

Manuscript

Title: Relationship between Writing Interest and Writing Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Interest is a motivation variable that has been examined thanks to its influence on learning and achievement. This study investigated the relationship between interest and achievement in the writing class. Three background variables, which are gender, learning shift, and English proficiency, were included into the study. Two hundred and forty-four year-one students participated in this study and each was asked to complete a questionnaire surveying their interest in the writing class as well as interest in journal writing. The results from this study indicated that overall students reported high levels of interest in the writing class and journal writing. There was no difference between male and female students in their interest in the writing class, interest in journal writing, or writing achievement. However, male students in the morning rated higher interest in the writing class than did the evening male students. Moreover, interest in the writing class was a powerful predictor of writing achievement even after controlling for the influential background variable English proficiency.

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INTRODUCTION

Institute of Foreign Language (IFL) is a tertiary institute of Royal University of Phnom Penh that provides BA programs in language learning. The prominent program at IFL is the four-year BA in English program. This program aims to develop students' proficiency in English as well as equip them with such specialization as English teaching, translation, and communication in English. Some examples of English courses at IFL incorporate Core English, Global Studies, Literature Studies, and Writing Skills.

Of all the subjects, the writing subject is assumed to be a boring subject since there are not many learning and teaching activities that can be conducted during class time. This lack of varieties in learning and teaching activities naturally causes boredom to both the students and the lecturers themselves. Moreover, the subject is also considered to be a difficult subject for both the students and lecturers. For the former group, writing tasks are time-consuming as they require a great amount of thinking not only of what to write but also how to write. This makes writing a more demanding subject than the other subjects. The latter group find grading students' writing a huge burden as they also need to spend much of their valuable time on it.

To add to the assumed misery of both the students and lecturers, another writing task, which is journal writing, has been introduced into the subject. The task has definitely increased the already presumed troubling burden on both parties. If this presumption is true, then motivational factors should be a great challenge in this subject for successful teaching and learning to transpire. There has actually been no research into this area in the context at IFL. Therefore, this study would look into an important motivational construct, which is interest, so that the motivational issues can be understood, and possible solutions can be discovered if any problems are happening or likely to happen.

The purpose of this study was to examine students' interest in the writing subject and the journal writing task and their relationship with writing achievement. The study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How do students report their interest in the writing subject and the journal writing task?
2. How do students of both genders in the three learning shifts differ in their interest in the writing subject and the journal writing task?
3. What is the relationship among interest in the writing subject, the journal writing task, and writing achievement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interest

Researchers have categorized interest into two main types: personal and situational. Schraw and Lehman (2001) in his review subdivided personal interest into two main groups (latent and actualized) and situational interest into three main groups (text-based, task-based, and knowledge-based).

Latent interest is described as internal interest that guides individuals' cognitive involvement and that orient individuals, on a long-term basis, toward a particular topic. Latent interest is theorized to contain two sub-components: feeling-related and value-related (Schiefele, 1991, 1999). The feeling-related components, as the name implies, involve positive affect and emotions resulted from particular tasks or activities. This positiveness may lead to high motivation and engagement in individuals. Value-related components refer to interest that exists when individuals see benefits of particular tasks or activities for their long-term goals.

Actualized interest is defined as a type of motivational factor that determines individuals' style of engagement. Schiefele (1991) believes that mastery orientation (the focus on learning) is

related to a high level of actualized interest, while performance orientation (the focus on grades) is associated with low actualized interest.

With regards to situational interest subgroups, text-based interest is aroused by the properties of the information to be learnt, especially reading texts. A number of text-based factors that can arouse situational interest are proposed by Hidi (1990): the unexpectedness of information, character identification, activity level, and structural aspects of the text such as coherence and completeness. Task-based interest involves manipulations that change individuals' goals or that change texts. Task-based interest also involves furnishing individuals with control and autonomy of their learning (Deci & Ryan, 1987). The last type of situational interest is knowledge-based interest. This type of interest involves individuals' background knowledge of a topic to be learnt; in other words, the more background knowledge a student has of a particular task, the more interest in that task that student possesses.

Interest is operationalized, in this study, to cover three aspects: personal interest, perceived usefulness, and further pursuit of the activity. These three characteristics formed the basis of the measurement of interest in this study.

Interest and Achievement

As mentioned earlier, interest affects students' motivation, level of engagement, and engagement styles. This should further influence students' learning and achievement. Literature below provides the case in point.

Hidi (2000) concluded that interest is associated with cognitive functioning, persistence, and affective engagement, all of which contribute to the enhancement of students' attention on tasks, while Schiefele (1991) stated that interest and learning strategies are also related. Interest has also been found to have relationship with goal orientation as Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer,

Carter, and Elliot (2000) found that with high interest, students will be oriented toward mastery, paying attention to their overall learning rather than only on grades.

As collaborated above, interest gives rise to positive features that are conducive to learning and high achievement. This has actually been supported by a number of studies. Gottfried (1985) conducted three studies on 4th-8th graders to examine the significance of interest and found that interest had a positive relationship with achievement as measured by both standardized achievement tests and teacher grades. Other studies later also found similar results of the positive relationship between interest and academic achievement in participants as children and adolescents (e.g., Denissen, Zarrett, and Eccles, 2007; Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Updegraff, Eccles, Barber, & O'Brien, 1996).

There have also been studies of interest and achievement at the college level. Harackiewicz et al. (2000) conducted a longitudinal study on college students to examine the effect of goal orientation and interest on students' learning and achievement in the psychology class. In this study, the researchers found interest in the psychology class to predict students' psychology final grade. Similar results were obtained from studies conducted Harackiewicz and colleagues (e.g., Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, & Elliot, 2002; Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997).

As seen in the review above, there has really been a great deal of research into the relationship between interest and achievement in different grades and subjects. However, the body of literature contains two main gaps. First of all, little attention has been paid to research on interest and achievement in the writing context. Second, there has been no such research in the context of Cambodia, a country in which English is only a foreign language. Consequently, this

study proposed to fill in these voids in the literature and examined the relationship between interest and academic achievement in the writing class at IFL.

METHOD

Setting

In the English program at IFL, writing skills is one of the main subjects provided from years 1-3. Year-one writing curriculum aims to equip students with necessary grammatical knowledge related to writing, and thus students are supposed to learn such lessons as Fragment, Run-on Sentences, Types of Sentences, and so on. At the same time, students are also introduced to the first step in essay writing, and this is paragraph writing, in which students learn how to write topic and concluding sentence(s) in a paragraph, how to write coherent and cohesive paragraphs, and so on. Therefore, besides tasks related to grammar, students in the writing class also learn to write different types of paragraphs. In addition, students are also supposed to practice writing outside class time, too, in such a task as journal writing. Journal writing is supposed to give chance for students to practice writing and improve their fluency in writing. The topics in journal writing can be free or assigned, depending on the teachers.

Participants

Year-one students in the academic year 2011-2012 in the English Department, with a total number of 575 were the target participants in this study. To obtain a controllable size of sample for this study, only 100 students from each shift, which made a total of 300 students, were selected, and then a self-complete questionnaire was sent to each of them through their Core English lecturers in June 2012, a few weeks before they had semester two exams.

The participants were asked to spend about five to ten minutes to complete the questionnaire in class. The researchers believed that asking students to complete the questionnaire would ensure much higher response rate than allowing them to take and complete the questionnaire at home. Moreover, the questionnaire was short and thus the researchers believed that it would not disturb much of the students' study time in class. Furthermore, participating in this research was complete voluntary, and the researchers made sure the lecturers who administered the questionnaire informed students of this.

The questionnaire was composed of two sections. The first section contained seven items asking students to rate their interest in journal writing. The second section elicited students' rating of their interest in the writing subject in eight items. Of the 300 questionnaires handed out, only 244 (83 from the morning shift, 81 from the afternoon, and 80 from the evening) were returned since some students were absent when the questionnaires were administered.

Measures

Measurement of interest adapted from that of Harackiewicz, et al. (2000). Interest in this study covered three aspects: personal interest, perceived usefulness, and further pursuit of the activity. The interest in journal writing was measured with seven items with six-point Likert-type response scales ranging from 1 (Totally Disagree) to 6 (Totally Agree). There was no neutral option. Principal-component analysis revealed the seven items formed only one component with factor loadings ranging from 0.65 to 0.85, eigenvalue = 4.3, and variance = 60.9, which displays the unidimensionality of the construct. Analysis also displayed $\alpha = 0.89$, a high internal reliability.

Interest in journal writing was measured with eight items with six-point Likert-type response scales ranging from 1 (Totally Disagree) to 6 (Totally Agree). There was also no neutral

option. One item (“The writing subject has been a waste of time.”) had to be reversed. Principal-component analysis also revealed only one component of the eight items with factor loadings ranging from 0.48 to 0.81, eigenvalue = 4, and variance = 50.9, and with $\alpha = .85$.

Writing achievement was reflected in students’ semester two scores, ranging from 0-100. These scores were a combination of final exam scores and on-going scores, which were obtained from revision tests, assignment, homework and class participation. All the scores were obtained from the administration with permission from the head of the English Department.

Three background variables, which are gender, learning shift, and students’ English proficiency, were included into the study. Gender and learning shift are categorical variables. Students’ English proficiency was reflected in their scores in the Core English subject, ranging from 0-100, in semester two of the academic year 2011-2012.

FINDINGS

Students’ levels of interest

Students of both genders and from all the three shifts report high interest in the writing subject (M range = 5.06-5.5, SD range = 0.48-0.64). Of all the 244 students, only one (0.4%) reported a mean of less than 3, and 238 students (97.5%) reported a mean of 4 and higher. Students also rated fairly high interest journal writing (M range = 4.76-5.31, SD range = 0.55-0.78). Only five (2%) of the 244 students reported a mean of 3 and less, and 221 students (90.6%) reported a mean of 4 and more.

Two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed there was a significant main effect of learning shift on interest in the writing subject, $F(2, 238) = 3.21, p < 0.05$, and the Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed that students in the morning shift reported a significantly higher interest in

the writing subject than those in the evening shift. There was no significant difference in the other cases.

The same analysis displayed a no significant main effect of gender on interest in the writing subject, $F(1, 238) < .001, p > 0.05$. However, there was a significant interaction effect between learning shift and gender on interest in the writing subject, $F(2, 238) = 5, p < 0.05$. This suggested that gender played a role in the difference found earlier in interest in the writing subject between morning and evening students. Female students from the morning and evening reported a similar level of interest in the writing subject. Nevertheless, male students from the morning shift ($M = 5.51, SD = 0.51$) reported a significant higher interest in the writing subject than those from the evening shift ($M = 5.06, SD = 0.65$).

Another two-way ANOVA revealed a non-significant main effect of either gender, $F(1, 238) = 1.37, p > 0.05$, or learning shift, $F(2, 238) = 1.19, p > 0.05$ on interest in journal writing. This suggested that there was no difference among students in their interest in journal writing.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Interest in the Writing Subject.

Gender	Shift	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Female	Morning	5.18	0.56	42
	Afternoon	5.38	0.48	30
	Evening	5.17	0.53	35
	Total	5.23	0.53	107
Male	Morning	5.51*	0.51	41
	Afternoon	5.16	0.62	51
	Evening	5.06*	0.71	45
	Total	5.23	0.64	137
Total	Morning	5.34	0.56	83
	Afternoon	5.24	0.58	81
	Evening	5.11	0.63	80
	Total	5.23	0.61	244

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2*Means and Standard Deviations of Interest in the Journal Writing.*

Gender	Shift	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Female	Morning	4.76	0.71	42
	Afternoon	4.93	0.77	30
	Evening	4.96	0.58	35
	Total	4.87	0.68	107
Male	Morning	5.30	0.55	41
	Afternoon	4.92	0.73	51
	Evening	4.75	0.91	45
	Total	4.98	0.77	137
Total	Morning	5.03	0.68	83
	Afternoon	4.92	0.74	81
	Evening	4.84	0.78	80
	Total	4.93	0.73	244

Relationship between interest and writing achievement

Preliminary analyses revealed that of all the three background variables, only English proficiency was significantly correlated with writing achievement, $r(242) = 0.77, p < 0.001$.

Therefore, gender and learning shift were discarded from any further analyses, and only English proficiency was maintained.

With regards to the main analyses, Pearson Correlation showed interest in the writing subject and interest in journal writing had a significant positive relationship with one another, $r(242) = 0.75, p < 0.001$. Analysis also revealed a significant positive correlation between interest in the writing subject and writing achievement, $r(242) = 0.3, p < 0.001$. However, interest in journal writing and writing achievement were shown to have no significant relationship with each other.

Table 3*Matrix of Correlation among Dependent Variable, Predictor Variables, and Background Variables.*

	Gender	Proficiency	Journal Interest	Writing Interest
Proficiency	0.04			
Journal Interest	0.07	0.07		
Writing Interest	-	0.22**	0.75***	
Writing Score	0.03	0.77***	0.09	0.3***

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

As the background variable English proficiency was found to correlate with writing achievement, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to find the unique effect of interest in the writing subject on writing achievement, controlling for English proficiency. The multiple regression model with both English proficiency and interest in the writing subject as predictor variables entered at the same time revealed that, controlling for the effect of English proficiency, interest in the writing subject still had a positive significant relationship with writing achievement, $\beta = 0.14$, $t(242) = 3.37$, $p < 0.01$.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

Students' levels of interest

The assumption that students' motivation in the writing class is low might not be justified, especially in the area of interest, inasmuch as the findings above shows that the majority students gave high ratings to their interest in both the writing class and journal writing. This is probably because students fully realize the benefits of writing toward other areas of their study as well toward their future career. Lecturers should enjoy this fact and capitalize on students' interest in the class to make students' learning meaningful. However, because these

results were obtained from descriptive statistics, any generalized implications should be practiced with caution.

Also with regards to students' interest in the writing class, even though students from all the shifts reported high interest, difference was reported between students in the morning and evening shifts. Male students in the evening shift reported lower interest in the writing class than those in the morning, although female students in both shifts reported a similar level of interest. Many more students in the evening are employed than students in the morning. This might affect students' interest in their study in general. Therefore, lecturers and especially the management should be aware of this fact and should find preventive measures to deal with students' interest problems. As students advance to higher year levels, the level of academic difficulty and academic burdens will naturally increase, too. This might instead decrease students' interest in their study, and this might especially true for evening students. Those students might drop out as a result. However, further studies on the level of interest of students over the year levels are needed.

Relationship between interest and achievement

As the findings suggest, interest is an influence factor on achievement. The more interest students have, the more scores they should obtain. This result is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Denissen, Zarrett, and Eccles, 2007; Harackiewicz et al., 1997, 2000, 2002). Moreover, the effect of interest on writing achievement is still evident even the English proficiency is controlled. Therefore, lecturers and management should find ways to maintain and/or improve students in the writing class, so that students can retain and/or enhance their writing achievement. Nevertheless, it has been posited that interest only impose indirect effect on achievement, and thus future research on direct effects should be conducted to expand the

current body of knowledge on the relationship between interest and achievement in the Cambodia's context.

With regards to journal writing, even though students express high interest in journal writing, this interest does not translate into writing achievement. The only importance of journal writing interest is its correlation with interest in the writing class. This means that the more interest students have in journal writing, the more interest they should also have in the writing class, or vice versa. Journal writing definitely adds to the existing burdens of both the lecturers and students, but interest in this task might contribute to the interest of students in the writing class. This might help make students put much effort into their study. Therefore, this result should serve as a point of consideration of whether to continue this writing task.

Limitation

The main limitation of this study was that writing scores were obtained from different lecturers who might have graded students' writing differently. Some lecturers might have been stricter in grading than others. This might have created biases and errors in the writing scores obtained.

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