

Enhancing students' engagement and motivation in writing: The case of primary students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper looks at young ESL writers in Hong Kong and describes an action research project which involved the implementation of a new ESL writing programme designed to enhance students' motivation and engagement by taking more account of the young learners' own socio-cultural context. The study examined both the students' and teacher–researcher's perspectives on the new programme and looked at its impact on students' engagement and motivation and their writing performance. It was found that the new writing programme enhanced students' writing engagement and motivation, but also resulted in lower writing scores for accuracy and organization, especially among the more able students. However, the enthusiastic way that the participants responded to the new programme suggests that encouraging young writers to write about topics of interest and relevance to them and providing them with genuine audiences, can have a liberating and confidence-building effect. The underachieving students benefited most in this respect, while the high-achieving writers were challenged to reconsider their previous writing strategies which had made them successful test-takers rather than flexible and resourceful writers.

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Introduction

There is a growing world-wide trend for children to start learning English at an earlier age at school in many different global contexts (Graddol, 2006), thus creating a very significant group of apprentice writers. Increasingly, there have been more studies focusing on younger ESL writers. However, most of these have looked at minority language writers in mainstream English-medium

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classrooms in the “inner circle” (Kachru, 1985, p. 12) of English-speaking countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada, and Australia (Maguire & Graves, 2001; Toohey, 2000). There has been less exploration of young writers in what has been termed by Kachru as the “outer circle” of English-speaking countries, despite their expanding numbers. This paper will look at young writers in Hong Kong where English plays an important role in various social, educational, and administrative contexts but is also a second language (L2) for the majority of the population.

This study describes an action research project which involved the implementation of a new ESL writing programme for primary five children (aged between 10 and 11) in Hong Kong, designed to enhance students’ motivation and engagement by taking more account of the young learners’ own socio-cultural context through a three-stage programme, focusing on topics ranging from personal to social concerns and moving in terms of purpose from self-reflection to writing designed for publication to a wider audience. The study examines both the students’ and teacher–researcher’s perspectives on the new programme and looks at its impact on writing engagement, motivation, and interest in writing as well as on the overall development of the students’ writing skills.

Writing and motivation in the Hong Kong context

Motivation is an essential element of successful language acquisition and is a dynamic process subject to continuous flux (Dörnyei, 2001). Williams and Burden (1997) suggest that each individual L2 learner’s motivation is influenced by both external factors related to the socio-cultural and contextual background of the learner and internal factors related to the individual learner. Internal factors include the learners’ attitudes towards the activity, its intrinsic interest, and the perceived relevance and value of the activity.

Motivation is also influenced by learners’ sense of agency and feelings of mastery and control over the learning activity and their interest in it. According to Noels (2001), three psychological needs have to be met in order to enhance motivation: “(1) a sense of competency achieved through seeking out and overcoming challenges; (2) autonomy; (3) relatedness—being connected to and esteemed by others belonging to a larger social whole” (p. 54). To increase intrinsic ESL motivation, Oldfather and West (1999) argue that “a sense of self-worth” (p. 16) and “self-determination” (p. 17) are essential, and learners need to be given “ample opportunities for social interaction and self-expression” (p. 16). Richards (1993) also mentions “personal causation,” “interest,” and “enjoyment” as indispensable factors.

When examining motivation in the Hong Kong context and the extent to which these psychological needs are being met, we have to consider the highly complex situation of English in this particular context and the ambiguous role of English in a post-colonial society. Both Bolton and Luke (1999) and Lin (1996) suggest that English plays a negligible role in students’ lives outside a formal learning environment in Hong Kong since motivation to use and learn English has been predominantly driven by extrinsic desires for vocational or socioeconomic advancement. Some of the major reasons suggested by students for learning English include improving their job opportunities or studying in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong or abroad (Fan, 1999; Hoosain, 2005; Lin & Detaramani, 1998).

The “utilitarian approach” to the teaching of English (Lim, 2002, p. 266) prevalent in many Hong Kong classrooms is characterized by “[extensive] practice of [the] grammatical system [...] through uncontextualized sentences” without adequate considerations for meaningfulness (Tongue, 1994, pp. 109–110). In particular, the potential of English as a creative and personally expressive medium has been neglected in the primary classroom, despite some undergoing

changes to the English language curriculum which are aimed at encouraging more exposure to and use of the creative aspects of English through the language arts (Curriculum Development Council, 2005).

This instrumental approach to English can be seen in students' approaches to writing. Fan (1993) looked at the writing strategies used by secondary students in Hong Kong and found that they were greatly influenced by the desire to achieve good grades in examinations. Strategies used included "withholding personal views, focusing on grammatical accuracy rather than ideas and memorizing model compositions" (pp. 74–75). The use of such limited strategies could impact students' motivation to learn to write in English.

It is important to remember that motivation is not fixed and that teachers can work actively to improve students' motivation (Dörnyei, 2001, 2003). One way of enhancing students' motivation and engagement to write is to provide opportunities for them to engage at a more meaningful level with the language through refocusing their writing classes to make them relevant to their social and cultural context as well as designing writing tasks which have meaning and interest to them and offer opportunities for social interaction and self-expression. This is what the new writing programme introduced for this action research project sought to accomplish.

Methodology

Background

The study took place in a very well-established primary (elementary) school in Hong Kong where one of the researchers was teaching. This was an all girls' school and was one of very few primary schools in Hong Kong which used English as the medium of instruction for nearly all subjects. English was, however, a second language for the vast majority of the students in the class, and they were not, on the whole, fluent and confident English language speakers and writers. In writing, most of them showed a heavy reliance on rote memorization of essay types and reformulation of model answers.

The tasks and textbook for the writing programme they were currently undertaking further encouraged this, offering formulaic phrases to use with different essay questions. The tasks (see Fig. 1 below for three examples from the text book) were also far removed from the students' own knowledge, interests, and experiences in terms of topics and audience. From her own

Topic of Writing	Content
T1: A rooster	Describe a rooster using given pictures, phrases, and vocabulary
T2: A visit to an orphanage	Narrate an imagined visit to an orphanage following a sequence of pictures, with phrases and vocabulary supplied
T3: A letter to a Friend	Write a reply letter to an imaginary friend making suggestions to help her improve her English Students took on the pseudo-name of "Yoon Lin" and were given phrases and vocabulary

Fig. 1. The traditional writing programme.

observations, the teacher–researcher felt that the tasks and the textbook encouraged her students to view writing as a series of meaningless display tasks since they were restricted by the prescribed content and were detached from what they wrote about. The tasks lacked relevance as they were far removed from the students’ life experiences, and students were not developing their own “voice” (Ivanič, 1998) or developing a sense of self- and personal identity through their writing activities. She also felt that the traditional programme encouraged her to focus on the students’ products as displays of language rather than on the process of writing and the expression of meaning in her teaching of writing.

In an attempt to address these concerns, an action research project was planned. It was hoped that this could bring benefits to both the teacher–researcher and the students by providing them with new understandings that could help change the status quo from both a teaching and a learning perspective (Creswell, 2002, p. 619). The main participants were the teacher–researcher and her 40 students, aged between 10 and 11, from one primary five class. Intervention spanned over a 3-month period, with the introduction of a new writing programme designed to contrast with the traditional writing approach adopted in writing classes in the whole school. Based on the collected data, comparisons were made between the two programmes to gauge the effects of the new programme on (1) students’ motivation and engagement in writing and (2) its impact on the quality of the students’ writing.

The traditional and the new writing programmes

The traditional writing programme spanned over 6 weeks. The school allocated five lessons a week for general English, including one double lesson every 2 weeks for writing, with one writing topic being covered in each double lesson. Figure 1, as already noted, shows the three writing topics and tasks covered in the traditional programme. These were all taken from the composition textbook currently in use in the school, and all three topics had been included in the syllabus for several years. Together, they served as a basis of comparison for gauging the impact of the “new” writing programme introduced immediately afterwards. The traditional lessons followed the typical pattern used by teachers in the school, with a teacher–led introduction to the topic including work on vocabulary and grammatical structures needed to complete the task. Students then wrote their compositions within a time limit and passed them to the teacher for correction and comments. A sequence of pictures was provided together with phrases and words which meant that students were very restricted in terms of possible responses to the task. (In fact, many of the students’ compositions produced from these outputs were extremely similar to one another.) No audience was specified, except for the imaginary “friend” in task 3.

The next 6 weeks were taken up with the new writing programme, shown in Figure 2. This aimed at making the writing tasks more relevant to students by introducing topics related to their lives and social world and by providing a real audience and a real purpose for writing. The topics started with the students’ concrete experiences and moved towards more abstract concepts as suggested by Moffett (1968). The programme also introduced the concept of writing for a real audience, with the audience being gradually widened from the students’ classmates, to their friends and family, and finally to the general public.

The teacher–researcher started each topic in the new programme by introducing and exploring it with the students through class discussion and through sharing her own ideas and writing. This served to demonstrate the process of writing, to give the students the experience of being an audience as well as writers, to help them get the sense that this was a collaborative endeavour, and to provide examples of good writing.

Topic of writing	New aspects to encourage engagement and motivation to write	
	In-class	Post-class
N1: My most memorable gift/photo	(a) exploring an object students brought from home; recounting the related life experiences unique to them (b) pre-writing discussion with classmates	Students' writing put into 4 booklets for in-class sharing and written comments exchange
N2: Letter to my _____	(a) exploring a real life relationship determined by students (b) demonstration through reading a genuine letter exchange between two of their teachers (c) freedom in content development (d) pre-writing discussion with classmates	Students encouraged to send their revised letters (after being marked and commented by the teacher) to the intended recipient if they wished to
N3: What I like and don't like about my school	(a) exploring their feelings and views on school life - social relationships in a community (b) freedom in content development	Posting of students' writing to <i>Young Post</i> newspaper to be published for a wider audience

Fig. 2. The new writing programme.

The lessons included pre-writing, timed writing, and post-writing activities. For example, for topic N1, students were asked to bring an object or photograph from home which was important to them and to be prepared to share their feelings about it with the class. The teacher started the lesson by showing a photograph and reading her own writing, then discussing its personal importance to her and the memories it invoked. Students were very interested to hear about her experiences, and she then gave them an opportunity to ask her questions about it. Students then enthusiastically shared their experiences of their own object or photograph in peer groups before doing their own writing using a series of questions as a guide. As a post-writing activity, after the teacher had read and commented on the students' writing, these pieces were revised and "published" in booklets which were put on display in class, and students were encouraged to read and write comments on each other's writing in their free time.

The other topics followed similar patterns, and thus the new programme tried to make strong connections between writing and the students' own experiences, while encouraging sharing between teacher and students and among the students themselves. The overarching aim was to make the whole writing experience more collaborative, meaningful, purposeful, and motivating for the students.

Data collection and analysis

The study was fundamentally heuristic and qualitative in its methods of data collection and analysis, aiming to capture "how human situations, experiences, and behaviours construct realities" (Burns, 1999, p. 28). The teacher functioned as the insider-researcher looking into "specific socio-cultural contexts in order to understand how particular motivational goals and states arise and are sustained" (Ng & Renshaw, 2003, p. 503). With the advantage of an in-depth understanding of the classroom context gained through the past 6 years of immersion in the setting, insights and knowledge that were inaccessible to an outside researcher could be drawn on. To systematically record these insights, a teacher-researcher's journal was kept throughout the research.

Focus groups were used as a data collection tool based on the principle of “maximum variation” in sampling (Merriam, 1998, p. 62). Since this was a mixed-ability class, in order to gauge how the programme affected the range of student ability, nine students were selected to participate in the focus groups in order to represent the varying levels of English language achievement. Based on scores from English tests taken at the beginning of the year, and also their academic profiles throughout their primary careers, three students were selected and placed in each of the high-, medium-, and low-achieving groups. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted in Cantonese, which was the first language for all the students. These interviews ranged from about 20 to 30 minutes each and were carried out with each of the focus groups. The first round of the interviews took place immediately after the traditional writing programme, and the second after the new programme. The interviews focused on students’ feelings about writing in general and their perceptions and preferences regarding the topics and procedures used in the two programmes. A list of the interview prompts is included in [Appendix A](#).

The entire class was asked to write a log entry after each of the six writing lessons in both programmes, reflecting on their feelings about the different lessons. To help students to complete the task, a guide was given before they first wrote an entry. They were free to choose between writing their logs in Chinese or English, but all chose to write in English. In addition, all students in the class were asked to complete a short questionnaire after each of the six lessons (see [Appendix B](#)), which investigated their feelings and perceptions about the two programmes in general and the specific lessons.

An emergent analysis was then carried out on the interview data and focus students’ log entries. Categories were constructed by identifying recurring patterns that centred around the impact that the two approaches had on students’ motivation and engagement with their writing. The data were then subjected to further cycles of analysis so that tentative findings could be “substantiated, revised, and reconfigured” (Merriam, 1998, p. 181).

All writing done by the focus group students was also collected. All these writing tasks in both programmes were completed in 35 minutes in class. A time limit may appear to be in conflict with the aims of the new programme, but this was an aspect of the school-wide English language writing programme which could not be altered by the teacher–researcher, and it did have the advantage of making comparisons between writing in the new and old programmes more valid.

To assess the writing, a scoring sheet adapted from Arnold (1991) and Tompkins (2004) was used (see [Appendix C](#)). Tompkins’ and Arnold’s assessment sheets are designed mainly for native-speaking classrooms. However, they do both focus on younger students’ writing, and their fundamental aims and process-oriented philosophies were very much in line with the aims of this programme. The sheet focused on the three broad categories of Content, Organization, and Language. Language accuracy was felt to be an important dimension to be considered in the evaluation of the programme in this particular writing context since accuracy was highly valued by both teachers and students. Hong Kong is a very exam-orientated society, and good English is seen as a key to a successful future, with success largely being measured by improved examination scores, and this has had a major influence on the way English is taught in Hong Kong (Evans, 1996). This examination culture influences students as well as teachers, and even primary students expect their writing classes to help prepare them for examinations by focusing on accuracy as well as content and organization.

All the writing was double marked by another rater, a colleague in the same school, and any differences in assessment were discussed until an agreement was reached. Scores from the traditional and new approaches were then compared. Word counts of all compositions produced in the six lessons were also carried out.

Findings

Students' motivation and engagement when writing

Both researchers believed that the topics on the traditional programme were outdated and unrelated to the students' lives, so it was interesting for us to see that these young writers made spontaneous and quite strenuous attempts to relate *all* writing topics, both traditional and new, to their past and future life experiences. One student explained in an interview how interested and involved she was in the "traditional topic" *A visit to an orphanage*:

The orphans have lost their parents and are therefore really miserable. ... I had a lot of sympathy for [orphans she visited in the past]. So I know more about them and was able to write from the bottom of my heart.

Before writing, another linked the topic to a future school event:

This Saturday some children from Oxfam will be coming to our school to have a Christmas party. We're going to play games and eat some food with them. It'll be like visiting an orphanage.

Another said her memories had helped her write on the topic *Describe a rooster*:

When I recalled that experience [of seeing roosters at her grandmother's house in mainland China] I remembered how they looked like and was able to write about their appearance.

In their log books, eight of the nine focus group students mentioned they liked the traditional topic *A letter to a friend*, even though it involved an imagined friend and an artificial situation. Five of them explained that they could link it to their past experiences of writing letters and emails to real people. This ability to relate supposedly non-relevant topics to their own experiences was unexpected but interesting as it demonstrates very vividly just how important it is for young writers to be able to make connections between themselves and their writing topics.

With the new programme, students continued to make connections between their lives and the topics, but now the connections were more straightforward and less forced and related to the everyday experiences students had, as these extracts from the student interviews illustrate:

I liked the one about school (N2) most because I've talked to Jo [her friend] before in primary four comparing the two school buildings.

I liked the one about school. ... During assembly Mrs Wong [the principal] talked about rebuilding of the new school complex. ...

I like to write about my favourites [N1 My most memorable gift] because with your favourite things, at least you know more. I can express how it looks, who gave it to me, and why I like it so much.

As Table 1 shows, the questionnaire results suggested that engagement with writing in both programmes was high, but there were some gains with the new programme, including a 9% increase in agreement with the statement "The things I've written are very important." There was

Table 1
Students' engagement with writing over the two programmes (N = 120 responses)

Statement	Traditional programme (N = 112)		New programme (N = 114)	
	Strongly agree/agree	Strongly disagree/disagree	Strongly agree/agree	Strongly disagree/disagree
I like the composition topic	90 80%	22 20%	98 86%	16 14%
The things I've written are very important	52 46%	60 54%	63 55%	51 45%
I try to write the least that I can	28 25%	84 75%	21 18%	93 82%
I didn't enjoy writing on the topic	30 27%	82 73%	17 15%	97 85%

Table 2
Average word counts and range of word counts for all compositions by all students in class

	Traditional programme			New programme		
	T1	T2	T3	N1	N2	N3
Average word counts	96	132	108	138	154	159
Range in class	71–133	86–201	81–182	92–248	108–248	112–300
Average for programme	112 words			150 words		

also a decrease of 12% in agreement with the statement “I didn't enjoy writing” after adopting the new approach.

Word count from the six lessons under observation could also be considered as evidence of the students' greater engagement with writing as well as greater fluency. Table 2 shows that the students wrote considerably more words in the same 35-minute writing time in the new writing programme than in the traditional programme. On average, the length of the compositions increased by 34%, from 112 to 150 words. The increase was especially noticeable in the last two lessons of the new programme. Of course it could be argued that the increased word counts might also be partly the result of the cumulative effects of the two writing programmes, but it is interesting to note that the second task for the traditional programme showed a marked increase in the word count, which dropped again for the third topic. The topic of the second task, *A visit to an orphanage*, was one which the journals and interviews showed to have engaged nearly all the students' interest contrary to our expectations.

Increased opportunities for self-expression

Another positive feature of the students' reaction to the new writing programme was that they saw more opportunities to voice their own thoughts and feelings. Table 3 suggests that students believed they had stronger feelings and felt they had more opportunities for self-expression with the new approach to writing.

This finding was backed up by the interviews. One of the students in the middle group, Heidi, talked extensively about her need to express her own feelings and the way that the traditional programme had constrained her:

Table 3
Opportunities for self-expression

Statement	Traditional programme (N = 112 responses)		New programme (N = 114 responses)	
	Strongly agree/agree	Strongly disagree/disagree	Strongly agree/agree	Strongly disagree/disagree
I had strong feelings when I was writing	55 49%	57 51%	70 61%	44 39%
I have a lot of things deep in my heart that I want to write about	40 36%	72 64%	60 53%	54 47%

Heidi: When I thought of something, I couldn't put it into the composition. I had to use all those vocabularies provided. So it was just like copying, copying and copying.

The students were aware of the potential for creativity and self-expression in their writing, and viewed the freedom to explore individual thoughts and emotions as central to writing:

Sindy: Composition lessons give us some power to create. You can make use of the words to express whatever you want to write. For instance, your feelings like "I feel very happy" or feelings of nervousness. . .

One student, Judy, recalled a previous writing experience when this creativity was stifled not by the topic or task prescriptions, but by the teacher appropriating the essay when marking it:

Judy: I used [my private language] as a secret code for something. But when the teacher marked it, she re-wrote everything as if the relationship [between my friend and me] was all messed up; as if the composition was a different one from what I had in mind.

The impact on the students' writing quality

In order to gauge the impact of the two programmes on the quality of the students' writing, the final piece of writing done by the nine focus group students on both writing programmes was marked by one of the researchers and a colleague with the raw scores converted to percentages. These were compared across the two programmes, with the results shown in Table 4.

The table shows that scores for organization fell for all the focus group students. One explanation may be the contrast between the demands made by the new programme and the

Table 4
Changes in scores of focus students' writing after the new writing programme

	High-achieving group (%)	Medium-achieving group (%)	Low-achieving group (%)
Content	-7	+2	+27
Organization	-9	-15	-1
Language	-13	+2	+7

Table 5

Average scores over the programmes for the high- and low-achieving students in percentages

	Traditional programme			New programme		
	Content (%)	Organisation (%)	Language (%)	Content (%)	Organisation (%)	Language (%)
High-achieving students						
Eva	95	98	96	82	83	82
Sylvia	82	90	86	83	80	76
Elaine	97	87	90	87	90	80
Low-achieving students						
Sally	55	67	64	75	60	68
Sindy	55	63	60	80	73	72
Judy	65	60	66	68	57	62

traditional programme, where the vocabulary and pictures were provided and ideas were already sequenced. The new programme involved forming sentences, paragraphing, grouping, and sequencing original ideas which would be more challenging to the students.

Another interesting aspect of Table 4 is the contrast between the high- and low-achieving groups, especially in the areas of both content and language. The low-achieving group showed mostly gains, while the scores of the high achievers declined in some areas.

Table 5 compares how each of the high- and low-achieving students in the focus groups performed on the traditional and new programmes in the three areas of content, organisation, and language.

While it could be commented that the weaker students have further to go and therefore are likely to improve more, the higher scores of both Sindy and Sally are very striking, especially in terms of content. The lower scores for individual high-achieving students in all three areas are also worth noting, and will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Word counts differences: a comparison

The third traditional lesson (T3) and the second new lesson (N2) provide another interesting comparison between the high- and low-achieving groups. Both required the students to write a letter, the main difference being that T3 involved imagined identities of the writer and audience. The students pretended they were Yoon Lin writing a reply letter to Amy in T3, whereas in N2 they wrote a real letter expressing genuine thoughts to someone special to them in their family or school. A comparison of the word counts of the high-achieving group and low-achieving group can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6 shows that the high-achieving group varied in their response to the new programme. While Eva increased her word count by almost 90%, Sylvia actually wrote less, and Elaine wrote only 14% more words. On the other hand, the low-achieving students all wrote considerably more for the new programme. It seemed that the combination of a real audience and the opportunity of genuine self-expression had a greater impact on the low-achieving students than on the high-achieving students.

These interesting contrasts between the high-achieving and low-achieving groups prompted us to further investigate the data to try to uncover factors which might explain the differences. In the next part of this paper, we will look more closely at this by first exploring the different reactions of the two groups to the challenges presented by a wider audience.

Table 6
Word counts for two letter writing tasks

	Traditional task T3 (a letter to a friend)	New task N2 (a letter to my_)	Increase/decrease (%)
High-achieving students			
Eva	131	248	+89
Sylvia	182	153	–16
Elaine	109	124	+14
Low-achieving students			
Sally	88	159	+81
Sindy	104	174	+67
Judy	99	135	+36

Challenges presented by writing for a wider audience

Interviews and comments in their log books suggested that the high achievers were particularly concerned about face and felt more pressured and threatened when asked to write for a wider audience due to the increased potential for criticism brought about by writing for a real audience. Sylvia, one of the high achievers, voiced such a concern during an interview:

I'm afraid that people may see the compositions in the *Young Post* [a weekly magazine for young people published in the local English language newspaper] because many people are looking at them. . . like my sister is much older. . . she also reads it. And for "My most memorable gift," when I look at my classmates' comments [in the book for written comments] during recess, I noticed that they seldom give good comments but mostly pick on the mistakes.

Interviews with the low-achieving group suggested that they also worried about the increased threat to face brought about by exposure to a wider and potentially more critical audience, but were able to view it more positively, as seen in the following observation made by Sindy, one of the low-achieving students:

When you know people are reading your work, you will try your very best so as not to show things that are incorrect to classmates. It's like you don't want your classmates to look down on you and you'll do your best.

Rather than seeing the challenge as face-threatening as with the high achievers, they saw the wider audience as helping them to enlarge their scope of participation in the community. Another member of the low-achieving group, Sally, had the following opinion:

. . .when others give me comments, we can discuss which things are correct and which are not. . . I think sending to *Young Post* is better. As that [composition topic] was about our school, we could let a lot of people learn about our school.

Personal involvement increases motivation—the case of Sally

A detailed investigation into Sally's case helps to illustrate how the low-achieving group's engagement with writing increased during the new programme. In T2, *A visit to an orphanage*,

Sally wrote 132 words, an increase of 50% from her previous writing task. The interview data pointed to one cause of this unexpected engagement with the writing topic. In her diary and interviews, she expressed sympathy and emotional attachment to the orphans partly because of her past experiences of meeting disadvantaged children. In her case, motivation to write could be linked to deep personal involvement with the topic.

In her earliest interview conducted after the traditional lessons, Sally said that she didn't like compositions because she "[didn't] like to have to use [her] brain to think about so many things." She went on to explain her preference for guided composition:

I think when words are given – almost like rearranging words into sentences – then it is better.

Considering this, it was surprising that she responded well to the new programme and wrote 159 words and 214 words, respectively, for the last two tasks. *A letter to my_(N2)* and *What I like and don't like about my school (N3)* required her to generate her own words and ideas, rather than "rearranging words into sentences," yet she was able to write more for both tasks. Her second interview indicated that she had changed her perspective about writing, viewing it more as a creative endeavor.

...it's better for [the teacher] to give us the guiding questions so that we can really think what we want to write. But when you give us the composition book, we have to follow strictly the words given and also write according to the pictures. But when you give us those sheets, we can create and think on our own.

She also revealed in the same interview why she liked *A letter to my brother*:

My favourite is *A letter to my brother* because if I tell him [what was in the letter] face-to-face, it'll be too embarrassing. But if you write it in a letter for him, then you can tell all you want to tell, so that he can understand.

Sally's case suggests that a programme that provides space for personal involvement and a chance to be creative could be especially motivating for students who have little confidence in their ability to write their own thoughts and ideas. On the other hand, it may have been the case that this freedom was more threatening to the high achievers, who were used to succeeding within known and comfortable boundaries and perhaps felt they had more to lose.

Self-expression takes priority—the case of Eva

Besides increased pressure from a widened audience, other factors could also help to explain the impact of the new programme on the high achievers' writing performance. The case study of Eva, one of the high-achieving students, revealed that involvement with a topic could result in problems with the relevance of the content and might also lead to drops in accuracy.

Eva was a quiet girl who seemed to prefer expressing herself through writing rather than speaking and eagerly seized the opportunities offered to do this. The number of words she wrote increased considerably in the new programme. In the first two lessons, she wrote more than 240 words in the 35 minutes given; and in the last lesson, she wrote 214 words. However, her scores for her writing actually declined during the new programme, in terms of both content and language accuracy. A close look at her writing revealed that she was marked down

in terms of content, as her writing was judged by both markers as being off-topic. In lesson N1 for example, the task specifically asked students to write about an object or photograph brought from home and their life experiences related to that object (see Fig. 2). Although Eva started with a photograph showing herself sitting happily on a bicycle, she actually wrote about a totally unrelated incident. One possible explanation is that she became so engrossed in telling a story which was important to her that she forgot about the task requirements to write about the photograph.

In addition, her language accuracy scores fell during the new programme, perhaps due to her focus on her message rather than the language. In her composition for N2, Eva expressed her regard for her class teacher. Her writing revealed deep personal involvement and suggested that she valued the opportunity to express her feelings. However, she failed to notice many minor language problems in the writing. Errors such as “you really *is* my favourite teacher” were quite common and went unnoticed by her. The teacher–researcher was surprised by this drop in her accuracy, knowing that her previous writing during the school year had not exhibited so many of these types of errors. While this would not seem important when set against the evidence of her increased engagement and motivation, in the Hong Kong educational context, a drop in accuracy could be regarded by teachers and students as a potential problem with the new programme.

Discussion

Although some of the findings of the study were quite unexpected, they were considered by the researchers to provide support for incorporating writing topics based on these young students’ life experiences into their classes and for giving them a stronger sense of purpose and engagement by providing a wider and more genuine audience than just their teacher.

Giving the students more autonomy in what they wrote about may have been threatening to those who were already used to being very successful within known parameters, but it had the effect of increasing students’ motivation and engagement and had a particularly noticeable impact on the underachieving students, resulting in noticeably longer pieces of writing and better content. One possible explanation for this is that these students felt able to succeed more in a setting where content and meaning were given priority over form. Their writing was valued for its message rather than seen as a way of demonstrating their mastery of a “set of decontextualised skills” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 59).

On the other hand, the high-achieving students were used to succeeding and writing “to order” for examinations. The drop in language accuracy found in many of the students’ writing might be particularly evident for these students because the removal of a form of language scaffolding they knew how to manipulate represented a threat to them. In addition, the task requirements were more demanding since, in the new programme, they were trying to express their real thoughts and feelings, and sometimes it appeared that the desire to communicate these outran the language resources they had. The teacher–researcher noted that there were more expressions in their essays in the new programme which were direct and inappropriate translations from Chinese to English. There were also a number of occasions during the classes in the new programme when students asked for direct translation of a phrase or sentence from Chinese to English while writing. This was not observed in the traditional class. It seems that giving students real topics where they had real information and feelings to communicate taxed their second language resources to the maximum and thus resulted in less accurate language.

This does not mean that the high-achieving group did not benefit from the programme in terms of language development. In the longer term, the genuine desire and need to communicate real messages might have helped the students to acquire more vocabulary and a wider range of structures. Arnold (1991, p. 113) suggests that genuine communication is vital for grammar learning: “. . . it is essential to connect students with their potential to make meaning. . . if they lose touch with their own potential, they will never generate their own tacit understanding of how language functions.” A study over a longer duration might clarify whether students were actually “making mistakes and experimenting” and whether the process was in fact “evidence of learning rather than being detrimental to learning” (Brewster, 1994, p. 5). The high-achieving students may have been producing less accurate language, but they were observed to be engaged and motivated when writing and had a real message to convey. Ultimately, they were receiving better preparation for authentic writing in the real world than they were when engaging with the restricted tasks of the old programme.

Implications and conclusions

The study was an action research project, and, as such, we were more interested in examining the impact of the new programme and students’ responses to it than in finding out whether it was “better” than the traditional one. We were seeking to explore rather than explain. For us, the findings suggest that the new programme increased students’ engagement and motivation, and that the benefits were especially evident for low-achieving writers. It appears that these particular writers benefited most from the new programme and responded enthusiastically to writing which focused more on their ideas and less on their grammatical performance. On the other hand, the more proficient writers were challenged to rethink their previous writing strategies which had made them successful “test-takers” rather than “writers” (Clark, 2003). While this may have resulted in less accurate writing in the short term, in the longer term it could be beneficial since it would help them to become more flexible writers, able to respond to different writing scenarios (Richards, 2002, p. 24). The enthusiastic way that most of these young writers responded to the new programme suggests allowing student writers to write about topics of interest and relevance to them, with a real rather than imagined audience, can have a liberating and confidence-building effect on them that more than compensates for any short-term declines in accuracy.

Although this study showed benefits in terms of increased motivation and engagement, in general the students’ language accuracy and organization scores fell. Students may have felt challenged by the removal of the sequence of pictures and provision of phrases and words which guided and supported them in the writing process in the traditional programme. Therefore, similar future projects could provide more scaffolding to help students to organize their texts and improve their language accuracy. While it is important to avoid restrictive guidelines like those of the traditional programme, it appears that these young writers could have benefited from more input and familiarization tasks (Hyland, 2003, p. 125) which focused on language and text organization. In addition, to remove the threat to face felt by some of the students, the audience could be made less daunting. Writing for the class bulletin board could provide a starting audience, gradually widening to include other classes, the school, and then the wider community.

This article reports on a small-scale study in one specific context, lasting for a period of only three months. Further research might examine student writing development over a greater period of time and in a variety of different contexts. An ethnographic study for a longer period of time

could uncover richer detail and better reveal the subtleties of change among students at deeper levels. Since motivation to learn a second language is not a static state but an on-going process, research which focuses on how similar programmes impact on students' engagement and motivation to write over a longer period would be very valuable.

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Appendix A. Schedule for interviews with students

Warm up questions (both programmes):

- Do you enjoy writing in general? Why?
- What do you think are the main purposes of learning to write?
- What differences do you find between writing in English and Chinese?
- What kinds of topics do you like to write about?
- What topics did you find the most difficult/easiest? Why?

After the traditional programme

1. How did you feel about these composition topics?
2. Did the words and pictures which I gave you help you or hinder you? Why?
3. In these lessons you knew I would be the only person looking at your compositions. Is that a good thing or not?
4. Every time I looked at your composition I used a red pen to mark the good points and the problems. Did you find that helpful to develop your writing?

After the new programme:

5. How did you feel about these composition topics? Compare them with the topics from the other lessons.
6. Did the guiding questions I gave you help you or hinder you? Why?
7. In these lessons you knew who your audience was. Did that help or hinder you?
8. Which audience did you like to write for the most and the least? Why?
9. How did you feel about the pre-writing and post-writing activities (peer discussion, etc.)?
10. I was still using a red pen to mark the good points and the problems. Did you find that helpful to develop your writing?

Both programmes:

- Out of the three topics which did you like to write about the most (least) Why?
- Take a good look at your compositions. Tell me any other thoughts/feelings you had during or after the lessons.

Appendix B. Student questionnaire

Composition Topic: _____

Date: _____

Circle the most suitable number from 1 to 4. (e.g. “1” for strongly agree and “4” for strongly disagree)

In this composition lesson...

	YES		NO	
	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
1. I like the composition topic.	1	2	3	4
2. The things I've written are very important.	1	2	3	4
3. I have strong feelings when I was writing.	1	2	3	4
4. I try to write the least that I can.	1	2	3	4
5. I think more about my own feelings.	1	2	3	4
6. I learn more about myself.	1	2	3	4
7. I learn a lot of new things about the world around me.	1	2	3	4
8. I am telling people something important about the world around me.	1	2	3	4
9. I didn't enjoy writing on the topic.	1	2	3	4
10. I have a lot of things deep in my heart that I want to write about.				

Appendix C. Analytic scoring sheet for students' compositions

(adapted from Arnold, R. 1991¹, p.40-45 and Tompkins, Gail, E., 2004², p.171)

Composition Topic: _____ Student
 Code: _____

Please ✓ the most suitable box for each item.

	Excellent 5	Good 4	Average 3	Below Ave. 2	Poor 1
A. Content					
1. Ideas are interesting.					
2. Ideas are well developed.					
3. Ideas are original and creative.					
4. Audience and purpose(s) are considered.					
B. Organization					
1. Appropriate paragraphing is used.					
2. Ideas are logically presented.					
3. Connectives are appropriately used.					
C. Language					
1. There is good choice of vocabulary.					
2. There is a variety of phrase and sentence patterns.					
3. Different tenses are correctly used.					
4. Spelling and punctuation are correct.					
5. Other aspects of language are appropriately used. (articles, pronouns, prepositions, agreement, etc.)					

D. Other comments:¹ *Writing development: Magic in the brain*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press² *Teaching writing: Balancing process and product*, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.

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