

7 Keys to Writing Enjoyment: The Student Perspective

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“Unless a person enjoys the process, he or she is unlikely to take the risk of crossing an unexplored frontier,” wrote Csikszentmihalyi in 1988 (p. 373). His research revealed that intense feelings of enjoyment generated motivation to exert effort. A decade later, LeDoux’s neurological research (as cited in Willis, 2006, p. 66) found that positive emotions actually promoted brain cell multiplication, thereby increasing the potential for learning. Both the psychological and biological reality spell out a clear mandate for teachers: If we are to assist our students in maximizing learning, we must see to it that our methods of instruction imbue the learning experience with pleasure.

To set up positive experiences for ESL/EFL writing students, it would seem reasonable to start by determining which aspects of writing resonate with them. How better to find out than to ask the students themselves?

Student Sample

To identify the factors that contribute to enjoyment of writing, we conducted a two-part interview, consisting of open-ended questions and a questionnaire, with 24 students from our intensive English program. The group was divided evenly between proficiency levels III (low intermediate) and V (advanced), as defined in our program, to test for the effect of language level on responses. Each proficiency level was further divided between Saudi Arabian and Chinese students, who currently predominate in our program, to explore potential cultural differences in attitudes.

In the open-ended interview, students were asked to reflect on in-class writing tasks that they had found enjoyable and then to focus on the particular features of those activities that had appealed to them. In our analysis of the responses, we identified the following principal causes of enjoyment.

The Seven Keys

1. **Freedom from constraints.** Writing freely, with no restrictions of topic, grammar, organization, or time. “Free writes” or “quick writes” were well received.
2. **Challenge.** The chance to demonstrate skill under pressure. Although timed writing tasks were disliked by some, writing within time limits, along with writing concisely, was the most frequently cited enjoyable challenge.
3. **Feedback.** Both giving and receiving corrections and suggestions. Peer feedback was perceived to be particularly effective.

4. **Models.** Examples of vocabulary use, essay or paragraph organization, and style, not only from native writers but also from peers. Instances of both correct and incorrect usage were appreciated.
5. **Feeling in control of the content.** Knowing the topic thoroughly before writing, whether through previous experience, group discussion, or research.
6. **Feeling in control of the process.** Having a command of the writing process, from brainstorming to the final draft. Scaffolded instruction and frequent practice led to self-assurance.
7. **A sense of progress.** The perception that an activity had led subjects closer to their personal goals, whether language proficiency was an aim in its own right or simply a gateway to matriculation in a U.S. college.

Our questionnaire included 22 potential factors in enjoyment that had surfaced in our literature review of positive psychology. Students were asked to indicate which of the factors figured in their positive feelings toward a writing task. In our analysis of the responses, the most popular factors in the questionnaire correlated with the seven features that we had uncovered in our open-ended interviews. At the same time, the frequency of responses to certain items varied by language level or country background.

Differences by Country Background

The Saudi students' responses exhibited a more unanimous enthusiasm than the Chinese for challenges, feedback, and a sense of control both of the content and of the writing process. A sense of progress in general was important to both groups; however, progress in peripheral learning (skills other than writing) was a more significant factor for Saudi than for Chinese students, who relied more heavily on writing-related progress for their enjoyment.

Differences by Proficiency Level

Feedback, a sense of control of the writing process, and perception of progress through peripheral learning were all notable sources of pleasure for the low-intermediate students, whereas advanced learners responded equivocally to the same factors. While both groups appreciated seeing improvement in their writing skills, good grades were a significant source of pleasure for the advanced students but held no special sway over lower level respondents. We speculate that this last finding may have to do with our IEP's status as a gateway program to matriculation in our university; in the advanced classes, grades become high stake.

Reflections on Student Responses

The results of our study held some surprises for us. We had expected that social interaction and game-like activities would figure heavily in responses, surfacing as a strong factor in the enjoyment of writing activities. Indeed, activities with a social component, such as group brainstorming, collaborative writing, and peer feedback, were widely cited as enjoyable.

However, only one student attributed her positive feelings to the social aspect itself and to the consequent formation of lasting friendships. All other comments attributed the value of social engagement to its impact on one or more of the seven keys. In fact, from the data, perceived progress toward personal goals and thorough content knowledge emerged as the primary conditions for enjoyment, with all other factors serving to advance these two. It became clear that this set of students derived a deeper pleasure from purpose-driven activities than from frivolous fun, and that a high sense of self-efficacy was their highest priority.

On the other hand, we had selected students who had earned a writing grade of B or higher, reasoning that high-achieving students might possess greater self-awareness regarding their writing experiences and therefore might be better able to analyze them for us. It is quite likely that the success of these students is partially due to their clear sense of purpose. It would be fruitful to compare their responses with those of a set of students who had experienced less academic success.

Although our interviews deliberately focused on the enjoyable side of writing, comments on negative experiences arose spontaneously. Our participants' disparate attitudes toward pressure, notably timed writing, suggest that factors that are positive for some writers may be negative for others. This raises the question of what other factors might engender contrasting responses.

Conclusions

While the above questions remain to be explored, our initial conversations with students have led us to a deeper understanding of what is important to them as they pursue writing mastery. In fact, the seven keys to enjoyment might be seen as an interdependent web.

- **Freedom from constraints** on the topic allows students to choose subject matter with which they are familiar and comfortable, leading them to feel **in control of the content**.
- **Feedback** and **models** contribute to a sense of **control of the writing process**, which heightens awareness of **progress** and at the same time nurtures the confidence to welcome **challenges**.
- The outcome of a **challenge** delivers further **feedback**, which leads to greater **control of the process** and a stronger feeling of **progress**.

Incorporating these interdependent factors into writing tasks—offering appropriate freedom of choice in assignment parameters, scaffolding through models and feedback, and setting challenges that enhance students' sense of control and of progress—will heighten the enjoyment of the writing experience and will thereby contribute to optimizing students' learning.

References

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