

The Effect of Students' Attitudes Towards Writing an English Composition on their Level of Achievement

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore third year students' attitudes towards writing a composition in English as a foreign language to give insights into how they feel, think and behave vis-a-vis writing; and more importantly, to show the relationship between these attitudes and learners' level of achievement in this skill. To test my hypotheses, a questionnaire was administered to 3rd year students along with a short interview with the writing teacher of the investigated group. In addition to that, a quantitative analysis was undertaken. The paper demonstrates that students have a negative attitude towards writing a composition in English, and this has a negative effect on their level of achievement.

Key Words: Process of Writing, English Language, Third Year Students, Learner's Performance, Writing a Composition.

الملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة كيفية تدريس التعبير الكتابي لطلبة السنة الثالثة جامعي في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، وذلك عن طريق تسليط الضوء على العلاقة التي تربط مستوى الطالب في إتقان واستيعاب هذه المهارة مع سلوكياته. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن السلوك السلبي للطلاب تجاه التعبير الكتابي له أثر سلبي على تعلم اللغة.

الكلمات المفتاح: التعلم، التعبير الكتابي، لغة إنجليزية، طلبة السنة الثالثة، مهارة الطلبة.

Introduction

When discussions of successful language learning are invoked, mention is made of affective variables such as attitude. Traditionally, research on writing composition focused on the complex cognitive process of writing. Researchers, who explored various factors that may contribute to success or lack of success in writing, seldom mentioned attitude as an issue in successful writing though it is probably of greater significance than one might assume. At this point, the study of learners' competence in writing should entail a consideration of such a variable.

Many studies on the role of attitude towards writing have come as a reaction to the theories of writing which were restricted to the description of linguistic skills and cognitive abilities. Brand (1991, p.396) claims that "social cognitive theories of writing mask the emotion of experience of writing." Brand focuses on the emotional component that he defines as "a positive or negative valence and a level of intensity"(1991, p.398). She concluded with a call for a theory of writing that gives a cardinal importance to the writer's emotions (1991, p.403).

Writing often provokes negative attitudes. In this regard, Musgrove (1998/1999, p.1-2) notes: "[w]hat is within student writers are heart-felt stories, narratives of success and failure [...] Unfortunately, the most common of these stories are filled with fear and despair-student fearing teachers' comments and peer responses; student despairing of success or approval." If teachers do not consider these attitudes, their effect on learners' performance will be more pathetic; "repeated again and again overtime, these narratives of hurt become internalized and shape students' attitude toward future writing experience. Even the most supporting teaching practices will fail in the face of such deep-seated resistance"(Musgrove, 1998/1999, p.1-2).

Insights into the importance of attitude in L2 writing have led many researchers to dig into the factors that provoke learners' negative attitudes. Bowen and Marks (1994, p.143), for example, report that among the factors contributing to students' negative attitudes towards writing are teachers' feedback and the difficulty of the writing skill in comparison to speaking. However, the relationship between feedback and attitude may be viewed as reciprocal in that teachers' feedback may not work if learners hold negative attitudes because of other factors. Myles (2002, p.6) argues that learners may continue to exhibit errors in their writing for the following reasons: 1-Negative attitudes towards the target language, 2-Continued lack of progress in the second language, 3-A wide social and psychological

distance between them and the target culture,4-A lack of integrative and instrumental motivation for learning.

Other factors responsible for students' negative attitudes are revealed in a study conducted by Bottomley, Henck, and Melnock (1997/1998) in which they have developed a scale to measure students' self-perception as writers. Their scale asks students to assess their general progress and specific progress in areas such as organization and style. The scale also includes students' comparison between themselves and others, teachers' feedback and their internal feelings during writing.

Students' perceptions of the usefulness or importance of writing may be determinant of how they approach a specific task. Carson asserts: "If learners perceive writing tasks to be useless, they may approach them in a careless manner. Consequently, it is likely that they will be inattentive to errors, monitoring, and rhetorical concerns" (Carson, as cited in Myles, 2002, p.2). This means that learners who view writing as interesting are more likely to achieve higher success because they are going to bring the whole of themselves to the task. Whatever the reasons of learners' negative attitudes towards writing are, teachers should find ways to foster and promote positive attitudes in their learners. Teachers' attention to this variable (attitude) may help improve students' level and change their writing habits.

1. Aim of the Study

Throughout the present study, three aims are sought. First, uncovering students' attitudes towards writing a composition in English. Second, determining some factors that affect these attitudes. Third, finding if there is a relationship between students' attitudes and their level of achievement.

2. Research Questions

The questions addressed in this research are:

1-What attitudes do students have toward writing an English composition?

2-What are the factors that may lead to these attitudes?

3-Is there any correlation between students' attitudes towards writing and their level of achievement?

3. Research Hypothesis

In the pursuit of these aims and in order to answer the aforementioned questions, it is hypothesized that:

- 1-Students have negative attitudes towards writing a composition in English.
- 2-Students' attitudes towards writing are influenced by some factors.
- 3-There is a correlation between students' attitudes and their level of achievement in writing.

Participants

This work is a case study conducted at Mila University Center. The population of this study relate to third year students. The actual research sample is made of 27 students. Among these, there are 2 males and 24 females. One girl was absent when administering the questionnaire. With regard to sex, this sample is consistent with the overall population of the university that is made up mainly of girls. The sample has a mean age of 20 years. Our sample consists of one group because conducting the study on a larger sample would be time-consuming and effort-exhausting. All the subjects of this research had already studied English for at least five years before coming to Mila University Center.

4. Research tool

This study adopts both a quantitative and a qualitative approach using a cross-sectional survey conducted through a closed questionnaire, framed in Likert scale. Likert scale is the most useful, valid and reliable tool to measure attitude. It is the most widely used scale by survey research. Oskamp and Schultz (2005, p.51) state that "the Likert method of attitude scale construction quickly became and remained the most popular method." Likert scale consists of a set of statements in which the respondents rate statements according to their agreement or disagreement with those statements. Likert scale is usually made of five-point scale; strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

Students' level of achievement was measured depending on the students' scores in the writing subject, which were obtained from the head of the English Department. To verify our third research hypothesis that there is a correlation between students' attitudes and their level of achievement, a statistical analysis was undertaken using Microsoft Excel.

5. Procedure

The purpose of this questionnaire is to investigate students' attitudes towards writing a composition in English and the factors that contribute to these attitudes. The questionnaire was administered to the students with the approval and presence of their teacher. The questionnaire consists of 25 statements, and students were asked to rate, in accordance with a five-point Likert scale, their varying degree of:

a-Agreement: Strongly agree (5), agree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1).

b-Frequency: Always (5), usually (4), often (3), seldom (2), never (1)

The questionnaire revolves around 7 headlines. The first section is designed to examine students' motivation to learn English (4 items). The second section examines learners' needs (3 items). The third section measures students' attitudes towards the nature of writing (6 items). The fourth section attempts to assess students' attitudes towards the learning situation (3 items). The fifth section examines students' attitudes vis-a-vis the role of the teacher (4 items). The sixth section investigates learners' self-confidence (2 items). The last section is designed to measure students' initiative to write (3 items).

Students were given information on how to complete the questionnaire, and many statements were explained. To avoid bias responses, the questionnaire was anonymous. For this purpose, participants were reminded that the study was voluntary and that their answers would be completely confidential. It is worth mentioning that since our third hypothesis is a statistical one, each questionnaire was assigned a coded number.

6. Analysis of the Questionnaire

Section 1: Students' Motivation to Learn English

When asked about the extent of their agreement or disagreement with the statement suggesting students' intrinsic motivation for learning English, most of the subjects (65,3%) answered that they agree or strongly disagree with it. This means that learners have an interest in learning English as a foreign language. These learners find it pleasurable to learn new ideas and gain new knowledge in that language. We also record 15, 34% who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. This implies that these learners learn English because of some orientations other than the intrinsic motivation. The remaining students (19,23%) have a neutral attitude towards learning English for an intrinsic motivation.

Still within the area of motivation, the overwhelming majority of respondents have opted for learning English to get a job; 80,76 % agree or strongly agree with the statement. 11,53% disagree with the statement. These learners do not see learning English as a means to an end. We have also recorded 7,69% who neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

The concept of integrative motivation (assimilation or integration into the target society) has a considerable application in this sample. We recorded 49,99% of the respondents who have a positive attitude towards the target community while 30,76% are not integratively motivated. Some students(19, 23%) are neutral towards integrativeness.

From the results, half of the group endorses integrative motivation to learn English. For those who report a negative attitude towards integrativeness, there are many possible interpretations. First, those learners are likely to adore their culture, and therefore, they do not identify themselves with any other culture. Second, some students may lack knowledge about the English speaking community which disenables them to construct a positive attitude towards integrativeness. Third, these students may have other kinds of motivation to learn English. Fourth, some students, possibly, have negative feeling towards the English speaking communities. Students who have an integrative motivation to learn English are more likely to acquire and develop their ability to write in that language because culture and writing are closely related.

The majority of students (64,37%) disagrees or strongly disagrees that they are learning English because it is their parents' desire. I had 23,07% of the respondents who have an extrinsic motivation to learn English to satisfy their parents, while 11,53% are neutral.

Parents do not seem to have a direct influence on students' choice to study English. However, some students tend to be encouraged or obliged by their parents to study this language because some parents have positive attitudes towards this target language. Students who neither agree nor disagree with the four statements in this section seem to be amotivated.

Section 2: Students' Needs for Writing

Most of students tend to disagree or strongly disagree that they need writing more than speaking to communicate with others. By contrast, 19,22% show a positive response to the statement, whereas 15,38% neither agree nor disagree. Most of the students seem to be in need of speaking more than writing to communicate with others. One possible reason for such a response may be the fact that learners are motivated to learn English, but not the writing

skill in particular. In addition, one might think that writing in English is not needed as a means of communication in the Algerian context.

Some students, interestingly, need writing more than speaking to communicate with others. One explanation for this may be the fact that they enjoy writing and find it the best way to express themselves. It is also possible that these students are introverts, and therefore, they prefer to express themselves by writing. Other students, in this sample, are unable to fabricate an attitudes towards the statement. A possible justification for that is their belief that writing and speaking are of equal importance.

Students' perception of writing as less needed or important than speaking may impede their attempts to achieve competency in that skill. This, in turn, may affect their level of achievement and possibly their level in such a vital skill if their attitudes do not change.

The majority of students (76,92%) do not perceive writing as a useful activity in their everyday life. Possibly, they think that writing does not perform any function in their daily life. Therefore, they see it as a task restricted to the classroom context. These students may also have no interest in writing; on the contrary, they assume that writing does not respond to their immediate needs. Students' attitudes towards writing as a useful activity affect their level of achievement. These students' beliefs in the task usefulness may be influenced by many factors such as the status of writing in one's culture, which is relatively low, the status of the ESL, in addition to some other learning factors.

7,69% of the respondents neither agree nor disagree with the statement that suggests the usefulness of writing in their everyday life. Only 15,38% of the subjects report that writing is useful in their everyday life.

The majority of students (73,07%) agrees or strongly agrees that getting a good mark in writing is the most satisfactory thing for them, while only 15,37% disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. On the other hand, 11,53% seem to have a neutral attitude.

It is crystal clear that most of the students are not intrinsically motivated to learn EFL writing. They perceive writing as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. These students' motivation is likely to fade away as soon as they finish their studies. Students' responses to this item are consistent with those in section 1 which reveals that students' motivation is mainly instrumental.

Most of students' tendency to favor getting good grades above anything else may be explained by reference to the sixth item which shows that most of the students perceive

writing as a useless activity that is not related to their immediate needs. Also, some students are motivated to get good marks just to save face with their parents, peers, or teachers or simply to pass their examinations.

In regard to these students who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement, we assume that they have a history of failure, and they have decided that grades are unimportant. Another plausible interpretation is that those respondents are good students or students whose purpose is to improve their writing regardless of marks. So, students who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement are probably not just seeking to get good grades but also to achieve competency in the writing skill.

Section 3: Students' Attitudes Towards the Writing Skill

The items of this section are centered on the nature of the writing skill. There appears a considerable number of students (49,99%) who tend to agree or strongly agree that writing is difficult even in Arabic or any other language. While 26,91% of these students disagree or strongly disagree with the statement, 23,07% are neutral.

A plausible explanation of the fact that learners find difficulty in writing is that those students may possess deficient writing strategies in L1. This, in turn, may affect their L2 writing.

Concerning those who opted for 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree', there are three possible reasons. First, they may have a good level in L1, but a bad one in EFL writing. Second, they may be good writers in both languages. Third, these students, possibly, have a bad level in L1 writing but a good level in L2 writing. If the last reason is true, we would assume that it is attributed to some factors such as learners' interest in writing, positive attitudes towards the target culture and the effectiveness of the writing courses.

The overwhelming majority of students (76,91%) see writing as more difficult than speaking. This may be attributed to the fact that writing is more formal than speaking, and it requires many abilities in comparison to the latter. I also recorded 15,37% of subjects who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. Their attitudes may be attributed to students' weaknesses in pronunciation. Also, students have less time in speaking than in writing. There are just 7,69% who take a neutral position.

Along the lines of the nature of the writing skill, students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree that the rules of the English composition make the task of writing more difficult. I recorded 57,68% of students who agree or strongly agree.

Possibly, these rules were not exposed to the students before, or they did not master them well. Indeed, the requirement of many rules, at the same time, makes of writing a demanding task for learners. It also needs no reminder that the conventions of writing in Arabic are dissimilar from those of English.

While 7,69% neither agree nor disagree with the statement, 34,60% of the respondents do not view the rules of the English composition as hindrances for writing. These students are expected to be good writers who master these rules. It is also worth mentioning that these students may be integratively oriented to the English target community, a crucial factor that is likely to influence their way of thinking and writing as well.

Most of the students (57,68%) think of vocabulary as a hindrance for writing. Indeed, I expect these students to be suffering from two difficulties: the difficulty of learning a foreign language and learning how to write in that language. Even those with a good level in writing do not possess enough vocabulary like a native speaker and they, sometimes, find it difficult to express exactly what they would like to say. This lack of vocabulary may be attributed to the fact that students do not read enough outside the classroom. They tend to limit themselves to what their teachers provide them with in the lesson. This lack of motivation to write is another issue that goes beyond the scope of the present research.

Grammar correctness is essential for students to write an academic piece of writing. Though grammar is given a considerable amount of time, students still make grammatical mistakes in their writings. One possible justification for this is the mismatch between the content of the writing subject and that of grammar. In this context, Reeves (1997, p.40) states that “grammar should not be taught in isolation. If the district requires grammar instruction, it should be within the context of a whole piece of student writing.” It is also probable that the teacher overstates grammar correctness and gives it higher attention than the other aspects. This makes learners develop negative attitudes towards the writing subject. This may put learners, especially those with low competence, in that subject, in an uncomfortable state.

Moreover, focusing on grammar accuracy may lead the learner to pay attention solely to grammar and neglect the other aspects of writing. Also, grammar lessons may not meet all learners' needs probably because grammatical cues are taught in isolation with little reliance on a context, an aspect that is of paramount importance in writing. Those who disagree or strongly disagree with the fact that grammar correctness hinders their writing are expected to have good level in writing.

The majority of the 26 subjects (80,76%) opt for 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement. I have also recorded 11,50% of the respondents who disagree with the statement, and only 7,69% who neither agree nor disagree.

Most of the subjects have a favourable attitude towards free writing. In the latter, students write down their thoughts as they come to them; they let their sentences flow freely without thinking about whether these ideas are appropriate or the grammar is perfect. In free writing, students do not respect many conventions of the written composition. These responses correlate with those of the items 10 and 12 in the same section where most of the students report that the rules of writing composition and grammar correctness are hindrances for them to write. Those who disagree with the statement are probably good learners who have a good level in writing; therefore, they have no problem in both types of writing. Those who take a neutral position may be unable to form an attitude. It is also possible to think that they are either good learners who like both types of writing or poor writers, who have no interest in writing whatever type it is.

Section 4: Students' Attitudes Towards the Writing situation

This section is centered on students' attitudes towards the learning situation or context. The majority of learners (57,68%) disagrees or strongly disagrees with the statement suggesting that the time allotted to teaching writing is appropriate to improve their writing. However, 26,92% out of the total number of the sample are neutral towards this statement, while 15,32% show a favorable attitude regarding the time allotted to teaching the writing skill.

Indeed, the amount of time for teaching writing is expected to be enough in order to improve one's level in this skill. This negative attitude, from the part of the majority of the learners, towards time allotment to the teaching of writing may be due to the fact that writing in a target language is difficult, and therefore, learning to write in that language is a long process. Some students come to the university with a very low level in English. Thus, learning to write in that language requires a very long time.

I should add saying that even if the amount of time is sufficient, it will not be efficient if it is not well managed. As a result, students' performance is unlikely to improve. The teacher may find it difficult to perform many tasks at the same time: giving theoretical knowledge, asking students to write in order to practice and providing feedback. One should also bear in mind that large classes is a real problem in the Algerian context for both students

and the teacher. Teaching writing to large classes makes it difficult for the teacher to check each individual's progress in the writing skill not to mention giving students some pieces of advice about their weaknesses is writing and conferencing about the problems they face when writing.

Concerning those who report an agreement with the statement, they are supposed to be good writers. On the other hand, we think that those who neither agree nor disagree with the statement cannot decide whether their poor level in writing is attributed to the time factor or to some other factors.

The overwhelming majority of students (92,29%) share the view that writing at home is easier than writing in the classroom. In sharp contrast, 3,84% report a strong disagreement with the statement, while 3,84% did not construct any attitude.

These findings indicate that most of the students prefer writing at home to writing in the classroom. This is mainly because at home students have more time to proofread their writings, to write many drafts and edit; they can even check some of the words in the dictionary. All in all, at home, many of the cumbersome problems that may arise in the classroom may be avoided. I think that my subjects' unfavorable attitudes towards writing in the classroom may be attributed to the pressure of time or to the fear of teachers' comments.

I have recorded only 7,68% of students who agree or strongly agree that one hour and half is enough to write an exam essay. These are expected to be good students. In comparison, I have 3,84% who are neutral. In sharp contrast, the overwhelming majority of students (88,45%) disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. From these results, it is crystal clear that time allotted to the exam essay is an inhibiting factor for students.

Time pressure may provoke anxiety and apprehension, and it may result in lower performance. Contrariwise, when given enough amount of time, students are more likely to produce better pieces of writing. To this effect, Kroll (1990, p.141) writes: "time may also be a key factor in other aspects of writing such as the ability to produce a text with control over such discourse features as organization and coherence." If we give the matter a little thought, we find that learners' need for a larger amount of time may be due to the nature of writing which is believed to be difficult by most of these students (See section 3).

Writing requires many sub-skills, and this might be impossible to achieve in one hour and half, especially if we take into account the exam situation that arouses anxiety for many

learners. It is also reasonable to think that this amount of time is not suitable for all students since their level is not the same.

Section 5: Students' Attitudes Towards the Role of the Teacher

The overwhelming majority of students (96,15%) agree or strongly disagree that writing about uninteresting topics inhibits them. No respondent disagrees or strongly disagrees with the statement, while 3,84% take a neutral position. One plausible interpretation for this is that uninteresting topics make the task of writing boring and less enjoyable. By contrast, giving students interesting topics or making them choose the topics by themselves makes them more involved in the writing task and helps them approach it with more confidence.

In respect to my selected sample, 38,45% admit that what the teacher provided them with in the classroom has helped them improve their writing. A reasonable justification for this may be the effectiveness of the teacher's approach to teaching writing. It's also probable to think that the teacher's interaction caters for these learners' weaknesses in writing.

Some respondents disagree or strongly disagree (34,61%) that the teacher's instructions have helped them improve their level in writing. This may be attributed to the mismatch between the teacher's lessons and the needs of the learners. It is also probable that the approach applied by the teacher is not helpful for them to develop their writing ability.

According to an interviewed teacher, the application of a certain approach depends on the level of the students. As far as third year students are concerned, the teacher is in favor of a product approach to teaching writing. Students' responses may imply that this approach is ineffective in developing the writing skill. These students may not also be interested in the writing subject; and therefore, whatever the teacher provides them with, they will fail to improve their writing.

A considerable number of respondents (26,92%) neither agree nor disagree with the statement. We assume that they do not know if their low level in writing is attributed to themselves or to the teacher. They might also be afraid that their answers will be handed to the teacher.

With regard to my sample, the majority of respondents (76,91%) agrees or strongly agrees that getting a bad mark demotivates them. This may be due to the teacher's way of assessing them, which probably does not tally with the students' expectations. If this is true,

students are more likely to develop negative attitudes towards the writing subject and may be towards the teacher as well.

The interviewed teacher says that she allocates 7 points for grammar and 2 or 1,5 to the ideas. This way of assessment mirrors the product approach in which the core of interest is on the form. However, students prefer the teacher's response to their writings as a reader and not as a grammar teacher.

It has been found that the purpose of most of these learners is not to improve their level in writing. What is of utmost importance for them is to get good marks in writing; therefore, the latter becomes trivial for them. These learners may also have an intrinsic motivation to improve their writing level; thus, they do not need to be obsessed with marks.

Out of the total number of subjects, 26, 92% agree that teacher's comments on their essays have helped them improve their level in writing. On the other hand, 57, 68% disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. These students are expected to receive unrewarding or punishing feedback. To put it another way, the teacher, probably, does not highlight the positive aspects in students' writings. Rather, she/he focuses solely on their weaknesses. This, in fact, is more likely to demotivate learners and make them careless of the teacher's comments. Teachers' way of providing feedback reflects his/her approach to teaching writing. I assume that those learners, who opted for disagree or strongly disagree, do not appreciate the teacher's method of providing feedback because they have different perceptions of how feedback should be given.

From the interview with the teacher, the focus in providing feedback is on form. Students' attitude of how feedback should be provided does not seem to coincide with those of the teacher. This mismatch between students' and teachers' beliefs of how to give feedback may develop negative attitudes towards writing.

Section 6: Students' Self-confidence and Self-efficacy

The majority of respondents, which is a total of 84,61%, agree or strongly disagree with the statement. In comparison, 11,53% tend to have a sense of self-efficacy. These students may have a good level in writing. Among these subjects, I recorded 3,84% who opted for neither agree nor disagree. Seemingly, they are unable to decide about their level in writing.

It is obvious from these results that most of these students lack self-efficacy beliefs. Students' perception of writing as a difficult skill to achieve (section 1) may be very

important in explaining this lack of self-efficacy from the part of the learners. It is also possible that respondents' bad marks (see appendix) may be a reason for constructing such a negative attitude about themselves. I assume that the teacher's feedback may also play an important role in students' sense of non self-efficacy. It is worth mentioning that this lack of self-efficacy may contribute to students' perception of writing as a useless activity (see item 5 and 6, section 2).

Section 22: I feel anxious when writing an English composition.

15, 38% of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree that they feel anxious when writing an English composition. These students are expected to be good writers or to have a strong sense of self-efficacy. In comparison, the majority of students (80,76%) agree or strongly agree with the statement. Students' anxiety may be attributed to a myriad of reasons, for example, students' perception of writing as being difficult, writing under the pressure of time and writing about uninteresting topics. It is also probable that non-efficacy is a factor at play. In this context, Pajares and Valiante (1999, p.191) write: "more recently, researchers have reported that writing apprehension typically correlates strongly with writing performance but that, when self-efficacy beliefs are controlled, the influence of apprehension diminishes or disappears." Thus, we reiterate and claim that self-efficacy helps sustain effort, increase perseverance when encountering obstacles, and lowers feelings of anxiety.

It may also be assumed that anxiety is a result of teachers' feedback because if the latter is unfavourable or de-motivating, students are likely to feel that they are incompetent in the writing skill. With regard to my selected sample, there is one who could not fabricate any positive or negative attitude.

Section 7: Students' writing practices

Items in the last section are centered on students' behavioral responses towards writing. Learners' attitudes towards writing can be inferred from these behaviors. The latter also predict and affect learners' level of achievement. The first item of information in this section aims at checking how often students take initiative to write compositions outside the classroom. With respect to my selected sample, a majority of 21 students (80,76%) indicates that they never or seldom write compositions outside the classroom without being asked by the teacher. Only 7,62% of the subjects say that they always or usually do. On the other hand, 11,53% opt for the 'often' answer.

Autonomous learning, no doubt, plays an important role in developing students' writing ability. However, students tend to avoid writing outside the classroom. This might be attributed to their perception of themselves as poor writers, their low level of motivation, or simply laziness. This may also be due to their beliefs that writing is a classroom activity and that writing in this context will suffice.

In addition, their perception of writing as a difficult skill and their lack of self-efficacy may greatly account for this avoidance. Given this is true, students think that whichever efforts they make, their level of performance will always be lagging behind. Believing that writing has no utilitarian purpose outside the classroom may also be responsible for students' lack of initiative to write.

The majority of the subjects (92,30%) said that they never or seldom write letters or diaries in English. A very small number (3,84%) say that they usually do. I have, on the other hand, identified 3,84% who say that they often write. This item, indeed, supports the preceding one and stresses the fact that most of the students avoid writing whatever its kind is.

The last item in the questionnaire probes students' use of the four main self-regulatory writing strategies (pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing). The findings indicate that 7,69% admit that they usually use those strategies. This is a small number in comparison to those (57,68%) who say that they never or seldom use the strategies. Conversely, I have obtained 34,61% of the students opting for 'often' and no student indicating an 'always' use of the strategies.

The lack of use of these strategies in writing may be attributed to their lack of self-efficacy. It is also possible to think that teachers do not apply the process approach to teaching writing. At the heart of the latter are the stages that the students use in the process of writing. It is also reasonable to think that students' lack of motivation is one of the factors that account for the lack in the use of these strategies. To this effect, Dornyei (2003, p.16) writes: "strategy use, by definition, constitutes instances of motivated learning behaviour."

Correlation between students' attitudes and their level of achievement

For more general insights into students' reported attitudes towards writing, the mean for each attitudinal factor is calculated. The factors represent the sections listed in the appendix (2) respectively.

The following table shows the measures of students' attitudes, their level of achievement, the Pearson product moment coefficient correlation R. The attitude variable is represented by the Mean, which is calculated by the use of the following formula:

Mean= The sum of scores/the number of items

Students	Attitudes							Marks
	Section1	Section2	Section3	Section4	Section5	Section6	Section7	
	4	3	3,35	2,33	2,75	3	3,66	13,75
	3,5	4,33	3,16	2,33	3	3,5	3	16
	3,75	2,33	2	2	1,5	1,5	1,66	9
	3	1	1,5	1,66	1,25	2	1,33	6,5
	4	1,33	1,83	1,33	1,25	2	2	7,5
	3,75	2	2	1,33	2	1,5	1,66	8
	3,25	1,33	1,66	4	2,25	2,5	1,66	13,5
	3,5	2,33	1,66	3,33	2	2,5	2	13,5
	3,75	1,66	2,16	1,33	1,75	1,5	1,66	7,75
	3,25	2	1,66	2	1,5	2	2	6,75
	3,5	2	1,83	1,66	1,5	1,5	2	7,75
	3	2,5	2,33	2,33	1,5	1,5	1	8
	3,25	1,66	2	1,66	1,75	2,5	2	7,25
	4,25	2	1,83	1,33	1,5	3	2	10,25
	3	2,33	1,5	1,66	3	1	1,33	7,25
	3,25	1,66	2	2,33	1,75	1,5	2	8,75
	3	1,33	1,5	2	1,75	1	2	7,25
	3,25	3	1,33	2,33	1,25	3	1,66	9
	3,75	2	1,5	1,66	1,5	1,5	3	8,25
	3	2	2	1,33	1,5	2	2,33	5,75
	3,5	1,33	1,5	1,66	2	2,5	1,66	7,25
	3,25	2	1,5	1,66	1,5	2	1,33	7,25
	3	1,33	1,66	3	1,75	1,5	1,33	7,25
	2,5	1,66	1,5	1,33	1,75	2	1,66	6,25
	2,5	1,33	1,83	1,33	1,75	1,5	1,66	6,25

	2,25	1,66	2	2	1,25	2	2	7,25
	0,433067 18	0,63785 97	0,576021 02	0,623971 49	0,596695 64	0,646225 49	0,52083 781	6,25

The following table shows the Pearson correlations among the participating learners' attitudes towards writing and their level of achievement.

Factor	MLE	ATUW	ATNW	ATLS	ATRT	LCAW	LIW
Statistic R	0,43	0,63**	0,57*	0,62**	0,59*	0,64*	0,52*

List-wise N=25

Confidence interval 95%

P**<0,01

P*<0,05

As shown in the table, motivation for learning English appears to be a poor predictor of learners' level of achievement in writing (statistic R=0,43). The table showed markedly a considerable positive significant correlation between students' attitudes towards the usefulness of writing and their level of achievement (statistic $r=0,62$, $p<0,01$). Likewise, students' attitudes towards the nature of the writing skill correlate positively significantly with their level of achievement (statistic $r=0,57$, $p<0,05$). Further, students' attitudes towards the learning situation correlate positively significantly with their level of achievement. (statistic $r=0,62$, $p<0,01$). The table reveals a positive significant correlation between students' attitudes towards the role of the teacher and their level of achievement in writing (statistic $r=0,59$, $p<0,05$). There is also a positive significant correlation between students' confidence in their abilities to write and their level of achievement (statistic $r=0,64$, $p<0,01$). The table shows a positive significant correlation between learners' initiative to write and their level of achievement in the writing subject (statistic $r=0,52$, $p<0,05$).

Conclusion

This cross-sectional study aimed at finding out students' attitudes towards writing, the factors influencing these attitudes and the relationship between this affective variable and learners' level of achievement. Participants in this study seem to have different kinds of motivation to learn English: extrinsic, intrinsic, instrumental, and integrative. From the findings, it is crystal clear that students' motivation to learn English is mainly instrumental.

This case study also results in an inconsistency between learners' motivation to learn English and their attitudes towards writing.

Concerning their needs, students have negative attitudes towards the usefulness of writing. Learners' need for writing tends to be mainly instrumental. In regard to the nature of the writing skill, students' attitudes are noticeably unfavourable. This stems particularly from the fact that writing is a combination of many sub-skills.

As far as the learning situation is concerned, students seem to have negative attitudes towards the time allotted to the teaching and testing of writing. They also, overwhelmingly, tend to prefer writing at home to writing in the classroom. Moreover, findings of this research work indicate that students, generally, have negative attitudes towards the role of the teacher.

The subjects of this study are characterized by anxiety and lack of self-confidence, which may hinder their writing proficiency. Students also report a low frequency use of some writing strategies that are of cardinal importance in their performance.

All in all, the obtained results of our empirical work have confirmed the aforementioned hypotheses. First, students' attitudes towards writing can be described as negative. Second, students' attitudes towards writing are negatively influenced by some factors such as time, the topic, and teacher's feedback. Third, there is a significant correlation between students' attitudes towards writing and their level of achievement.

Teachers of writing should not believe that their only educational mission is to increase students' knowledge and skills and that attitudes do not fall into their proper sphere of influence. Indeed, teachers' role is extremely significant as they possess a great potential to foster positive attitudes, to rise motivation, and above all, to render the learning situation efficient and interesting as well.

Suggestions and recommendations

On the basis of these study findings, I assume that there is a need for innovation in writing instruction that may change students' attitudes towards this vital skill.

1-There is a need to create motivation for writing though the task might be enormous. Building motivation in the learners helps them overcome the difficulties they may encounter when writing. I believe that one of the motivating tasks that make students write frequently and voluntarily is exchanging letters, journals, and diaries develops students' self-confidence and lessens their anxiety; moreover, these experiences are likely to result in proficiency

development. We should add saying that motivation is likely to promote self-directed learning and hard work.

2-The writing course should cater for students' needs; and henceforth, it should proceed with needs analysis. One of the considerations in investigating learners' needs is to determine students' areas of difficulty in writing which help identify teachers' aims in the teaching of this skill. In determining students' needs, time allotment should also be reviewed as well as field of interest in terms of topics and subjects for writing assignments.

3-Teachers should devote at least a segment of their program to the measurement of students' attitudes. This can be done in writing conferences. Teachers can also ask students to write about their attitudes towards writing.

4-Students need to be given a larger amount of time for writing. It is also recommended that the validity of the timed examination needs to be questioned.

5-Learners need to be provided with interesting topics to write about because this is likely to lessen their anxiety, motivate them and make their ideas flow spontaneously.

6-Because strategy training in writing instruction plays a major role in helping students become good writers, we should like to suggest the design and implementation of a curriculum that would enhance writing strategies (pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing). We believe that linguistic competence does not produce good writing if it is not coupled with strategies competence.

7-Motivation for reading needs to be encouraged because it helps in the mastery of all the aspects of language (grammar, vocabulary, and meaning). Students' mastery of these aspects is likely to develop self-confidence and to foster positive perceptions about the act of writing..

8-I suggest that teachers have to teach writing as a process to help alleviate students' anxiety. Focusing on the process of writing rather than on the product may help students view writing as an ongoing project rather than as a one-time performance.

9-Teachers should pay attention to students' perceptions of their capabilities because self-efficacy beliefs influence learners' future experiences and helps determine their achievement. Teachers should be aware that inaccurate self-efficacy beliefs may be more influential than linguistic competence. Therefore, we suggest a continuous assessment of both learners' competence and beliefs.

10-Teachers' feedback should be positive because 'to err is human.'

11- Teachers should respond to their students' writings as readers and not as grammarians.

12-Comments should be limited to the fundamental problems keeping in mind that students cannot pay attention to everything at once.

13-Feedback needs to be provided in conferences where students can confide their writing problems to the writing teacher. Conferences also help build confidence and trust between the teacher and the learners. Moreover, they provide a motivating environment where students are encouraged to give feedback to each other's writing and learn from each other's experiences.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Dear students, you are invited to complete this questionnaire about your attitudes towards writing a composition in English. Your clear and Franck answers are greatly appreciated and extremely important for this research. Be assured that your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and that no one will have access to them.

Please, read the statements carefully and respond to them by circling the appropriate number (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) which indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement in **part A** and how much each statement is true of you in Part B. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Part A: Strongly agree (5), Agree (4), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly disagree (1)

Part B: Always (5), Usually (4), Often (3), Seldom (2), Never (1)

Part A

Section one: Learners' Motivation to learn English

1-I am learning English because I like it very much.

2-I am learning English because this enables me to get a job.

3-I am learning English to be a member of the English speaking communities.

4-I am learning English because it is my parents' desire.

Section Two: Learners' Attitudes Towards the Usefulness of Writing

5-I need writing to more than speaking to communicate with others.

6-I find writing useful in my everyday life.

7-Getting a good grade in writing is the most satisfactory thing for me.

Section Three:

8-I find writing difficult even in Arabic (or any other language).

9-I think that writing is more difficult than speaking.

10-The rules of the English composition (coherence, organization, thesis statement,...) make the task of writing more difficult.

11-Poor vocabulary is an obstacle for me to write a good essay.

12-The requirement for grammar accuracy and correctness hinders my writing.

13-I prefer free writing to writing composition.

Section Four: Learners' Attitudes Towards the Learning Situation

14-The time allotted to teaching writing is appropriate to improve the writing skill.

15-I think that writing at home is easier than writing in the classroom.

16-I think that one hour and half in the classroom is enough to write an exam essay.

Section Five: Learners' Attitudes Towards the Role of the Teacher

17-Writing about uninteresting topics inhibits me.

18-What the teacher provides me with in the classroom has helped improve my writing.

19-Getting a bad mark in writing demotivates me.

20-Teacher's comments on my essays have helped improve my level in writing.

Section Six: Learners' Confidence in their Abilities

21-I think that I have some weaknesses in writing.

22-I feel anxious when writing an English composition.

Part B

Section Seven: Learners' Initiative to Write.

23-I write compositions outside the classroom without being asked by the teacher.

24-I write diaries or letters to my friends in English.

25-I use the four stages of writing (pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing).

Appendix Two: Interview

Researcher: Good morning

Interviewee: Good morning

Researcher: I am conducting a study on students' attitudes towards writing a composition in English. Would you mind if I ask you very few questions.

Interviewee: You are the most welcome.

Researcher: Do you teach writing as a process or as a product?

Interviewee: Well, it depends on the level. With first year and second year students, I teach it as a process, while with third year students, I teach it as a product.

Researcher: To which aspect do you give more importance when correcting your students' writings, form or content?

Interviewee: I give priority to form over content.

Researcher: How much do you allocate to grammar and ideas when correcting your students' exam essays?

Interviewee: I devote 7 points to grammar, 2 points to spelling and vocabulary and 15 or 2,5 to the ideas.