2007) were used by the teachers though they were not mentioned in the completed questionnaires. Interviews would have enabled the researcher to probe deeper into teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge level as this is an important factor which can influence children's writing in English.

Gender and achievement levels could have affected children's perception of their own writing level as well as their motivation and goal orientation. If the research is to be replicated in the future, these areas need to be taken into consideration.

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