

# Impact of Social, Psychological and Linguistic Factors in the Writing Skills of ESL Learners

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## Abstract

Writing in second language demands the writer to select appropriate content, meaningful sentence construction, task specific diction and maintaining coherence and organisation. In the process of writing, learners are influenced by internal and external factors. This study investigates the factors affecting the composing processes of Indian ESL Learners while attempting structured writing tasks. It also encounters the challenging aspects that L2 writers face to produce meaningful and organized content. This study adopts the case study approach to examine the impact of cultural, linguistic, educational and psychological factors in the process of drafting cohesive content in second language. Learners were trained to employ appropriate strategies to overcome the negative influence of these factors. The findings of the study exhibit that the learners of the study were empowered to understand the nature of writing skill and act accordingly in the task environment. It also provides suggestion for further research in this field.

**Keywords:** Cohesive writing, Second language writing; Social and psycholinguistic factors; Writing strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Writing, a critical communication skill requires the writers to employ appropriate lexicon, to select relevant content, and to apply language mechanics and organization. According to Warschauer (2010) writing can be considered as an effective tool for the development of academic language proficiency as learners are more ready to explore advanced lexical or syntactic expressions in the written form. Effective written communication not only concerns the sentential accuracy, it also involves the use of linguistically or culturally appropriate language features. It is the outcome

of methodic involvement among, hands, eyes and brain (Emig, 1983). Writing involves both cognitive and emotional aspects of the learners (Pajares and Valiante, 1997). It has many prerequisite interdependent skills, the writer needs to concentrate. They have to pay conscious attention to handwriting, word choice, punctuation, spelling, syntax, textual connections, purpose, organization, clarity, rhythm, euphony and reader characteristics (Scardamalia, 1981). Writing Practice in Second Language enables the learners not only to enhance their writing skills and content Knowledge but also it motivates them to learn the target language (Manchon & Vasylets, 2019). According to Manchon (2011) it offers the learners to engage in learning-to write and Writing to learn contexts. Writing process fosters progress in cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and inference (Bacha, 2002). In the process of writing in second language, learners encounter various manacles related to social and psychological factors. This study investigates the factors affecting the composing processes of Indian ESL Learners while attempting structured writing tasks.

## **1.2 Objectives of the study**

1. To investigate and categorize the factors that impacts the writing process of the ESL Learners
2. To examine the influence of cultural, linguistic, educational and psychological Factors in the process of drafting cohesive content in second language.
3. To analyse the strategies that students need to be aware of in order to overcome the influence of the above mentioned factors.

## **2. Theoretical Framework of Second Language Writing**

### **2.1 Culture and Second Language Writing**

Second language writing is considered a complex system of socio-cultural and contextual factor and the learners' individual characteristics such as institutional requirements, parental or social expectations, teaching and evaluation procedures, motivation, personality, self-confidence, learners' belief, L2 proficiency and gender (Cheng 2002). Connor (1996) establishes that language and writing are cultural phenomena. As a direct consequence, each language has rhetorical connections unique to it. He also states that linguistic conventions of the first language interfere with writing in the Second Language. Kaplan (1966) analyses nearly 700 L2 stu-

dents composition and find out that native language and cultural impact cause idiosyncratic rhetorical patterns of ESL Writing. In that line, Fox (1994) adds that an individuals, language use is governed by both culture and societal conceptions. Learners manifest different cultural patterns to emphasize their individualism in writing. They express their L1 values and social norms while writing in second language. Shen (1989) echoes that the process of learning to write is not “an isolated classroom activity, but a social and cultural experience. Learners develop a sense of self in their writing to create textual identity.

## **2.2 Vocabulary and Second Language Writing**

Viera (2017) investigates the importance of vocabulary knowledge of a foreign language learners and found that vocabulary knowledge is essential as it provides learners a broader ability to produce well-structured written texts. In relation to that, Ingold (2017) also finds that successful writing depends on selecting appropriate words and using them correctly. Writing necessitates deliberate focus in choosing content and vocabulary with careful thought, discipline and concentration (Grami, 2010). So the learners need to be diligent in regulating their cognition to supply task specific content and diction. They should also have profound knowledge in grammar, vocabulary, conception, rhetoric and other parts of the language (Zhang and Chen, 1989).

Many research studies reveal that past traumatic experiences, negative feedback from teachers, lack of writing competence, time limit, fear of negative evaluation, recent knowledge and linguistic aspects such as grammar and vocabulary knowledge plays a cardinal role in the writing process. They also experience various challenges while attempting tasks such as misuse of certain words, repetition, parallelism, sentence length, lack of variation and misuse of certain cohesive devices (Qaddumi 1995). Learners can overcome these factors by employing appropriate strategies and understating the nature of writing process. From the above analysis, it is inferred that in the process of second language writing learners come across several constraints to finish their writing. They are also in need to be aware of the strategies to employ according to the writing context.

## **2.3 Noticing and Feedback**

Written corrective feedback can be used as a pedagogical tool and it serves as an input for the learners. The input does not become intake until the learners consciously noticing it (Schmidt 2010). Noticing can be defined

as an individual individual's awareness of their attention to something (Schmidt, 1990 & 2010). Ellis (1995) also mentions that 'no noticing, no acquisition'. Mackey (2006) examined that whether there is a relationship between noticing of L2 forms in the written corrective feedback and the learners' output. Noticing their errors and its correction in their notebook help the learners to notice the gap between their current knowledge and the required skill in writing. Schmidt (1990) also opines that noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake. Conscious attention to ones' own errors is prerequisite condition for interlanguage development.

Empirical studies related to how noticing facilitates the learners' writing development is inadequate. The most recent research was conducted by Rahim and Riasati (2011). They carried out a study with four Iranian EFL learners in IELTS classes. They used noticing as a strategy to make reforms in the learners composing process. They concluded that language related noticing contributes to EFL learners' subsequent writing. Soleimani et al. (2008) inquired the role of noticing in output in the acquisition of rhetorical structures of paragraph writing. The participants were given practice to notice the output. The results of the study showed that noticing strategy had significant effect on the learners' acquisition of rhetorical structures of contrast expository writing. Hanaoka (2007) examined the effect of the students' spontaneous noticing on form in a four stage writing task to discover that whether the learners, noticing and attention to linguistic structures affected their immediate and subsequent revisions in writing. Similar result was obtained by Qi and Lapkins (2001). They dealt with the role of noticing through a case study with two Chinese Mandarin ESL learners. They conclude that language related noticing have a direct impact on the learners' written output.

The above discussion highlights that the process of writing encompasses various conscious processes. Conscious attention is needed to increase the writing ability and the learners must actively notice their output to write error free meaningful composition.

## **2.4 Writing Anxiety**

Writing in English is a more challenging task for ESL learners and they have negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, stress, tension and low motivation while attempting the task. Students generally have a belief that writing in English is arduous, challenging, frightening and unrewarding (Li, 1992 and Wu, 2003). Writing anxiety highly inhibits ESL students

writing performance as they have less writing experience inside and outside the classroom. In the second language task environment, if the students perceive task as a difficult and challenging to generate content their self-confidence, self-efficacy and motivation may also decrease (Kirmizi and Kirmizi, 2015) that results in ineffective composition. Riffe and Stacts (1992) opines that writing anxiety consists of both dispositional attitudes existing overtime and context, and situational attitudes specific to particular tasks. Learners express their anxiety in attempting particular writing task with various unique facial expression, tension, and nervousness. Cheng (2004) also identified that some students feel somatic anxiety or physiological reactions to anxiety such as unpleasant feeling, nervousness and tension. Previous research studies (Ellis & Yuan, 2004, Kuiken and Veddler, 2012) also suggested inclusion of learners individual differences in future research.

## **2.5 Composing Anxiety**

Composition anxiety is a situation specific anxiety or tendency to approach or avoid writing (Daly, 1978). It has also been labeled as writing anxiety, writing apprehension and writing block. Bloom (1980), states that nearly 10-25% of individuals experience composing anxiety. Learners with high level of composing anxiety have a tendency to avoid writing class and they feel anxious when forced to write (Dally and Miller, 1975). Composing anxiety impedes learners' interest to initiate writing (Dally, 1978) results in empty pages or writing meaningless content. Aldrich (1982) found that composition anxious students tend to produce meaningless longer sentences in order to hide their lack of competence in writing. Due to its complex nature, students feel writing as an emotional strain and finds it difficult to think in line with the task demand.

## **2.6 Strategic Knowledge**

Strategies are the conscious behaviours of the learners in the process of second language learning (Cohen,2007). It refers to the awareness and application of metacognitive strategies while attempting the task. It involves the learners' ability to select task specific strategies from their repertoire to complete the task effectively. If the learners can find and apply the strategies for learning they will be able to perform successfully. In line with this, Livingston (1997) adds that strategic knowledge encompasses "knowledge about both cognitive and metacognitive strategies as well as conditional knowledge about when and where it is appropriate to use such strategies". Metacognitive strategies are "general skills through

which learners manage, direct, regulate, guide their learning i.e. planning, monitoring and evaluating” (Wenden 1998).

In the context of second language writing, strategic knowledge refers to prewriting, planning, monitoring, aware of one’ own mistakes in writing and trying to avoid the same kind of errors in the next writing. The previous research studies on learning strategies reveal that the use of appropriate strategies is more essential than how frequently they are used (Chamot et al. 1999).

### **3. Methodology**

This study tries to find out the factors that hampers the writing process and provides suggestions to overcome the influence of negative factors to compose meaningful writing. The study adopts qualitative method of research and data were collected from classroom observation and interaction with the students and writing tasks. Eisenhart (2002) explores that case study helps to understand the dynamics present within single setting. Case study approach was adopted as it provides rich, detailed and in-depth information on a specific context (Berg 1998). In this study, the researcher investigates the factors involved in the writing process of a particular students, social setting as it allows the researcher to gather deeper insight of the learners and the context.

#### **3.1 Classroom Observation**

Observations are easy to follow in the classroom and they can be conducted either formally or informally (Oxford and Burry-stock 1995). Classroom observation works with young children whose behavior may serve as a good indicator of their mental activity (Ellis, 1994). In this study also the researcher follows classroom observation to perceive the emotional and physiological factors expressed by the learners in the writing process.

#### **3.2 Participants**

Participants of the study were three female Post graduate students of English from Thiruvalluvar University Constituent Arts and Science College, Kallakurichi, Tamilnadu, India. From these three, one student studied through English medium of instruction and two students from Tamil Medium of instruction. These three students were selected, as they showed their willingness to take this writing practice. Data were collected from them by observation, interaction and from their written draft.

### 3.3 Implementation

Participants were asked to attend the class regularly for two weeks (14 days). The duration of the class was one hour each day. During the one hour, at first, students were motivated to interact with the facilitator regarding their doubts on writing. The next 30 minutes were allotted to compose a paragraph on the topic of their own or the assigned topic. The next 20 minutes were used to correct their draft and to have discussion on their writing. In the first two classes, students were asked to write on any topic of their interest. From the third class, the facilitator had given the topic for writing. Topics were selected with the aim of giving scope to associate their real life experience in the task. Because topics which are related to their personal experience maximize their involvement in writing. Roca and Murphy (2001) also argued that familiarity with the topic minimize the need for heuristic procedures.

### 3.4 Tasks

Prabhu (1987) defines “a task in an activity which helps the learners to get information through some stages and allows teachers to handle and control that process” (p.24). In relation to that, Nunan (1989) explains task is “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. Ellis (2003) provides the salient feature of the task 1. A task can be considered as a work plan 2. In a task, the main focus is on meaning day 3. A task includes everyday processes of language use 4. A task can compromise any of the four language skills 5. A task involves cognitive processes 6. A task has a clear defined communicative result. Based on this, tasks for this study were designed and administered to stimulate the students’ cognitive domain in order to produce a meaningful content. They were instructed to concentrate in drafting meaningful paragraph rather than accuracy in language mechanics.

## 4. Findings and Observations

From the interaction with the students, it is observed that they do not aware of anything about writing except classroom test, assignment and final examination. It was also identified that they have not familiar with the phrase “writing on their own”. The admitted that they have never come across the phrase, for them writing means copying subject content from the text book or notes given by the teacher and writing assignments.

It was also perceived that they never wrote assignments on their own, they were asked to write ten pages on the topic which was marked by their teacher in the given notes or in the guides. They simply copy the content and submit it as their assignment. Though the students have already earned their undergraduate degree in English, they were not able to write three sentences on their own for the given topic. When students do not attempt to convey ideas with their own words and connect their own experiences with new experience they are restrained from having more scope to develop their writing skill.

In the first class, the facilitator asked them to choose the topic on their own, they discussed with the facilitator how to select and frame a topic to write and finally they came with their own topic. The next question, they asked the facilitator, "How to start the writing", after getting guidance and instruction from the facilitator they have started their writing. It was observed from their task that they have written everything that comes into their mind with erroneous sentences. In the following classes, they were trained to select appropriate content for the given topic and encouraged to write cohesive content. In the consecutive tasks, due to the meticulous application of exact strategies they drafted suitable content with limited errors.

#### **4.1 Factors Affecting the Second Language Writing Process**

It was observed that various factors influence the writing process of the students and hinder their development in second language writing. Nunan (1989) discusses that writing is extremely difficult and the learners have to control over various factors in the process to attain mastery. In this study, the identified factors were categorized as Internal Factors, Linguistic Factors, Educational Factors, Physiological Factors and External Factors.



**Table : 1 Factors identified in the students' writing process**

S.No	Factors	Categories	Coping Strategies
1.	Internal Factors	Motivation Anxiety Self-efficacy	1. Choosing task specific vocabulary from their repertoire. 2. Discussing more about the errors committed. 3. Thinking in English 4. Content specific Thinking 5. Outlining 6. Making them understand and to be aware of the difficulties they face in the process of writing 7. Motivating them to read the research papers related to learning difficulties in second language.
2.	External factors	Teachers' expectations - Mother tongue Culture Feedback	
3.	Linguistic Factors	Lack of vocabulary knowledge Discourse knowledge Errors in Language mechanics	
4.	Educational Factors	Age, when they were introduced to second language writing Writing practices in school Syllabus	
5.	Physiological factors	Unpleasant feelings Nervousness Tension Placing their hands in head Hiding their notebook with hand	

#### 4.1.1 Internal Factors and Coping Strategies

Internal Factors are Psycholinguistic factors that impacts the learners' second language development. In this study, it was found that students were in need of motivation to write on their own. So the facilitator, encourages

them to focus on the content not on the grammar. The students admitted that when they found so much errors in their writing, they felt anxious and started thinking about errors. The facilitator instructs them to consciously observe their own errors and try to avoid those errors in their next attempt. She also explains them the importance of errors and how it would be helpful for them to move towards accuracy in second language use. Facilitator encouraged them to increase the self-efficacy to develop their writing competence and reduce their anxiety level. Pajares (2003) study also suggests to enhance students writing self-efficacy to decrease anxiety and develop the quality of their writing. Writing self-efficacy is an individuals' belief in his ability to write successful draft. Bandura (1986) also found that higher writing self-efficacy results in better writing performance. He further proclaims that self-efficacy contributes to students' level of motivation, aspiration, and academic achievement.

#### 4.1.2 External Factors and Coping strategies

Sociolinguistic factors such as mother tongue, culture and teachers' expectations also play a crucial role in the development of second language writing. When the students understand the cultural differences in the target language that results in developing positive attitude towards second language. Students felt more anxious, when they were not able to find the right word in English for their mother tongue equivalent. They exhibit that they can think and frame idea in their mother but constructing those ideas as a cohesive paragraph in English becomes more challenging in all aspects. They concede that they translate each word from their mother tongue to English and sometimes sentence structure too. So they were trained to think in English to make their learning process more facilitative. They were suggested to think in English on anything such as tree, bus, flower while traveling to college or at their home to practice their mind. They shared that while practicing this task, they did not have any fear because they speak for themselves, they can edit and rephrase at any time without any hindrance. They explored that this strategy is more interesting and there is no restriction in selecting the topic.

**Participant 1:** "I first think about classroom but I cannot continue with more sentences so I changed the topic as flower". This gives more idea to me like colour, shape, smell and its use".

**Participant 2:** "first two or three times I speak within myself after that I speak soundly without knowing my sister is also hearing that".

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**Participant 3:** "I feel it helps me to use the words I already know and I speak small, small

Sentences I choose easy topic only. It is easy to use this idea in the class-room writing also. I am now happy".

All the three states that now they could speak, think and write in English with limited errors without any fear. They can easily choose words to speak and write in relation to the context.

Feedback is one of the factors as well as a strategy directly influence the writing development. If the learners perceive feedback as critical and unnecessary it impedes their progress and become reluctant in attempting writing tasks. At the same time, their positive attitude and belief toward teacher and feedback stimulates them to notice their errors and they surely correct it in their consecutive writing. The participants of the study received feedback positively and they were always ready to discuss about their errors. They ask guidance from the researcher on how to rectify it in their next writing. They started to think more about their errors and they noted down the repeated errors and they asked about the reason for the errors. They went back to their previous writing for error reference and consciously avoided same type of errors in their future writing. All the three participants shared commonly that they had never received this type of error correction and always instructed to write without any mistake in their previous education. They registered that through this course only, they realize the importance of errors and felt that it should be notified to the learners to be aware of their deficient part to make learning successful.

#### 4.1.3 Linguistic Factors and Coping Strategies

Linguistic factors such as grammar, vocabulary knowledge and language mechanics are more essential to produce the meaningful content in second language. Chakravarthy and Gautum (2000) also define writing as a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topic and to analyse and classify any background knowledge. In this study, the students thought that they have limited vocabulary knowledge and not able to complete task effectively. In relation to that Thornbury (2002) also states that without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. So, the facilitator induces the learners to be aware of and make use of their vocabulary knowledge and facilitate their working memory in order to apply task specific diction. In order to make them aware of their vocabulary knowledge the facilitator asked them to

write the words they could remember and associate the words with the assigned task. This strategy helps them to choose right word while writing without any hindrance. As a first step, they have written whatever the words they remember related to topic, then they choose the necessary words to draft the content. In the next stage, the researcher encouraged them to write word chunks to facilitate the usage and relationship between words. Participant1 said " I do not know, I know this much English words, now I am confident". In relation to that participant 3 shared, "Now I write simple sentence with the words I know. It is very, very easy for me.

#### **4.1.4 Educational Factors and Coping Strategies**

Learners' previous writing experience had a great impact on their written fluency and their attitude towards writing. The more positive experience will result in selecting appropriate content and language structure with more interest and enthusiasm. In this study, the learners have scant experience in writing due to exam oriented learning in schools and they really lack in basic writing skills. Spack (1997) also confirms that the literary instruction they receive prior to entering college may be inadequate to satisfy the demands they in college level. The content in the syllabus and the method of execution also play crucial role in developing and understanding the writing skill. If the syllabus has the aspects oriented to written communication and promotes thinking, they could have adequate knowledge about what the actual writing entails. In some situations, even in the communicative part also students memorize readymade answers and present it in the examination without any error and scored good marks.

So when they find a different environment or educational setting where they are asked to write with their own discourse, they face challenge in generating content. That creates anxiety and they forget even the known features of language. So, the teachers should consider creating pleasant environment as their prime objective in their process. When the students found the task environment conducive, they put maximum effort to produce more sentences and with organisation. In relation to that, Barnett and Rosen (1999) also observe that when students found positive climate in the writing class, they become active participants, negotiating the meaning of their text with the tutor and collaborating to make the writing as clear and concise as possible. Wu (2003) explains that learners' poor knowledge in content and organization is the reflection of lack of practice in generating ideas and verbalizing these in English.

### 4.1.5 Physiological Factors and Coping Strategies

It is perceived that the students display their difficulties in attempting the task through the physiological factors such as nervousness, placing their hands on the head, hiding their notebook with hand. In the case of participant 3, when she starts to write, she feels nervous and her hands start sweating due to anxiety. She tells “my hand sweats when I do not know what to write and how to start”. In addition, when the facilitator asked, why she places her hands on head, they replied, “automatically my hand go to head when I do not know the correct theme to write. They expressed these indications till the 4th task, when they start their writing with appropriate content, without delay in the 5th task, they complete the task successfully earlier than the previous task. Similarly when they found the task is relevant and related to their personal they shared a smile in their face and generate more sentences without considering errors. The researcher made them realize, there is no grade for this writing class, errors are essential to know their stage of development and this class is conducted to practice their writing skill not for awarding marks. This belief motivates them to come with more sentences without concentrating on errors and increased their self-efficacy, reduces the influence of physiological factors.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Less proficient writers use their L1 as a problem-solving skill and as a strategy when they thought the assigned task was difficult. They collect information in their mother tongue then they proceed with the second language. In the writing task, they have enough time to think compared to speaking so they apply this strategy to the task for which they do not have a fully adequate schema (Hayes, 1996). Similarly, Lay (1982) also identified that learners showed interest to generate ideas in L1 when the task is related to L1 culture. It is observed that the use of L1 is determined by task difficulty and the proficiency of the learners. So the use of L1 can be reduced by providing facilitating writing tasks (Jones and Tetroe, 1987).

In this study, the participants convey that after practicing writing and thinking for four classes, they understood the process they went through while composing. They further said that they first think about the content alone then after spending five to ten minutes for the proceeding ideas they decide to take their pen to write. They have also disclosed that if they felt they could not write more sentences on the selected content, they would go for another possible content which has scope for generating more sen-

tences.

The researcher motivated the learners to read more research papers related to second language learning to understand the difficulties faced by the second language learners in other educational settings and to understand the coping strategies employed by them. After completing each reading, they had a discussion among themselves and with the researcher regarding their understanding. This strategy reduces their anxiety level and increase the confident level, they believe that they can overcome the writing difficulties by practice and using appropriate strategies. If the students realize writing difficulties are natural and universal for second language learners who have limited exposure till tertiary level, they start to think and analyse about their problem in second language writing and look for the remedies. They also make themselves involved in the contexts where they can get exposure to learn the writing skill outside the classroom. Their intrinsic motivation will also be activated and they prefer their mind to receive feedback positively to know more about their lacunae in writing.

Errors committed by the students help the facilitator understand the current proficiency level of the students. When Corder (1981) mentioned about the pedagogical justification of learners' errors, he said, "understanding the nature of errors is necessary before a systematic means of eradicating them...". It can be labeled feedback facilitates the learners to become an independent writer and benefits new schema in their repertoire.

Teachers' feedback on students' writing is one of the main features of process approach to writing. The knowledge of the distinction between error and mistake is fundamental for the teachers to ensure their quality of feedback. Mistakes are the slips of the pen and the learners who make mistake can identify and rectify the mistake. On the other hand errors are systematic; it will occur repeatedly until the learner recognizes and corrects the errors with the help of the feedback provided by teachers, peers or the language trainers. So it can be said that feedback is necessary to promote learning development by knowing the weak aspect and progressing toward that particular part in writing. Because, it influences the learners performance in the consecutive task and helps the learners to self-analyse their stage of development. It assists them to find the strategy they tend to apply to cope with their weakness in writing.

Students apply relevant strategies to complete the task successfully, if they are enabled to choose the content and task specific language structure. In this study, factors impact the writing process were identified and students were trained to use strategies to overcome the influence of these factors. It is identified from observations and interaction with the students, at the end of the course they could draft meaningful content with limited errors in language mechanics. They were enabled to write with organization and apply correct strategies whenever necessary. Further research can be conducted to analyse the type of strategies the learners need to employ implicitly and explicitly. It can also be proceeded with the interrelationship among the writing strategies and how they promote each other in the process of writing.

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