

Teaching strategies that foster learning motivation in EFL writing classes: A Self- Determination Theory Approach

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Abstract

In tertiary education, writing is an essential aspect of learning a second or foreign language and is frequently perceived as a challenging skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Motivation plays a significant role in shaping both teaching and learning processes within EFL classrooms. Using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the theoretical framework, a seven-week writing program was designed and implemented among ten second-year Chinese English major students. Data were collected through qualitative reflective journals and interviews. The findings indicate that writing activities aligned with SDT can foster positive writing experiences. Additionally, the findings highlight the need to prioritise teacher-student relatedness building, which is an overlooked motivator in the Chinese educational context. This study offers practical pedagogical strategies for writing teachers in their instructional practices.

1 Introduction

When embarking on the journey of acquiring a second language (L2), writing plays a pivotal role in the language acquisition process. Nevertheless, learning to write is seen by many students as “not their favourite, and possibly their most dreaded, part of college” (Townsend, 2014, p. 1). It is a rather daunting activity within the L2 learning experience for many students, and this perception can impact their motivation to learn and improve in their L2.

Research confirms that writing is a difficult part of English language learning for EFL students (see for example Amalia, 2025; Bulqiyah et al., 2021), more so than writing in the mother tongue. In the Chinese context, there are numerous studies that report the difficulties Chinese students experience in English academic writing. For example, Qin (2009) reported university undergraduate students throughout China generally feel that English compositions are difficult to write and that it is difficult to improve their writing ability despite repeated practice. Bian and Wang (2016) investigated the rhetorical difficulties faced by Chinese EFL undergraduate academic writers. They found that both writing teachers and students shared perceptions of culturally embedded beliefs that writing is mainly for exams, as well as genre-specific struggles in EFL academic writing. They emphasised improved teacher-student communication to motivate students and address these writing challenges. Zhilong (2018) pointed out that Chinese students are “often able to recognise grammar mistakes but have low academic writing proficiency and cannot write acceptable English compositions” (p. 20). Difficulties and challenges in writing can lead to feelings of frustration and diminished motivation (Al-Gharabally, 2015). Therefore, motivation in learning L2 writing is something that EFL teachers need to take seriously in their teaching.

The significance of motivation in writing reflects the first author’s own experience as an English teacher in a university in mainland China and noticing students’ lack of interest in writing class and reluctance to apply themselves to learning writing skills. When faced with a writing task, students often felt highly anxious and lost for ideas. After-class writing assignments would be avoided until the last minute and were usually very perfunctory. Few students were willing to take the time required out of class to think

and write in English. In casual conversations, students admitted that writing classes create feelings of resistance and frustration in their daily study. This anecdotal evidence suggests that students face a number of problems with EFL writing which both contribute to and are reflective of a lack of motivation.

The study reported in this article explored motivation issues related to EFL writing in the context of EFL writing classes in China. The focus was learning experiences that influence English writing motivation amongst Chinese EFL learner; their features and how they influence motivation in English writing classes. Self Determination Theory (SDT) was used to identify and understand how language learning experiences and strategies can address issues of motivation. Selected language learning experiences were trialled with a small group of Chinese tertiary EFL students and their responses from reflective journals and interview data were analysed to understand the influence on motivation.

2 Understanding learning motivation from Self-Determination Theory perspective

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a psychological theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000), that seeks to explain human motivation. A sub-theory of SDT is Basic Psychological Needs (BPNs) that focuses on three universal psychological needs that drive human behaviour and well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). SDT proposes that people are naturally motivated to engage in activities that provide opportunities for choice, growth, and connection with others. It has been applied in diverse areas, such as education, sport, and health, to understand and enhance intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Ryan and Deci describe the BPNs are described as “nutrients that are essential for growth, integrity, and well-being” (2017, p. 10). They suggest that the BPNs are innate and universal, and support for these needs “tends to enhance autonomous motivation, leading to better learning and performance and more positive affective experiences” (Deci & Ryan, 2016, p. 17).

Autonomy is the need to “self-regulate one’s experiences and actions” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10); It refers to the innate need to feel in control of one's own actions and choices. This involves a sense of volition, the ability to make decisions based on personal values and interests, and the avoidance of feeling controlled or coerced by external factors. Studies have indicated that when the social and environmental conditions allow for autonomy, it leads to increased autonomous motivation, but if autonomy is restricted, motivation is undermined (Aitken & Graham, 2023).

Competence in SDT refers to an individual feeling effective in his or her environment; the need to experience self-efficacy, mastery and achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It thus refers to a felt sense of confidence in pursuing goals and tasks and experiencing growth and development. When individuals perceive themselves as competent, they are more likely to engage in activities that promote growth and development, leading to enhanced motivation and well-being. Feelings of competence can be enhanced or negated by episodes of feedback (How & Wang, 2016). Constructive feedback is an important

element which aids in achieving a sense of competence and is considered crucial for generating productive intrinsic motivation (Shelton-Strong, 2020).

Relatedness refers to need for positive connections with others, or “The need to be involved in warm relationships characterized by mutual concern, liking, and acceptance” (Reeve, 2016, p. 140). Experiencing a sense of connection and belonging with others and feeling significant among others are essential aspects (Ryan & Deci, 2017). A sense of relatedness is established when an individual feels integrated into a social group and feels like they are making a contribution that extends beyond their own self (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

How educators meet these fundamental needs of learners will impact their inspiration, engagement, and accomplishment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The fulfilment of the three fundamental psychological needs is primarily facilitated by well-structured, warm, and responsive settings, which encourage clarity, connectedness, and understanding within relationships (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Within the SDT model, each of these basic psychological needs can be supported or thwarted by particular environmental circumstances. In autonomy-supportive, warm, and responsive settings, individuals tend to report increased intrinsic motivation (Reeve, 2016). Studies related to university-aged samples have shown the significant effect of autonomous motivation on persistence (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020) academic interest and enjoyment (Black & Deci, 2000); academic satisfaction (Noels et al., 2003); academic achievement (Black & Deci, 2000); and higher well-being and lower anxiety (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). When an environmental circumstance thwarts one of the three needs, individuals tend to orient towards extrinsic motivation values (Ryan & Deci, 2020), leading to deficiencies in self-regulation, relatedness, poor concentration in classes, academic hopelessness, and fewer intentions of pursuing further education (Leo et al., 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

The theory suggests that environments that support these basic needs will enhance intrinsic motivation, while environments that thwart them will lead to decreased motivation and well-being.

3 Research Design - Designing EFL writing for motivation

The research reported here was conducted within the Foreign Language Department at a comprehensive university in Mainland China. In the Chinese education system, the teaching of English writing typically follows a structured, exam-oriented framework that prioritises foundational skills and alignment with standardised test requirements. Extrinsic motivation drives teaching and the intrinsic elements of learning motivation are largely neglected. To explore how to increase student motivation, a writing program was designed to include experiences that supported autonomy, competence, and relatedness, based on evidence-based practices from Magid and Chan (2012) and Ruegg (2015, 2018, 2021).

The program was delivered by the first author and conducted as an additional writing class to students' regular writing class. Ten second-year English major students chose to participate in this writing program. It was structured into seven sessions held weekly on a Saturday, forming a complete cycle that

included topic selection, timed writing, and various forms of feedback. Table 1 provides an overview of each session.

Table 1
A summary of the main learning activities of each session

Session 1	Goal-setting
Session 2	Topic choice & independent research & reading example essays
Session 3	Extensive reading before writing
Session 4	Generating and organising ideas: brainstorming, mind-mapping and outlining
Session 5	Timed writing
Session 6	Multiple-forms of feedback, including self- and peer-feedback
Session 7	Revision of the final draft

Data were collected through two qualitative methods, reflective journals and post-program interviews. Before the first session, students got individual online journal accounts linked to their social networks. After each session, they provided immediate, anonymous feedback on class activities and their overall feelings about the session. Their feedback was reviewed between sessions and adjustments were made to the next session in response. Each journal entry had guiding questions like: ‘Did the way the class was organized help you?’, ‘Do you have any suggestions for our next session?’ and ‘Did you have enough opportunity to talk with other students? And the teacher?’. Repeating questions like: ‘How confident are you in English writing right now?’ tracked students’ motivation change across the six sessions. Complete in-class journal questions can be seen in Appendix 1. Post-program interviews (Appendix 2) were conducted to probe students’ overall feelings and comments on the writing program. Participants were encouraged to write journals in their preferred language, mostly using a mix of Mandarin and English. Interviews were held in Chinese, then transcribed and translated into English.

Participants were encouraged to use whatever language they felt most comfortable with for their journals; most used a mix of Mandarin Chinese and English. Interviews were conducted in Chinese. Interview data were transcribed and translated into English. The journal data were collected at the end of each session across the whole writing program stage. To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data collection and analysis, several steps were taken. First, all interviews were recorded for transcription; Next, when the interview data were transcribed for analysis, a native English speaker assisted in translation. I first translated the transcripts independently; he then proofread the drafts, and we collaborated to finalise the English versions. To increase the trustworthiness, a third bilingual colleague, who has mastered both English and Chinese, was invited to proofread the translation. Altogether, the interview data were finalised.

3.1 SDT-informed learning experiences

In this section, we describe the learning experiences and how they were informed by SDT basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as EFL writing literature.

The designed writing activities in the writing program incorporated some that were part of students' regular writing classes, such as brainstorming and mind-mapping. It also integrated some classroom activities identified in the literature that students had never experienced before, such as topic selection, peer and self-feedback, and deliberate initiatives for relationship building.

3.1.1 Supporting autonomy

SDT highlights the role of autonomy-supportive motivation strategies which meet students' psychological needs and enhance classroom engagement (Núñez & León, 2019). Autonomy-supportive environments nurture students' internal motivational resources, provide choice and opportunity for self-direction, provide positive and constructive feedback to students, rely on informal, non-controlling language, explicitly link elements of classroom structure (e.g., rewards, expectations) to explanations of why these features are important for students' learning and well-being, and respect for other people's perspectives (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Research across diverse contexts and learner levels demonstrates that autonomy-supportive teaching improves engagement, learning quality, intrinsic motivation, well-being, and academic success (Aitken & Graham, 2023; Reeve & Cheon, 2016). In the next sections, specific elements of autonomy-supportive teaching are described in relation to the program developed for this research.

Fostering Choice - Topic selection

A key element of autonomy is choice, and there is good evidence that providing language learners with choice enhances intrinsic motivation. For example, in the context of writing, self-selection and choice of topics is recommended as it provides a sense of ownership (Atwell, 1998). Recent EFL writing research suggests that the freedom to select writing topics leads students to feel more motivated and encouraged to write (e.g. Bonyadi & Zeinalpur, 2014; Leblanc & Fujieda, 2012). Bonzo (2008) investigated the impact of teacher-selected topics versus student-selected topics on the writing fluency of participants among intermediate foreign language learners in Germany. The results showed that when students chose their own topics, there was a positive effect on the overall fluency of their writing. The ratio of unique terms to total words was also higher when participants picked their own themes, as opposed to those chosen by the teacher. Similarly, Leblanc and Fujieda (2012) found that self-selected topics increased lexical variety amongst Japanese tertiary EFL students.

During the first session of this research writing program, the main activity focused on assisting students to select viable writing topics. The approach for choosing topics was based on Ruegg's (2021) method, which involved a step-by-step progression consisting of identifying a broad theme and progressively narrowing down the scope to a specific theme, topic area, and ultimately arriving at a writing topic aligned with the students' own interests. Table 2 below illustrates the process for one of the topics chosen by participating students. The process generated two very different topics arising out of their

interests and enabled the formation of two small groups based on the topics. One topic was ‘Do you believe death penalty can decrease the crime rate?’, the other was ‘What do you think of the phenomenon of rat race among university students?’

Table 2
The process of selecting a topic

Scope of topic	Example
Broad theme	Education
Theme	Tertiary education
Topic area	Problems in tertiary education
Topic	The rat race experienced by university students
Writing topic	What do you think of the phenomenon of rat race among university students?
Based on Ruegg (2021, p. 49)	
An autonomy-supportive environment	

Providing an autonomy-supportive learning environment goes beyond providing choices for students. Teaching approaches, generally, fall along a continuum from controlling to supportive. A controlling or “teacher prescribed” approach is one in which the teacher exerts pressure and monitors students closely (Reeve, 2016, p. 130). An autonomy-supportive approach is characterised by respect for students’ perspectives. These differences reflect a teacher’s orientation towards control versus autonomy, described by Reeve (2009, p. 159) as their “motivating style”. Based on Reeve (2009), the teaching actions most closely associated with a controlling approach and autonomy support are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Enabling conditions and instructional behaviours associated with controlling and with autonomy support

(Adapted from Reeve, 2009)

Controlling	Autonomy support
Enabling conditions • Adopt the teacher's perspective. • Intrude into students' thoughts, feelings, or actions. • Pressure students to think, feel, or behave in a specific way.	Enabling conditions • Adopt the students' perspective. • Welcome students' thoughts, feelings, and actions. • Support students' motivational development and capacity for autonomous self-regulation.
Instructional behaviours • Rely on external sources of motivation. • Neglect explanatory rationales. • Rely on pressure-inducing language. • Display impatience for students to produce the right answer. • Assert power to overcome students' complaints and expressions of negative affect.	Instructional behaviours • Nurture inner motivational resources. • Provide explanatory rationales. • Rely on noncontrolling and informational language. • Display patience to allow time for self-paced learning. • Acknowledge and accept expressions of negative affect.

Studies confirm that students with autonomy-supportive instructors have better classroom behaviour and educational outcomes than those with controlling teachers (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy support from teachers can have multiple benefits for student, such as increased need satisfaction, greater intrinsic motivation, more classroom engagement, higher-quality learning, preference for challenging tasks, better well-being, and higher academic achievement (Lee, 2017; Reeve & Cheon, 2016). Autonomy-supporting teachers are also more likely to provide differentiated instruction, which further contributes to students feeling engaged and motivated as their learning needs are addressed (Tajik et al., 2024).

Furthermore, providing autonomy support to students' also benefits teachers. For example, Cheon et al. (2014) found that teachers in autonomy-support training workshops not only taught more supportively but also reported increased teaching-related satisfaction, passion, confidence, job satisfaction, energy, and less exhaustion.

3.1.2 Supporting students' competence

Competence is related to self-efficacy, which is often used as a proxy for competence. Writing self-efficacy directly impacts students' willingness to complete tasks and hence their writing performance (Pajares et al., 2006). Writing motivation, self-efficacy, and proficiency are positively correlated (Lee et al.,

2018; Zhang & Guo, 2012), and according to Zabihi (2018), self-efficacy has the strongest predictive power over writing performance. Self-regulation has also been identified as a significant factor in writing self-efficacy (Anggraeni et al., 2025), and EFL writing instruction that integrates self-regulated learning supports active engagement and self-efficacy (Anggraeni et al., 2025; Teng, 2022).

Three key competence-building learning experiences were included in the writing program. Building topic knowledge and vocabulary, writing models, pre-writing activities, and feedback are described below.

Topic knowledge, vocabulary, and writing models

A key aspect of writing competence is having topic specific knowledge and vocabulary to draw on. One way to develop this is by reading and discussing material about the topic, as well as identifying key lexical items and vocabulary. Study participants completed activities where they read and presented key information and language from topic related articles. This built competence and confidence in knowing about the topic and having key phrases to use when writing about it.

Another activity involved reading and analysing example essays that demonstrated key writing elements. These writing models were sourced from Gu (2019, p. 42; p. 145) and exemplified topic sentences, paragraph structure, and overall essay organisation. The example essays were regularly revisited to reinforce key skills and build competence, with the aim of enhancing motivation.

Pre-writing activities

Pre-writing activities are a common and effective way of building student competence prior to independent writing. The pre-writing stage is often the most challenging for many writers, especially with unfamiliar topics. Struggling to generate or express ideas, writers may experience “writer’s block” (Hung & Van, 2018; Mogahed, 2013). Pre-writing activities can help overcome writer’s block. Studies show learners who do pre-writing achieve more in writing than those who do not. For example, pre-writing activities help with accuracy, complexity, and engagement (Mohammadi et al., 2024), writing accuracy and motivation (Zoghi & Fakhimie, 2019) and can reduce students’ writing anxiety (Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000).

Beneficial pre-writing activities include brainstorming, mind-mapping and outlining (Ruegg, 2021). Hung and Van (2018) suggest that learners should try more than one activity until they know what works well for them, because there is no single pre-writing strategy that is a “panacea” (p. 452).

In the writing program, brainstorming served as a valuable initial stage that assisted the students to generate specific content to be included in their writing. The importance of creativity and free-thinking was emphasised, encouraging participants to deliberately generate new ideas. A subsequent activity aimed to enhance understanding and information retention through the use of mind mapping. Mind mapping involves recording a central theme and generating new, related ideas that radiate outward from the centre. Numerous studies across various disciplines and learner groups have demonstrated the effectiveness of mind mapping (Sabbah, 2015). Specifically in the realm of writing, Liu (2011) found that

students who utilised mind mapping outperformed their peers who did not employ this technique in writing tasks. Participants in this study were instructed to articulate key ideas in their own words and establish connections between them. They were encouraged to verbalize their thought processes and were given the freedom to complete the mind mapping activity individually or collaboratively according to their preferences. In this way, autonomy and relatedness were also encouraged alongside building competence.

Creating a writing outline facilitates the organisation of information in a structured and logical manner. The essential component of outlining is to articulate the main ideas intended for inclusion in the essay in the order of their appearance (Ruegg, 2021). Participants created outlines to help them to stay focused, prevent them from deviating from their intended writing purpose, and ensure coherence in the essay's structure.

All these pre-writing processes were modelled prior to the participants undertaking them for their own writing.

Feedback

Feedback about performance can enhance intrinsic motivation and “have informational significance if it is efficacy relevant” (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 6). Huisman et al., (2018) found that students tended to pay less attention to feedback comments if grades and scores were also provided in an assignment. To overcome this, Ruegg (2021) suggests it is beneficial to provide a smaller number of writing assignments with multiple feedback opportunities throughout the drafting process. This encourages students to focus on the quality rather than quantity of writing.

Teacher feedback predominates in EFL classrooms due to teachers' expertise in foreign languages and writing norms, and because it boosts students' writing confidence (Ruegg, 2018). However, in large writing classes, providing feedback is time-consuming and burdensome. To address this, peer feedback is often used and has been shown to improve writing performance (Huisman et al., 2018). A study by Chen and Cui (2022) among 96 EFL tertiary learners in China found that peer feedback helped increase the use of cohesive devices in writing. Peer feedback can also be effective in improving writing issues related to meaning and content (Ocampo et al., 2025).

Participants in this study were shown how to evaluate and give feedback on both their own and their peers' essays, using a checklist modelled on Ruegg (2015, 2018, 2021), and encompassing various aspects of writing, such as essay structure, word choice, content, and grammar. The students independently evaluated their initial drafts based on these four specific components, then proceeded to share their essays with two to three peers and employed the same checklist to evaluate and give feedback on each other's work. After completing the peer evaluations, each individual incorporated the feedback received from others and revised their writing.

In addition to self- and peer-feedback, participants also received teacher feedback from the first author, as well as a native English-speaking colleague with over 10 years' English writing teaching experience. Before providing feedback, the colleague signed a confidentiality agreement. Participants received their second drafts along with checklists and overall comments provided by the two teachers. Opportunities were provided for participants to read and reflect on the comments individually as well as discuss them with their group members (if they wished). The most common mistakes and most frequent comments were discussed with participants, and some sentences were extracted from their own essays and presented as examples. Participants were encouraged to raise any questions, and further time was made for participants to complete a third and final version of their writing.

3.1.3 Supporting relatedness

People's fundamental psychological urge to feel connected to others and develop social relationships are strong human motivations (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). This need encompasses the desire to establish a secure and safe connection with others while also feeling valued and deserving of that connection (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Townsend, 2014). Some research suggests that, of the three components of BPN, relatedness has the most significant impact on enhancing students' intrinsic motivation (Alamer et al., 2025). Studies in education have demonstrated that students who receive caring and supportive relationships within their school environment tend to have a more favourable academic outlook and are generally more content with their schooling experience (See for example Fan, 2012). In the context of language learning, Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) found that, of 48 motivational strategies, "Show students you care about them" and "Establish good rapport with students" were chosen by teachers as the most important. Establishing a positive rapport with students can foster the development of self-regulation skills, particularly autonomy, and enable them to achieve their personal and academic goals (Kurdi et al., 2018).

In the Chinese context, teacher-student relationships differ to those in Western settings. Teaching tends to have a hierarchical structure, and the prevailing belief is that a harmonious classroom environment is established within this hierarchical structure (Liu et al., 2022). Teachers have absolute respect and power in the classroom, which is reflected in teacher-student relationships and a focus on skill building, rather than relationship building (Han & Scull, 2010). Due to the impact of unevenly distributed power between teachers and students, close relationships are often absent among most teachers and students.

There are a number of ways that teachers can build positive relationships. For example, Korthagen et al. (2014) suggest teachers show empathy and authenticity during contact moments. Henry and Thorsen (2018) observed non-verbal behaviors, such as touch and smiles could build rapport, and sharing personal information helps improve connectedness as it signals openness. Allocating extra time before or after class for student questions also builds relatedness (Townsend, 2014).

In addition to the in-class activities mentioned above, a crucial element of the writing program was the teacher-student relationship. However, building a positive relationship with students cannot be reduced

to a single teaching strategy. To create a supportive, warm, and trusting atmosphere, various approaches were employed throughout the writing program. Firstly, the first author made it a point to arrive ten minutes early and greet the students as they entered the classroom, as well as ensuring she remained in the classroom until everyone had left. Additionally, instead of solely standing at the front of the classroom, which is a common teaching practice in the Chinese context, she walked among the students, joined their discussions, and sat with them. Specific comments, such as acknowledging their ideas or initiatives with phrases like “I like your idea” or “Good point”, were given to foster positive attitudes.

Research has suggested that storytelling can contribute to building teacher-student relationships (Caesar et al., 2025). Therefore, the first author stayed in the classroom during breaks and had lunch with students in the canteen in order to engage in casual conversations, sharing personal anecdotes with the students and discussing their lives, goals, and challenges in a more relaxed and informal setting.

The goal of supporting the needs of students is to help them achieve better outcomes by providing appropriate learning activities, an autonomy-supportive environment, and positive student-teacher relationships. The three factors of BPN can intensify each other’s effectiveness when addressed together (Ryan & Deci, 2020). They appear to have a synergistic relationship, leading to a positive cycle of motivation enhancement. As Deci and Ryan(2000) believe, “commitment and authenticity reflected in intrinsic motivation and integrated extrinsic motivation are most likely to be evident when individuals experience supports for competence, autonomy and relatedness” (p.74).

4 Findings from the writing program

This section highlights the findings from the writing program. It starts with an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the writing program and moves to how students’ confidence changed over time and in relation to the elements of SDT.

4.1 Positive learning experiences in the writing program

An initial finding from the reflective journalling by participants was that they felt positive about the language learning experiences in the writing program. This is salient given that it was additional to their usual writing classes. The word cloud below (Fig. 1) represents 168 words generated by participants when asked to describe their feelings about each session in three words.

Engaged and Enjoyable stood out as the two most prominent descriptors, with ‘engaged’ mentioned 14 times and ‘enjoyable’ ten times. Other words that stood out were those prefaced by the descriptor ‘well’, for example: well-structured, well-conducted, well-organised, well-taught. Helpful, Interesting, Informative and Challenging were other prominent words used by participants. These words suggest that participants had positive learning experiences throughout the sessions, even if they found them

challenging. In the post-program interviews, participants explained their perceptions in detail. Student 7 (S7) said:

In these seven sessions, we had a high degree of participation, and the form of group cooperation greatly improved our enthusiasm. The course content was closely connected, and gradually progressed from simple to difficult.

When asked how they would describe the differences between the research program sessions and other writing classes, eight participants reported that they thought the seven sessions were “complete” (S1, 3, 4), “systematic” (S1, 4, 6) and had “clear focuses” (S2, 3). As S6 said:

These sessions guided us to complete a well- structured argument essay step by step. It included selecting a topic, preparation before writing, self and peer feedback and revision. It was a clear and systematic circle.

4.2 Growing confidence

Students’ sense of confidence in English writing was tracked with a repeated reflective journal question. After the first session, seven out of ten participants indicated bluntly that they did not have much confidence. S5 said: “No confidence. I am feeling a headache about writing”. After the second session (which included the sample essay analysis), only three participants reported a slight increase confidence. S1 said: “Through this session, I am more confident understanding the structure of an argumentative essay”.

After the third session, there was a noticeable increase in the number of people who felt confident. The third session consisted of extensive reading and a group presentation to help the students learn topic related vocabulary. Seven out of nine responses indicated that they felt their confidence had increased as a result. The pre-writing activities seemed to have a positive impact on confidence. Almost all students who were present said their confidence had increased. Comments included greater confidence in “understanding the essay structure”, “generating more ideas”, and that knowing “how to use strategies [to] organise my essay”.

A further increase in writing confidence was reported at the end of the fourth session, which was a timed writing session. All participants reported improved confidence:

“I completed my essay with less struggle. Though I need more practice” (S1).

“More confident. I can never write an essay longer than this one” (S2).

“Confidence improved. Compared with before, I have increased a lot of writing knowledge and have a further understanding of writing” (S4).

“Looking at this essay I wrote, now I think it is quite a good one” (S7).

“This is the best essay I have ever written” (S8).

"I am more confident with writing topic sentences and have clearer understanding of essay structure" (S10).

Following sessions targeted self- and peer-feedback based on the first essay draft participants wrote. This further enhanced feelings of confidence, for example: *"I am satisfied with this essay. It looks much better than my previous essays" (S2), "I like my essay" (S3) and "Much more confident than before. This class helps me a lot" (S7).* Students felt their writing confidence had increased significantly through different learning activities.

4.3 Response to learning experiences

In this section we consider the learning activities in greater depth, as they relate to Self-Determination Theory.

4.3.1 Pre-writing activities

Having a choice and input into writing topics was the first learning experience. Participants' journal data recorded their thoughts about the topic they chose. Evident in the data were descriptive phrases such as *"heavy", "realistic", "profound", "meaningful" and "worth talking"* suggesting that students felt their topics had weight and were important. This recognition increased their motivation to write, as one responded: *"This is a very important social hot topic. I think it is worthwhile to write about".*

Opportunities to work collaboratively to discuss their chosen topics seemed to motivate participants who reported they could *"pool wisdom" and "think outside the box"*. Sharing their different opinions on the same topic was conducive to learning from each other and developing their own thinking. S4 said: *"Putting students who choose the same topic together could give full play to the students' creative potential and cooperation skills"*. Using talk to rehearse ideas and develop foundational language for the topic is an important but often overlooked classroom activity. Perhaps this is because it is talking rather than writing and so not seen as a valid writing class learning activity. However, the benefits of this kind of talk are clear in this data.

Extensive reading about the topic was identified as contributing to learning new topic-related vocabulary and thus avoiding repetition when writing. S5 said:

I personally think the extensive reading before writing is useful. Reading articles helps me learn new vocabulary and create ideas I have never thought about. This allows me to write without having to worry about word repetition, and I do not need to rack my brains for ideas.

Small group presentations and quizzes not only increased the interaction between participants but also helped them accumulate material for their writing. Journal data suggests that most students believed they had learned a lot from the group activities. S5 in the post-program interview said:

Group cooperation can help us collect information better and more efficiently, expand our thinking and cultivate cooperative thinking. Especially when we did the presentation sharing our reading materials, I think

it was very highly efficient.

Brainstorming, mind-mapping, and outlining were identified by over half of participants in the post-program interview as having the greatest impact on their learning motivation and preparation for writing. They said: “Brainstorming helps me to avoid repeating one point in an essay”, “Mind-mapping helps me get ideas into shape”, and “Mind-mapping and outlining offer a logical base”.

S7 elaborated:

Mind-mapping has had a great influence on me, because this activity helps me connect ideas together and get them out in a logical order. I have more ideas to help support my argument. The logic of my writing is enhanced. Mind-mapping helps me stay on topic, and I do not write irrelevant sentences and repeat a sentence many times. I used to write without knowing what to write, so I think this activity has had a positive influence on me.

S1 also had a similar feeling:

I think for me, the learning activities that help me most are mind mapping and outlining the topic sentence for each paragraph. Using topic sentences makes me develop more powerful support for my thesis statement, so that each paragraph has different views and arguments and I can write in an orderly way. Making an outline gives me a basic framework for a piece of writing, laying a good foundation for the following body paragraph.

Analysing model essays addressed students’ reported difficulties with fully grasping teachers’ expectations and provided a better understanding of the structure and language features in effective writing. Two model essays from Gu (2019, p. 42; p. 145) were utilised to teach students about topic sentences, paragraph construction, and essay structure.

Journal data provided evidence that the model essays helped participants to better understand how to write a topic sentence and use a logical essay structure. S6 said:

I think the example essays helped me greatly. Talking theories without concrete examples makes it hard to understand. Instead, sentence by sentence analysis of the sample essays made me understand immediately.

In the post-program interview, S2 pointed out that analysing and discussing example essays had the greatest impact on their learning.

I was not very clear with the structure of argument essays before. I used to write in a muddle, and I did not know what I was writing. The sample essays the teacher analysed give me a direct way to go and help me quickly establish a correct writing structure.

4.3.2 Self- and peer-feedback

Later in the writing process, self- and peer-evaluation and feedback was used to support the editing and revising process. A checklist, provided to support self- and peer-evaluation and feedback, was identified by eight out of nine students as being of great help when reviewing essays. One student said: *“Great help. Help me reviewed my essay in general. It is helpful to comb through the ideas of the essay to check for loopholes”*. Another said: *“The checklist gave me a clear guidance to go over other’s essay”*. They also deemed that their peers could offer them useful suggestions on their essays, such as identifying minor spelling and grammatical mistakes and modifying topic sentences.

Self- and peer-feedback was also reported as positively impacting writing revisions. All participants felt that their essays had improved greatly. They reported they wrote faster, produced richer content, had fewer grammatical errors, a more diverse lexis, clearer essay structure, and better connections between paragraphs.

To summarise, the learning experiences, from topic selection to specific class activities, incorporated into the class sessions led to participant perceptions of improved writing. As S3 said:

I think all the activities had an equal impact on me. First, brainstorming helps me explore my thinking; second, mind-mapping helps me put ideas together; outlining helps me write down important sentences; the following self- and peer-feedback makes the first writing product better, and then the teacher gave us useful feedback. Each of these learning activities has its own purpose, I cannot say which one had the greatest impact on my learning, I can only say that each of them is very important.

4.4 The effect of teacher-student relationships

Unlike specific learning experiences and activities, building good relationships takes place all the time and needs to be incorporated into every lesson. To create a warm, friendly, and approachable relationship, several strategies were adopted throughout the program. The following actions were mentioned by participants in interviews as having contributed to their learning experiences by fostering a sense of relatedness.

The first author, who delivered the writing program, went to the classroom about 10 minutes early and made conversation with each student when they came in. Participants reported that these greetings and informal chat made them feel welcomed and cared about when they walked into a classroom. S2 said: *“I feel we are like friends”*, while S1 remarked that making small talk can *“shorten the gap [between us]”*. They believed the relaxed atmosphere encouraged them to talk without feeling too inhibited. As S6 said:

You are more caring than teachers I had before. Every time I got to class you were already there, and you were going to chat with us about what happened this week. You asked, ‘how was my week?’, etc. I like this small talk because it made me feel relaxed. Although our writing program classes were on weekends, I did not feel burdened at all.

Other relationship building actions such as joining in during group discussions, being available during break times, and sharing lunch together, helped the students feel heard and valued:

I think your participation in discussion made me feel that my feelings matter. I am very grateful to you for creating a relaxed and pleasant environment for us to study without pressure and rules. In this case, I think it is a delightful thing to come to class every Saturday. (S7)

I enjoyed the stories about your past experience and your ongoing PhD study that you spoke to us about ... I think the best thing about communicating beyond the classroom is that we can get some advice, whether the post graduate study is useful for us right now or not. (S4)

I think when we went to the canteen to have a meal together after class, it was very relaxed and happy ... I feel like you and my friend are the same, there is no distance at all. The best part of being friends is that I feel like you care about me. In this way, I will not feel that class is a burden. (S4)

When participants were asked what advice they would give to a new writing teacher, more than half prioritised cultivating good teacher-student relationships. They hoped teachers could be more open-minded and flexible in communication. As S5 concluded: *Do not let your students feel intimidated. A casual and informal relationship will set students up for success.*

5 Discussion

The writing program aimed to investigate learning experiences that can be implemented in EFL writing classrooms to enhance learning motivation. The findings suggest that the SDT-informed learning experiences implemented in the writing program succeeded in enhancing participants' sense of motivation. In this section, we discuss how the learning experiences addressed the three basic psychological needs identified by SDT and thus boosted participants' writing motivation.

5.1 Choice supports autonomy

The findings suggest that giving students the freedom to select their own writing topic is positively associated with increased writing motivation. The key benefit of self-selected topics is that students will have a personal interest in the subject matter they are writing about. In a qualitative study in a US university context, Aitken and Graham (2023) found that having choice in writing was important because it allowed students to write about topics that they find more interesting. Although the topics the participants in this study chose were uncommon for argument writing, students displayed a greater level of interest than usual in classroom activities preceding the writing task. This heightened interest may motivate learners to initiate and maintain learning behaviours, such as increased engagement in class discussions.

When writers are assigned writing topics that they struggle with, it is natural for them to feel overwhelmed and lose interest in the task (Farooq et al., 2012). It is difficult for students to write about topics they know less about, which may decrease their confidence and motivation to write. As writers lose interest, they tend to experience a shift in motivation from intrinsic towards extrinsic (e.g. assessments) potentially limiting ongoing engagement and learning.

Apart from the need for autonomy, offering students choice also seemed to be useful in building relationships between them. In smaller groups with those who had interest in the same writing topic, participants had more opportunities to connect with each other on a personal level. Personal connections can lead to a greater sense of familiarity, comfort, and shared understanding among group members (Xu & Kou, 2018). Students who write about the same topic can more easily align around shared thoughts, opinions, and experiences. This increased participation creates a sense of unity and common purpose, leading to a sense of being valued, heard, and connected. In other words, their need for relatedness is also met.

5.2 Process-oriented writing supports competence

Competence includes a sense of mastery and control over one's actions, which can amplify learners' intrinsic motivation and willingness to participate in learning activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020; Townsend, 2014). Process-oriented teaching focuses on various stages of the writing process, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Yu et al., 2020). The results of this study suggest that incorporating these activities into a writing class potentially boosts students' sense of competence as participants were guided towards mastery through each stage of the writing process.

Pre-writing activities provided opportunities for participants to brainstorm, plan, and organise thoughts before starting writing. This supported participants to develop vocabulary, clarify ideas, understand coherent essay structure, and anticipate potential challenges in their writing. In addition to enhancing linguistic competence, pre-writing activities also foster creativity among writers by supporting the exploration of diverse perspectives, and generating innovative ideas through thinking, exchanging ideas, and persuasive reasoning. This creative thinking and adaptability contribute to building writing competence.

5.3 The role of feedback

Another activity that had a positive impact on participants perceptions of competence was the process of giving and receiving feedback. Evaluating a peer's writing and giving feedback prompts metacognitive activity and deeper thinking about writing which leads to increased competence (Yu & Lee, 2016). When students evaluate someone else's writing, they compare it to their own knowledge and skills. This process requires reflection and self-awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. By critically analysing others' writing, students become more aware of their own writing choices and areas for improvement. Evaluating a peer's writing also requires students to analyse various aspects of writing, such as grammar, vocabulary, structure, and coherence. This analytical process encourages attention to specific details and patterns that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. In these ways, engaging in self- and peer-feedback develops self-regulation and a sense of self-efficacy, and enhances metacognition contributing to development as a writer (Anggraeni et al., 2025).

The exchange of feedback not only enhances writers' competence but also contributes to building stronger peer relationships by encouraging more frequent interaction among classmates (Xu & Kou, 2018). Face-to-face interactions offer benefits for relationship building (Duncan & Fiske, 2015), and in the

context of writing, also provide immediate feedback. Writers can ask questions, seek clarification, and receive instant responses from their peers (Harris & Meltzer, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This instant feedback allows writers to address concerns or make revisions promptly, leading to more efficient essay refinement. Additionally, face-to-face interactions foster a communicative and supportive environment for writers. When students collaborate to provide feedback to improve each other's work, it promotes cooperation and stronger interpersonal bonds (Duncan & Fiske, 2015). As students give and receive feedback, they have the opportunity to learn and grow together (Harris & Meltzer, 2015), creating a sense of shared progress and achievement, strengthening their connection.

5.4 Teacher-student relatedness: An overlooked motivator in Chinese education contexts

The writing program in this study utilised relatedness-building strategies outlined in literature, such as verbal actions, for example, greetings and friendly general conversations, and nonverbal actions, for example, arriving early to the classroom, and developing personal connection outside the classroom. The findings indicated that the teacher-student relationship seemed to play an important role in promoting motivation within the classroom. In the post-interviews, they reported that they valued the relationship established with the first author as teacher, which made them feel that the writing program on Saturdays were not a burden. The findings are consistent with previous research (not limited to L2 classes) about the importance of positive student-faculty relationships for teaching and learning (Liu et al., 2022).

However, in the Confucian education context, teachers do not typically build close relationships with their students because the teacher-student relationship is seen as hierarchical and formal. The teacher serves as the authority figure and the student is subordinate, rather than a friend or confidante (Liu et al., 2022). Confucianism emphasises the importance of social order and hierarchy, which is reflected in teacher-student relationships where the teacher is the knower and moral guide and the student is respectful and obedient. As a result, the importance of relatedness is largely neglected in the Chinese education context (Lee, 2020). Though Confucian education has evolved over time and there may be variations in the degree of formality and hierarchy in the teacher-student relationship depending on the time period and location, building close personal relationships could be seen as undermining this hierarchical relationship.

Participants in this study were the generation born since 2000 (Generation Z). They have grown up in a society that is more democratic and open than in the past and have been exposed to ideas and teaching styles from outside China, influencing their thinking and expectations. Therefore, younger generations of students may be less afraid of teacher authority because they have been raised in a more egalitarian environment where authority is not automatically given but earned through trust and respect. Considering the current generation of students, teachers may need to give further attention to the impact of relatedness on motivation rather than solely focusing on various teaching methods.

As a result of this research, we urge EFL teacher to establish and cultivate a sense of relatedness with students. This is relevant not only to L2 writing classrooms, but also at a broader education level. Small actions, such as engaging in conversations about daily life or chatting more with their students, can create friendly, mutually respectful relationships, which can have a positive effect on students' learning motivation and teachers' sense of efficacy.

6 Conclusion

This study conducted an EFL writing program at a Chinese tertiary institution, providing learning activities designed to enhance students' motivation for writing. It found that learning activities and teacher behaviours that are consistent with SDT elements of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were effective in creating positive learning experiences for students in this context.

EFL teachers can use the insights gained from this study to identify and implement specific teaching and learning activities that may improve students' learning experiences, enhance their motivation, and improve their writing as a result. There are four key take-away messages from this study. First, cultivating topic interest is crucial in writing classes, and giving choices about topics builds interest and motivation. If students struggle to make choices, teachers can narrow down selected topics and have students form interest-based study groups. Second, pre-writing activities are essential. Activities like idea-generation, topic-related reading, and planning reduce linguistic hurdles and give students a sense of progress. As students talk and read about a topic, they feel more competent and confident that they have something to write about, as well as the skills to manage the writing process. Third, post-writing activities and student-centered feedback are equally vital. Encouraging students to give and receive feedback promotes interaction, fostering students' competence and sense of connection. Finally, building positive teacher-student relationships contributes to maintaining student motivation. Creating opportunities for connection and fostering relatedness can help maintain motivation during the times when writing is hard and students are struggling.

Declarations

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Author Contribution Statement

Yao Meng contributed to the study conception and design. Both authors contributed to data analysis, and manuscript drafting and revision. Both authors have read and approved the final submitted version of the manuscript.

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Figures



Figure 1

A word cloud based on participants' descriptions of their feelings about their experiences in the writing program.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- Appendix1.docx