

NAMIBIAN LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING ACTIVITIES

Patricia Nandu, Louise Mostert & Talita Smit*
University of Namibia

Abstract

Namibian learners exhibit low performance in English creative writing. This might be attributed partly to learners' attitudes towards the English writing activities as prescribed by the school curriculum. This paper investigated Grade 11 learners' perceptions of English Second Language (ESL) writing activities at selected schools in Windhoek, Namibia. The study employed a mixed-method design that involved a survey. Purposeful sampling was used to select three schools on the basis of learners' performance in ESL writing. A total of 286 learners participated in the study. Quantitative data were collected via questionnaires and qualitative data via open-ended questions in the questionnaire and focus group discussions. Findings revealed, amongst others, that learners had both negative and positive attitudes towards ESL writing. When compared, a larger number of learners felt that writing activities were easy; fewer learners regarded them as difficult. The research also revealed differences in how learners enjoyed and regarded the usefulness of the ESL writing activities. Chi-square results in relation to sex demonstrated that in most cases, the differences between boys and girls were not statistically significant. However, a clear difference was found between boys and girls with regard to the writing of diaries. Chi-square analyses done on the schools' performance level in relation to perceptions of ESL writing activities yielded clear and statistically significant differences between the three schools.

Introduction

Moodley (2003, p. 96) states that attitude "involves an emotional element and is thus rather subjective", and several researchers have looked at attitude and its relation to language. Attitudes are often shaped

***Patricia Kachana Nandu** teaches English as a Second Language to senior secondary learners in Windhoek, Namibia. She obtained her Master's degree from the University of Namibia. Her interest in research stems from her experiences as a classroom teacher and the challenges that both learners and teachers experience with English as a Second Language in a multicultural society.

Maria Louise Mostert is an Associate Professor in Educational Psychology at the University of Namibia. She obtained her Ph D degree from the University of Oslo in Norway. Her interest in English as a Second Language is based on her participation in a Norwegian funded Master's programme and the supervision of Master's students in the area of Literacy and Learning. E-mail: lmostert@unam.na

Talita Christine Smit is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Namibia. She obtained her PhD degree in cognitive linguistics from Stellenbosch University. As a linguist, her field of specialisation is literacy, especially literacy in the multilingual and multicultural context. E-mail: tcsmit@unam.na

early in childhood by the child's social context, such as the attitudes of parents and peers (Brown, 2006), as well as contact with other cultures. Social context also determines the provision and practice of second language learning at home. Brown (2006) states that families with positive attitudes towards English as a language might provide reading and writing materials to the child. Such families might thus practise language skills in an informal learning context. Brown (2006) argues that the attitude learners have towards a language will have either a positive or a negative influence on their desire and, hence, their ability, to achieve proficiency in a language. He thus states that, having a positive attitude towards the language is an important contributor to the success of language learning. Brown (2006) further posits that learners with positive attitudes will spend more effort to learn the language by using strategies such as asking questions and volunteering to produce writing activities. Choi (2005) suggests that a positive attitude also helps learners maintain their language skills after classroom instruction is over. Yet Witte (2007) found that learners showed little interest in classroom writing activities and assignments. According to him, some learners dislike writing in general and thus hate writing, no matter in which language. Passive learners viewed English writing as just another subject to pass, without any necessity and practicality for their future, which showed that they did not enjoy the writing activities. Similarly, Ackerman (2006) states that many learners consider writing as a classroom chore, and that they would only write when asked by the teacher.

Given the importance of writing activities for learners' future lives, education systems need to ensure that they have both the interest and the motivation to continue learning to write beyond school. Moreover, teachers should pay attention to the attitudes learners bring to language learning, as teachers may have to overturn negative views towards the language learning process. Learners can develop and maintain a positive attitude in the language classroom if instructional activities and materials used are exciting, stimulating and interesting to them. Learners need to be involved in the process of creating positive attitudes to writing and need enough practice in a variety of writing activities such as analysing the text for elements of good writing, identifying problems, finding topics and supporting ideas (Gabrielatos, 2002; Holmes, 2004). The importance of regular writing practice is supported by Abu-Bakar (2009) as well as Fulmer and Frijters (2011), who argue that practice improves learners' writing skills as it trains them to put their thoughts into words and aids vocabulary acquisition. Holmes (2004) stresses the importance of individualised work. This view is supported by Fairclough (2003) who argues that more individualised work is essential, despite crowded classrooms. Writing, according to him, is power, and to gain such power, learners should learn to write and write to learn.

Although writing is one of the important language skills, many learners consider it as the most difficult and complex activity to develop, particularly in an English Foreign Language context (Trang, 2009). As Ackerman (2006) reports, up to 40% of learners in high schools are not performing well in writing classes. This closely relates to the Namibian situation where the majority of learners typically achieve D to G symbols for ESL in their external examinations, while only a few achieve A+ to C symbols (Ministry of Education 2008; 2009b; 2010a). Some of the problems outlined by ESL learners in previous studies (Miranda & Yih, 2005) were that essays required too much writing time and that learners were not familiar with the topics they were given to write about. The unfamiliarity of the given topic makes the writing activities very difficult for learners. Brown (2006) also cautions that difficult essay topics can create negative attitudes in learners towards writing which, in turn, may lead to low competence levels in writing in general. Ong and Zhang (2010), as well as Hidi and Boscolo (2006), posit that a learner's level of concern with writing will depend on how competent he or she feels in writing and his or her ability to carry out a writing task.

In a second language learning context, age, gender, language background, type of school attended and peer influences are some of the variables that influence writing and attitudes toward writing (Merisou-Strom, 2007). In the present study, the influence of two variables, gender and type of school attended, were investigated. The reason for the interest of the researchers in gender was that research, in general, still shows inconclusive results with regards to differences in writing abilities and attitudes between males and females. The issue of a school's performance level and its influence on learner motivation is also an on-going debate in the literature. For example, Cambira (2010) argues that even though schools differ with regard to the learner characteristics of their intake, even in schools that are performing well, there are learners who lack confidence and motivation and who are not inclined to set and monitor their own learning goals.

According to Visscher and Dreary (2010), evidence in English assessment suggests that boys in the UK and America underperform when compared to girls; and that males underperform in writing tasks in comparison to females. In support of this, Kellogg (2008) states that even though all young writers are likely to find it difficult to consider their audience in writing, it is possible that females develop meta-cognitive skills at an earlier age, which may impact their writing skills. Furthermore, Walker (2005) has found that females seemed to be more advanced than males in those writing tasks where learners needed to imagine stories to write about. In terms of writing style, Jones and Myhill (2007) found that boys and girls showed equivalent writing patterns, yet they also noted that boys were often at the upper and lower ends of writing, while girls lay somewhere in the middle. It has also been argued that it is not underlying skills in

reading and writing of males that result in lower writing scores, but rather the quality of their ideas when producing fiction, as well as the approach they have to free writing. Jones and Myhill (2007) further argue that boys and girls might both engage with the writing activity but it might be possible that the topic of the narrative is more appealing to girls than to boys, so girls seem to score higher.

The current study was carried out in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia. Before Namibia's independence, the medium of instruction in schools was Afrikaans, which was also the official language. Several changes, for instance, the language curriculum for schools, were put into place after Namibia's independence. This change of curriculum included the use of English as medium of instruction. The then new curriculum aimed at enabling learners to acquire reasonable competence in English and to be prepared for English as medium of instruction throughout the secondary cycle. It also aimed at promoting the language and cultural identities of learners through the use of their home languages as media of instruction, at least during the formative Grades, and the teaching of the home language throughout formal education. This curriculum is recognised and accepted by tertiary institutions both nationally and internationally (Ministry of Education, 2010b).

The Namibia Senior Secondary Syllabus for ESL is mainly based on speaking, writing, listening and reading activities. National examination results indicate that learners exhibit low performance in English writing (Ministry of Education, 2008; 2009b; 2010a). Part of the reason for this low achievement in English writing could be attributed to learners' perceptions of those English writing activities expected from them in the Namibian curriculum. It was thus decided to investigate the perceptions of Grade 11 learners regarding the ESL writing activities they did in class.

The main areas of interest were how enjoyable and useful learners perceived ESL writing activities and how competent they were in each of the writing activities. It also looked into whether there were any differences in the learners' perceptions of ESL writing activities because of gender and the performance level of schools. The study is limited to three secondary schools in Windhoek which means that the results cannot be generalised to the whole country.

Materials and methods

The study employed a mixed-method design that involved a survey. Quantitative data were collected by administering a questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained via focus-group discussions and open-ended questions in the questionnaire. The schools were purposefully selected to include one higher-performing (HPS), one middle-performing (APS), and one lower-performing school (LPS). The three schools

were chosen on the basis of how learners had performed in ESL writing in the 2008, 2009 and 2010 Namibian National Examinations. A total of 300 Grade 11 learners were included in the sample. The method of the selection of learners in each school was random sampling of full class groups. From each of the three schools 10 learners were randomly selected to participate in the focus-group discussions.

The first part of the questionnaire collected biographical information of the learners. The second part sought information on how much learners enjoyed doing writing activities in English, as well as why they enjoyed or did not enjoy these activities. It also looked at how important learners considered each writing activity in present, as well as in future learning. In addition, the questionnaire also focused on how difficult learners perceived the different writing activities, as well as why they considered the activities as difficult or easy. Further, learners were asked to indicate how competent they felt they were in each writing activity.

Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to analyse the quantitative data. Chi-square analyses were used to determine whether there were any significant differences in the responses of participants based on variables such as gender and the level of performance of schools.

Of the three hundred questionnaires administered to learners, 286 were used for data analyses while fourteen respondents did not answer questions sufficiently to be included in the data analysis. From this total of 286 learners, 166 (58%) were females and 120 (42%) were males. The age of learners ranged from sixteen to twenty years old. The majority of the learners, 54%, were seventeen years old, while the eighteen-year olds comprised 24% and the nineteen-year olds comprised 12%.

Results and discussion

Table 1 is a clear reflection of the multi-lingual reality of classrooms in the Namibian context. Permission was obtained from the principals to conduct the research with children below the age of 18 years.

Table 1: First languages of the participant-learners

First language	Oshi-wambo	Afrikaans	Otjiherero	Khoekhoe gowab	Rukwangali	Silosi	English
Participants	38%	25%	19%	8%	2%	0.70%	0.70%

Learners were asked to record the results they obtained during the first ESL examination of the year under discussion as well as their Grade point average in the same examination. These were based on learners' accounts of their performance and were not verified via school records. This would have compromised confidentiality, since the researchers would have had to match questionnaires to specific names. It can

be noted from Table 2 that, for both ESL and Grade point average about 25% of learners stated that they had obtained scores below 50% and only 8% had reached scores above 70%.

Table 2: Performance in ESL and grade point average of the sampled group

	Score Categories					Total
	0-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-100	
Learners in each category	%	%	%	%	%	%
Performance in ESL	5.8	21.1	38.5	26.5	8.0	100
Grade Point Average (GPA)	2.6	23.8	40.8	25.3	7.5	100

N= 286

The number of learners obtaining A+ to D symbols in the ESL national examination were obtained for each of the participating schools for the period 2008 to 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2008; 2009b; 2010a). When results for the three examinations were compared, it became clear that there was a big difference between the performances of the three schools in ESL. It was also noticed that high percentages of learners in all three schools had obtained symbols below D (see Table 3). The low results in ESL of the sampled group reflected results as reported in other official documents. It is thus clear that establishing reasons for the current status quo, and developing strategies to improve this, are of great importance.

Table 3: Average percentages of learners obtaining A+ to D symbols in the lower, average and higher performing schools from 2008 to 2010

Symbols	LPS	APS	HPS
	Average % of learners per symbol		
A+, A	0%	4%	7%
B	4%	17%	19%
C	9%	35%	38%
D	43%	12%	13%
Below D	44%	32%	23%

The writing activities selected for this study were based on the activities outlined in the Grades 11 and 12 Namibian syllabi; these comprised the writing of essays or compositions, book or film reviews, reports, articles, letters, diaries and grammar activities. In the questionnaire learners expressed their likes and dislikes on a four or five point Likert scale. For the purpose of presenting the results and for clarity, the researchers sometimes combined the positive results, for example “much” and “very much”, and the negative responses, for example, “not at all” and “somewhat”.

Perceived level of enjoyment of writing activities

Results indicate that the most popular or most liked writing activities were letter writing (59%), grammar activities (58%) and summaries (54%). The most disliked writing activities were writing newspaper articles (66%), reports (59%) and book/film reviews. When the researcher looked at the average responses for all the writing activities, it became clear that 19% of learners did not like writing activities in English at all, 31% liked them only somewhat, 25% liked them much, and 22% liked them very much (see Table 4).

Table 4: Level of enjoyment with regards to each writing activity

Writing activity	Level of enjoyment					Total
	No response	Not at all	Some-what	Much	Very Much	
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Writing essays/ composition	3.0	11.0	37.0	31.0	18.0	100
Writing letters	3.0	8.0	30.0	32.0	27.0	100
Writing newspaper articles	3.0	26.0	40.0	20.0	12.0	100
Writing report	5.0	24.0	35.0	22.0	14.0	100
Writing book/ film reviews	3.0	26.0	33.0	21.0	17.0	100
Writing summaries	3.0	13.0	30.0	29.0	25.0	100
Writing poems	4.0	21.0	25.0	23.0	27.0	100
Keeping diaries	3.0	32.0	22.0	21.0	22.0	100
Grammar activities	3.0	13.0	26.0	25.0	33.0	100
Average	3.0	19.0	31.0	25.0	22.0	100

N= 286

When one looks at the average responses, it appears that 50% of learners indicated that they disliked the writing activities, compared to 47% who appeared to like them. Learners thus had both negative and positive attitudes towards the writing activities. These findings are in agreement with the views of Witte (2007) who stresses that children show little interest in classroom writing activities and assignments. Yet it is important that learners should have positive attitudes towards writing because a positive attitude towards writing motivates them and brings greater success in terms of language proficiency and competence in language skills (Atkinson, 2003; Brown, 2006; Cobanoglu, 2006). Choi (2005) also states that a positive attitude may help learners maintain their language skills after classroom instruction is over. Learners who enjoy a task and find it motivating or interesting are likely to choose to participate in that task and avoid tasks which they do not find motivating (Cambira, 2010). The low performance of Namibian learners in their ESL writing activities might thus partly be due to negative attitudes and low motivation.

The data gathered from the open-ended questions of the questionnaire and the focus group discussions indicated that learners enjoyed the writing activities because these activities were easy; they helped learners to enlarge their subject knowledge; they provided an opportunity to use their own words; activities promoted creativity and developed their imagination. On the other hand, reasons for not enjoying the writing activities were that some learners saw them as difficult and that they required too much writing time. Furthermore, learners were limited to one topic only and teachers did not always look at their written work. Learners also felt that they obtained low grades for the activities. These findings are in line with what was observed by Jones and Myhill (2007) who state that essays pose a problem to learners because they require longer periods of time to write; teachers expect learners to write about unfamiliar topics, as well as that the writing process as such is perceived to be difficult.

Perceived level of usefulness of writing activities

Learners were asked whether they found the ESL writing activities useful to them now and in their future lives. The most useful writing activities were: writing letters (77%), grammar activities and reports (62% each), and writing summaries (61%). The least useful writing activities were writing poems (56%), book/film reviews (56%) and newspaper/magazine articles (51%). Average results in Table 5 show that more learners (62%) viewed the writing activities as useful compared to those who viewed them as not useful (35%).

Table 5: Usefulness with regard to each writing activity

	Level of usefulness						
	No Re- sponse	Not at all	A little	Some what	Useful	Very useful	Total
Writing Activity	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Writing essays/ compositions	2.8	10.1	23.8	3.8	31.1	28.3	100
Writing letters	2.8	5.2	13.6	1.7	35.0	41.6	100
Writing newspaper articles	3.1	16.8	29.0	5.6	22.4	23.1	100
Writing reports	2.8	9.4	21.0	4.9	33.9	28.0	100
Writing book/film reviews	4.2	23.1	26.2	7.0	21.0	18.5	100
Writing summaries	3.1	11.5	18.9	5.9	32.2	28.3	100
Writing poems	3.5	25.2	23.8	7.0	18.5	22.0	100
Keeping diaries	4.2	17.8	16.4	8.0	23.4	30.1	100
Grammar activities	4.2	11.2	18.2	4.5	23.8	38.1	100
Average	3.0	14.0	21.0	6.0	27.0	29.0	100

N= 286

In the focus-group discussion participants believed these activities were useful as writing activities trained them for the future, improved their knowledge of writing, prepared them for examinations and improved

writing skills could provide job opportunities in future. It could be deduced from these views that the majority of learners in this study understood the value these writing activities have for them in the present and the future.

Learners' perceived competence and perceived difficulties in writing activities

A relatively high percentage of learners felt that they had either high or very high competence in most of the ESL writing activities. The highest percentages under the two categories 'high' and 'very high' were for the writing of letters 58%, grammar activities 56% and the writing of summaries 55%. Those writing activities in which a high percentage of learners did not feel confident about their competencies were the writing of newspaper articles (70%) and the writing of reports and book or film reviews (60% each). See Table 6.

Table 6: Perceived competence with regards to each writing activity

	Level of competence						
	No Re- sponse	Very Low	Low	Some what	High	Very High	Total
Writing activity	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Writing essays /compositions	1.4	3.1	11.5	37.4	36.7	9.8	100
Writing letters	1.4	2.4	7.0	30.8	41.6	16.8	100
Writing newspaper articles	1.7	6.6	18.9	44.1	23.1	5.6	100
Writing reports	2.1	5.6	17.5	44.8	21.7	8.4	100
Writing books	1.7	15.4	16.4	35.7	21.0	9.8	100
Writing summaries	3.1	4.2	14.0	24.1	31.8	22.7	100
Writing poems	2.8	11.2	12.9	31.5	20.6	21.0	100
Keeping diaries	2.4	9.1	16.1	28.3	22.4	21.7	100
Grammar activities	3.1	7.7	10.5	22.4	29.4	26.9	100
Average	2.0	7.0	14.0	33.0	28.0	16.0	100

N=286

Learners were also asked about how easy or difficult they found the ESL writing activities. The number of learners who found the majority of activities easy was high when compared to those who said that they found the activities to be difficult. It was only when asked about the writing of newspaper articles, as well as the writing of reports and book or film reviews, that more learners reported finding these activities difficult, rather than easy. The writing activities that were perceived to be easy by most learners were the writing of letters (69%), summaries (61%) and grammar activities (56%). See Table 7.

Table 7: Perceived difficulties with regard to each writing activity

	Level of difficulty						
	No Re- sponse	Very difficult	Difficult	Some what	Easy	Very easy	Total
Writing activity	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Writing essays /compositions	0.0	3.5	11.9	35.0	49.3	3.0	100
Writing letters	0.3	3.5	4.9	22.4	68.2	0.7	100
Writing newspaper articles	0.7	9.1	19.2	40.6	30.1	0.3	100
Writing reports	2.4	8.4	18.5	36.4	34.3	0.0	100
Writing book/film reviews	2.4	11.2	21.7	33.9	30.8	0.0	100
Writing summaries	1.4	4.2	7.3	26.2	60.8	0.0	100
Writing poems	2.8	11.5	14.3	24.5	46.9	0.0	100
Keeping diaries	2.1	11.5	10.8	23.8	51.7	0.0	100
Grammar activities	2.1	4.2	8.4	29.0	55.9	0.3	100
Average	1.0	8.0	13.0	30.0	47.0	1.0	100

N= 286

The average responses to all the writing activities clearly showed that the majority of learners (44%) perceived themselves as being highly competent, while a small percentage (21%) perceived themselves as having low competence. In addition, the majority of learners (48%) found the writing activities to be very easy and easy compared to a few (21%) who found them very difficult and difficult.

Having competence in activities should be a sign that learners have positive attitudes to writing activities, but this is not the case according to the findings in this study. These findings are also contrary to what Trang (2009) argues. He says that many learners consider writing as the most difficult skill. Ackerman's (2006) report, furthermore, states that up to 40% of learners in high schools are not doing well in writing classes. Learners' perception that the writing activities were easy and that they had high competence in these activities were not expected, because of the examination results which indicated that more learners had achieved lower symbols (D to G) compared to those who achieved A+ to C (Ministry of Education 2008, 2009b, 2010a). Learners' reported performance in ESL also indicates that more learners (65.5%) had scored below 60% compared to learners who had obtained scores of 60% and above (34.5%). It, therefore, appears that learners' perceptions of their competence, and the difficulties experienced in ESL were not corresponding with their actual performance in ESL.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to state some of the difficulties they encountered in the listed writing activities. From the total of 286 respondents, 202 responded to this question and reported the following difficulties: too many words to write (15%), spelling words correctly (14%), losing or running out of ideas (12%), using tenses correctly (11%), difficulties in introducing and concluding their

writing activities (10%). In the focus-group discussion, participants added difficulties, such as that it was not easy to formulate titles in essays and that it was difficult to arrange ideas logically and identify main points in summaries.

These views support Grabe and Kaplans' (2000) view that the most common problem in writing is the writer's difficulty in beginning to compose. In addition, Grabe and Kaplan (2000) and Myles (2002) state that using tenses correctly has always been a serious difficulty in writing for most second language learners. They further argue that choosing the right word to fit the context is also difficult, especially when learners have low English language skills.

Voluntary involvement in ESL writing activities

When probed about how often they engaged in ESL writing activities on their own without being asked by the teacher to do so, it became clear that for all the writing activities the majority of learners did not write voluntarily. The average responses for all the writing activities showed that 33% of learners never engaged in the ESL writing activities on their own, while 21% said they rarely engaged in these activities; some of the respondents said that they did the activities sometimes (16%). Fifteen per cent of learners said that they often did these ESL writing activities voluntarily and 12% of them said they did them very often (see Table 8).

Table 8: Voluntary involvement in writing activities

	Voluntary involvement						Total
	No Re- sponse	Never	Rarely	Some what	Often	Very often	
Writing activity	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Writing essays /compositions	3.5	36.0	27.3	15.0	10.5	7.7	100
Writing letters	3.8	16.8	19.6	17.8	26.6	15.4	100
Writing newspaper articles	3.5	44.4	25.9	13.6	8.7	3.8	100
Writing reports	2.8	41.3	24.5	13.3	13.6	4.5	100
Writing book/film reports	4.2	48.6	19.6	13.6	8.0	5.9	100
Writing summaries	4.2	24.1	18.2	16.8	21.0	15.7	100
Writing poems	5.2	27.6	17.5	12.6	16.4	20.6	100
Keeping diaries	4.2	27.3	13.3	19.2	12.9	23.1	100
Grammar activities	4.2	27.6	18.2	16.8	18.9	14.3	100
Average	4.0	33.0	21.0	16.0	15.0	12.0	100

N= 286

Although 56% of learners in this study found the writing activities to be useful, 35% did not; 50% found activities to be enjoyable opposed to 47% who did not; only 27% reported that they engaged in these

writing activities voluntarily while the majority (54%) rarely or never engaged in these writing activities on their own. These findings are in line with Schunk's (2009) argument that motivated learners choose to work on tasks in their spare time when they are not required to do so, and that the more frequently learners practise writing activities in English as a second language, the more intrinsically motivated they become. The findings in the current study cannot clearly support the findings of Fulmer and Frijters (2011) who posit that learners participate willingly in activities they find interesting and important. The current findings indicate that learners in this study felt competent in doing the writing activities and also found these to be useful, but hardly participated willingly in any of the writing activities.

Gender

Of the 286 learners included in the study, 167 (58.3%) were girls, while 119 (41.6%) were boys. Chi-square analyses were done to determine whether there were significant differences between the perceptions of boys and girls with regards to ESL writing activities. Big differences were found in several of the categories but in most cases these differences were not statistically significant. The only writing activity where chi-square results indicated a statistically significant difference between boys and girls was on the writing of diaries. Many more girls (32.3%) than boys (6.7%) considered the keeping of diaries as very enjoyable. Similarly, many more girls (37.7%) than boys (19.3%) considered the keeping of diaries as being very useful. More girls (31.1%) than boys (11.8%) kept diaries on their own without being told to do so by the teacher. Substantially, more girls (65.3%) than boys (37.8%) considered the keeping of diaries as easy or very easy, and more girls (27.5%) than boys (13.4%) perceived themselves as having very high competence in keeping diaries ($p < 0.05$ in all cases). This difference between boys and girls may be socially constructed and may reflect society's conscious or unconscious conformity with stereotypical gender roles. In the Namibian context, the keeping of diaries may be considered as a female, rather than a male, leisure activity. Research has shown that social factors or gender socialisation also constitutes language differences between males and females (Browne, 2005; Lovas, 2011). Since differences between boys and girls for the other activities were not statistically significant, this finding cannot support or refute other research that found differences between boys and girls with regards to ESL writing activities.

Schools' performance level

As was indicated previously, three schools were purposively selected to determine the relationship between the schools' performance level, on the one hand, and learners' perceptions regarding ESL writing activities, on the other. Several of the chi-square analyses yielded clear and statistically significant differences between the three schools. However, it was only in some of these cases (perceived difficulty and

perceived competence) that a clear pattern emerged with regard to school performance and the selected variables in the writing of ESL activities.

One would expect that in higher performing schools there would be more learners who perceived themselves as competent and who might find the writing activities easy. There were more learners from average and lower performing schools (17.2% and 23.2% respectively) than from higher performing schools (6.1%) that perceived the writing of essays as either difficult or very difficult ($N=286$ $df = 8$ $p = 0.00$). Similarly, more learners in lower (30.1%) and average (37.9%) performing schools found the writing of newspaper articles difficult and very difficult, while only a few from the higher performing school (17.4%) found these activities to be difficult ($N = 286$ $df = 10$ $p = 0.02$). As far as keeping diaries are concerned, the results also showed that there were more learners from the lower performing school (28%) and the average performing school (27.3%) than from the high performing school (12.2%) that perceived the keeping of diaries as either difficult or very difficult ($N = 286$ $df = 8$ $p = 0.00$). Thus, as was expected, with an increase in school performance there was a decrease in the number of learners that found the writing of essays, newspaper articles, and diaries to be difficult. These differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

The relationship between the three schools' levels of performance and learners' perception of their competence in the ESL writing activities also yielded statistically significant differences. More learners in the high performing school (59.2%) indicated that they had high and very high competence in writing essays, as opposed to those learners from the average (27.4%) and the low performing schools (52.7%) ($N = 286$ $df = 10$ $p = 0.00$). Similarly, more learners from the higher performing school perceived themselves as having high competence in writing newspaper articles (34.7%) compared to those from the average performing school (20%) and the lower performing school (30.1%) ($N = 286$ $df = 12$ $p = 0.00$). As far as writing summaries are concerned, the results also showed that there were more learners (53.1%) in the high performing school than learners in the average (50.5%) and the lower performing school (48%) that perceived themselves to be highly or very highly competent in writing summaries ($N = 286$ $df = 10$ $p = 0.02$). It was also found that more learners in the high performing school (55.1%), compared to 31.6% in the average and 45.2% in the low performing school, perceived themselves to be highly competent in the keeping of diaries ($N = 286$ $df = 10$ $p = 0.00$).

As was expected, results showed that there was an increase in the number of learners who perceived themselves as having high competence in the writing of essays, newspaper articles, summaries and diaries with an increase in school performance. In higher performing schools, learners, on average, received

higher marks for their academic work, and this would have influenced their perceived competency levels as related to their abilities to handle the different writing activities.

On the other hand, for the writing of poems, the opposite of what was expected, was found with regards to both learners' perception of competence and difficulty. More learners in the higher performing school (28.6%), compared to 25.2% in the average performing and 23.7% in the lower performing school, perceived the writing of poems as difficult. Similarly, more learners in the average performing school (47.4%) and in the low performing school (44.1%) than in the higher performing school (33.6%) perceived themselves as having high competence in the writing of poems. There was thus a decrease in the number of learners who perceived themselves as having high competence in writing poems with an increase in school performance. This difference was found to be statistically significant ($N = 286$ $df = 10$ $p = 0.02$). It could be that learners from higher performing schools are being made more aware of the complexities involved in the writing of poems, and that they are thus more aware of how difficult it can be to write a good poem. This would also have influenced their perception of their competence to write poems.

As a general observation, it was interesting to note that, even though learners liked writing poems and generally also perceived themselves as having high competence in the writing of poems, they found this exercise not useful. These discrepancies are difficult to explain, and one can only speculate about possible reasons for this. However, the reasons learners offered as to why writing activities were useful, were, amongst others, that these activities would train them for the future; prepare them for the examination and could provide job opportunities in future. When one looks at these reasons, it can be argued that learners may not consider poems as being useful to assist them in their future lives, even though they may feel competent and enjoy writing poems.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results showed that, even though a large number of the sampled learners disliked most of the school writing activities, the majority felt that these activities could be useful to them, especially in their future careers. Furthermore, it was observed that, despite their self-reported, low academic and ESL performance, most learners considered themselves to be highly competent in ESL writing activities, and also did not consider these writing activities to be difficult. These findings contradict their real school performance, as reported in a number of official documents. It was also observed that very few learners engaged in writing activities voluntarily. In general, the results thus point to negative attitudes and low motivation as far as ESL writing activities are concerned for a high percentage of learners in this study.

To encourage learners to like and enjoy the writing activities, teachers should give relevant and interesting topics for essays. In order to influence learners to develop positive attitudes towards writing, teachers should encourage learners to do more activities on their own. This could be done by entering them into writing competitions or introducing them to web-based writing. Once learners know that their writing efforts may be rewarded, they will be more motivated to participate in writing activities.

Since the examination results of learners indicated poor performance, teachers could improve on these results by giving more writing activities to learners because the more learners write, the more they would learn and master the skill of writing. However, pieces of writing should be marked thoroughly by the teacher, and learners should be clear on why they have obtained a specific mark and what their mistakes are.

Furthermore, learners should be encouraged to make use of books in libraries and read much more, in order to become more proficient in vocabulary and spelling. Reading more could improve the learners' levels of reading and they would become familiar with more English words. Once learners are well-equipped with vocabulary, they can become better writers.

The teaching methods that teachers employ should also be geared towards motivating learners to participate in all kinds of writing activities. Although the learner is the one to produce the writing, the onus remains on the teacher to motivate, encourage and assist the learner to regard writing activities as a pleasure and not a pain.

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