



THE IMPACT OF TEACHER BEHAVIORS ON STUDENTS' WRITING JOURNEYS IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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Abstract:

Grounded in Weiner's Attribution Theory, this study explores how university students in an ESL context retrospectively attribute their writing success or struggles to their perceptions of teacher engagement, feedback, classroom environment, and consistency in instruction. Data were gathered through a focus group discussion with four second-year engineering students at a Ghanaian public university, who reflected on their high school writing experiences. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes: teacher support and engagement, feedback practices, classroom environment, instructional gaps, and assessment consistency. Positive outcomes were linked to teachers who were consistent, supportive, and provided constructive feedback. In contrast, negative self-attributions emerged in classrooms with disengaged or inconsistent teachers. The results demonstrate the impact of teacher behavior on students' motivation and perceptions of their writing abilities. Teachers who promote adaptive attributions, emphasizing effort and strategy, sustain student motivation. The study argues that teacher motivation should involve fostering emotionally supportive and equitable environments. The study recommends training programs for teachers that emphasize consistent pedagogy, relational classroom approaches, and motivational feedback. It also advocates systemic reforms to ensure consistent, student-centered writing instruction, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

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1. Introduction

In many educational contexts, especially across sub-Saharan Africa, improving students' proficiency in English writing remains a persistent and complex challenge (Pineteh, 2014). This issue is particularly urgent in countries like Ghana, where English is the official language and the main medium of instruction. Because writing plays a vital role in academic success, especially at the Senior High School (SHS) level and beyond, addressing this challenge demands a thorough understanding of its underlying factors (Ansah, 2014). In spite of ongoing curriculum reforms and increased access to teaching resources, general assessments still reveal various issues with students' writing (West African Examinations Council [WAEC], 2022). This gap appears to point to deeper problems related to classroom dynamics and students' perceptions, which need to be solved by means other than superficial curriculum changes.

While current research emphasizes pedagogical strategies, curriculum design, and teacher preparedness, little attention has been paid to how students interpret teacher encouragement and discouragement and how these perceptions affect their writing interests (Arkhurst *et al.*, 2025; Badu *et al.*, 2022; Ntumi *et al.*, 2023). This highlights a critical point: students are not merely passive recipients of instruction but active meaning makers who interpret classroom experiences in ways that shape their beliefs, attitudes, and self-assessments. These insights significantly influence how students approach writing assignments and responding to feedback. Specifically, the emotional and motivational impact of teacher-student interactions, whether positive or negative, can affect students' willingness to persevere and improve their writing. Understanding how students perceive both the challenges they face and the support they receive during their writing journey, offers valuable insights into their development as writers. This study explores students' perceptions of the factors influencing their writing growth, with the role of their teacher's motivation as the focus. The goal is to determine how these perceptions influence students' motivation, engagement, and academic success in English writing.

The Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985, 2000) provides a strong framework for analyzing how students' explanations for their academic successes and failures influence their motivation for current and future learning behaviors. According to Weiner, students form causal attributions, i.e. explanations for their academic outcomes, across three main dimensions: locus (internal vs. external), stability (stable vs. unstable), and controllability (controllable vs. uncontrollable). These attributions, whether centered on personal effort, innate ability, task difficulty, or external support, greatly influence students' emotional reactions, expectations of success, and motivation (Graham, 2020; Schunk *et al.*, 2008). Students' perceptions of how teachers respond to their progress could be key to these attributional patterns. Students who view their writing improvement as stemming from

teachers' encouragement and constructive feedback are more likely to develop a sense of competence, maintaining motivation that leads to success (Weiner, 2010). Conversely, students who attribute poor performance to teacher discouragement, harsh criticism, or lack of support may internalize failure as resulting from stable or uncontrollable causes, which can diminish motivation and lead to disengagement from writing tasks (Graham, 2020).

Despite the importance of these psychological processes, limited research within the Ghanaian context has systematically examined how students' attributions about teacher influence impact their motivation and progress in writing. This study addresses this gap by exploring how second-year undergraduate students reflect on their senior high school experiences, interpret teacher behaviors, and understand their writing development through attributional reasoning. Focusing on students' perspectives, the study aims to reveal how the causal explanations they form influence their motivation, perseverance, and performance in English writing (Weiner, 2010; Schunk *et al.*, 2008).

Using focus group discussion, the study investigates how students attribute their writing improvement or stagnation to specific teacher behaviors. This approach offers insights into the broader motivational dynamics that underpin writing instruction in an under-researched educational context. Additionally, the study highlights the multilingual educational landscape, where English writing often functions as a gatekeeping skill for academic progression.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What specific teacher behaviors do students attribute to their motivation or demotivation in English writing?
- 2) How do students' attitudes toward their English language teachers relate to their perceived writing performance and progress?

By examining these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between teacher-student dynamics, motivational psychology, and educational outcomes in Ghana and the broader sub-Saharan African context. Through the lens of Attribution Theory, it highlights the critical role of teachers not only as instructional facilitators but also as key agents in shaping students' motivational trajectories through the meanings students assign to their learning experiences (Graham & Williams, 2009). It offers a context-sensitive understanding of attributional processes in writing classrooms and emphasizes the need for pedagogical practices that recognize students' interpretations as central to their academic engagement. The findings have implications for teacher education, classroom practice, and education policy in Ghana and similar contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Motivation and Student Outcomes: Attribution Theory

The relationship between teacher motivation and student learning has been examined through key psychological theories, notably Self-Determination Theory (SDT),

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), and Attribution Theory (AT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Weiner, 1985). While SDT emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining teacher and student motivation, and EVT highlights beliefs and values associated with effort and achievement, Attribution Theory offers a unique lens for understanding how students interpret teacher behaviors and how these interpretations influence their motivation and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Guthrie *et al.*, 2006).

Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985, 2010) posits that learners explain their academic successes and failures through three core causal dimensions: *locus* whether the cause is internal (e.g., ability, effort) or external (e.g., luck, task difficulty), *stability* whether the cause is stable over time (e.g., ability) or unstable (e.g., effort, mood), and *controllability* whether the individual perceives the cause as something they can control (e.g., effort, strategy) or not (e.g., luck, others' actions). These attributions influence students' emotions, motivation, and future behaviors. For instance, attributing writing success to internal-controllable factors like effort or strategy can enhance persistence, whereas attributing failure to stable-uncontrollable factors like perceived teacher neglect or low aptitude may lead to helplessness and disengagement (Graham, 2020; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). The theory is especially vital for interpreting the long-term effects of emotionally charged feedback and classroom settings on writers' beliefs.

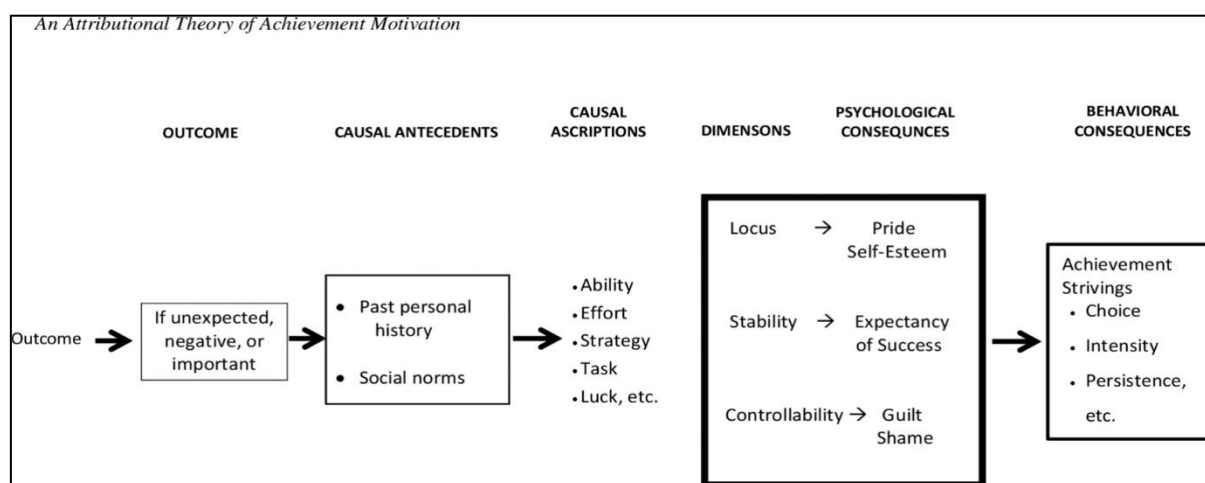


Figure 1: An attributional theory of achievement motivation
(Adapted from Graham & Taylor, 2022)

Figure 1 illustrates that achievement outcomes, such as success and failure, are commonly explained by several factors, including inherent ability (which encompasses both natural aptitude and learned skills), the level of effort (whether short-term or long-lasting), task difficulty, luck, emotional state, and the influence of others. Among these explanations, ability and effort stand out as the most frequently cited reasons. People tend to place the greatest emphasis on their intelligence and the amount of effort they put in (Graham & Taylor, 2022). In the writing classroom, these elucidations are particularly salient, as feedback and evaluation are frequent and mostly public. This theory, therefore,

provides a nuanced framework for understanding how students construct meaning from such connections.

2.2 Teacher Motivation and Educational Contexts

Teacher motivation has long been recognized as a critical determinant of educational quality, influencing instructional practices, classroom climate, and student achievement (Richardson, Watt, & Devos, 2013; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Motivation broadly refers to the internal and external forces that initiate, guide, and sustain goal-directed behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within educational contexts, intrinsic motivation reflects teachers' internal drive to teach for personal satisfaction or interest, whereas extrinsic motivation derives from external rewards like salary, recognition, or status (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Han & Yin, 2016).

Multiple structural and interpersonal factors affect teacher motivation. Excessive workload, rigid accountability systems, and administrative pressure can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout, reducing instructional effectiveness (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Shen *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, supportive settings that offer professional development, collegial collaboration, and meaningful recognition enhance teachers' sense of competence, job satisfaction, and commitment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Day & Gu, 2007). Having a positive relationship with students and school leaders further reinforces a sense of belonging and professional purpose (Klassen & Chiu, 2011). These motivational dynamics influence both the quality of teaching and students' classroom experiences. Issues of language policy, assessment pressures, and resource constraints, which intensify the emotional stakes in the writing classroom, can further complicate these dynamics.

2.3 Writing in Second Language Contexts

Writing in a second language (L2) contexts, particularly English as a Second Language (ESL), is usually viewed as a complex skill that requires mastery of both lower-level linguistic elements and higher-order cognitive processes. L2 writers frequently struggle with grammatical accuracy, lexical variety, organization, and coherence across texts (Hyland, 2003; Weigle, 2002; Nation, 2009; Owusu Debrah, 2025). These challenges are often intensified by systemic issues such as insufficient feedback, limited exposure to meaningful writing tasks, and an exam-oriented curriculum (Lee, 2017; Sampson, 2016).

Psychological issues, for instance, low self-efficacy, anxiety, and fear of assessment, also play a role in determining students' engagement and success in writing (Cheng, 2002). Therefore, effective writing instruction requires not only pedagogical strategies for linguistic competence but also attention to the emotional and motivational states of learners (Tardy, 2009; Hyland, 2016). These factors play a significant role in determining whether students will exert greater effort to overcome their writing challenges or resign themselves to failure, particularly when the perceived difficulty is immutable. Essentially, teacher behaviors such as managing classroom affect, responding to students' errors, and delivering feedback can impact students' emotional and cognitive

challenges. In contexts where writing instruction is high-stakes and feedback is scarce, students' attributional beliefs about their writing ability become central.

Empirical studies show that motivated teachers engage in student-centered practices, provide meaningful feedback, and cultivate classroom environments conducive to learning elements critical in the context of L2 writing (Han & Yin, 2016; Kunter *et al.*, 2013). However, in under-resourced settings like Ghanaian Senior High Schools (SHS), where English writing is often taught under conditions of large class sizes and high-stakes exams, the extent to which teacher motivation influences students' writing development remains underexplored (Sampson, 2016; Dampson, Havor, & Laryea, 2018).

2.4 The Current Study

This study applies Attribution Theory to investigate how university students retrospectively perceive the role of their high school English teachers' motivational behaviors in shaping their English writing journeys. Within the attributional framework, students may attribute their writing progress either to internal factors (such as their ability or effort) or to external factors (such as the support or discouragement provided by their teacher). Teachers who demonstrate enthusiasm, commitment, and engagement in the classroom are likely to be perceived by students as playing a central role in their learning outcomes, reinforcing external-controllable attributions that promote persistence and confidence (Richardson, Watt, & Devos, 2013; Han & Yin, 2016). In contrast, when teachers appear disengaged or indifferent, students may attribute failure to stable, uncontrollable causes (e.g., the teacher's lack of support or an unchangeable classroom environment), undermining their motivation to improve (Weiner, 2010).

Research Question 1 focuses on identifying specific teacher behaviors that students perceive as motivating or demotivating in English writing classes. Here, the conceptual framework links observable teacher actions, such as providing constructive feedback, showing encouragement, or offering opportunities for self-expression (motivating behaviors), versus harsh criticism, neglect, or rigid exam-focused instruction (demotivating behaviors), to students' attributional interpretations. Previous research suggests that the nature and delivery of teacher feedback play an important role in shaping students' beliefs about the causes of their performance (Brookhart, 2017; Kunter *et al.*, 2013). Motivationally supportive behaviors promote adaptive attributions (e.g., "*If I work harder, I can improve*"), while discouraging or punitive behaviors may lead to maladaptive attributions (e.g., "*I'm just not good at writing, no matter what I do*"; Graham, 2020).

Research Question 2 explores how students' perceptions of their teachers relate to their writing progress and performance. From an attributional perspective (Weiner, 1985), students form opinions about teachers based on how they interpret classroom experiences. When students see a teacher as supportive and inspiring, they are more likely to attribute their writing progress to both their own effort and the teacher's role. This, in turn, fosters motivation and persistence (Day & Gu, 2007; Schunk *et al.*, 2008).

However, negative views may stem from feelings of frustration, especially if students blame external or uncontrollable factors, such as perceived unfairness or lack of support, for their struggles (Graham & Williams, 2009). In this light, a teacher's behavior in the ESL classroom is not just a personal trait but something that determines how students construct meaning around success or failure in English writing.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative research examines university students' retrospective perceptions of how their high school teachers' behaviors have influenced their writing experiences and academic writing practices at the university level. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on its unique ability to capture the complexity, depth, and nuance of participants' lived experiences, especially those related to personal feelings, reflections, and meaning-making processes that are difficult to quantify (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study provides detailed insights into how students recall the support or criticism from their teachers and how these moments have impacted their development as writers. Using a qualitative approach enabled the researchers to emphasize students' voices and explore the emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of writing.

The study adopts an interpretivist perspective, which focuses on retrospective reflection to recognize that students' stories are influenced by context and constructed meaning. This approach highlights personal experience and allows for a nuanced exploration of how past classroom interactions impact present academic writing habits. It also aligns with the research goal of capturing the retrospective attributional logic students use to explain their writing development.

3.2 Participants and Data Collection Procedure

The participants involved in this study were four undergraduate students in the first semester (i.e. 3rd week) of their second year at a public university in Ghana. All participants were enrolled in the School of Energy, which at the time of data collection offered two academic programs: Bachelor of Science in Petroleum Engineering (PET) and Bachelor of Science in Renewable Energy Engineering (REE). Two students from each program accepted the invitation to participate, resulting in a total of four participants.

Participant recruitment was facilitated through course representatives, who were requested to extend invitations to their peers for a study focused on improving academic writing in the university. It was made explicitly clear that participation was voluntary. Ultimately, four students expressed interest, and a follow-up meeting was arranged with these students to discuss ethical considerations, including informed consent, and to organize the logistics of the interview session.

The interview was conducted during the third week of January 2025 in a designated facility on the university campus. The session lasted approximately two

hours. The choice of a focus group was guided by the potential for interaction among peers to spark memory recall and deepen responses through shared reflection. Engaging in collective meaning-making can be especially valuable when reflecting on past classroom experiences that may be emotionally complex and difficult to express individually. Focus group discussion also has the potential to boost dialogic engagement, allowing participants to negotiate and construct meaning.

The data originates from a broader project centered on students' academic writing. During focus group sessions, participants were first invited to reflect on their academic writing experiences in senior high school and to consider how those experiences have shaped their current writing practices at university. Notably, one interview with students from the School of Energy uncovered valuable insights into how teacher behavior in senior high school influenced students' writing progress. Although this theme was not the primary focus of the project, it emerged as significant and is explored further in the present study.

3.2.1 Data Management and Ethical Clearance

The group discussion was recorded using a Zoom H1 audio recorder. The audio files were subsequently uploaded to Research Video, a secure multimedia transcription platform managed by the Research Support Services at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. The automated transcript generated by the platform was manually reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy and to verify that individual contributions were properly attributed through diarization.

The ethical approval was obtained from the institution to conduct the research in Ghana. The study ensured the confidentiality of participants through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. For the focus group discussion, participants were allowed to sign informed consent forms before the data were collected.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed as the primary method for analyzing the data, following the six stages of Braun and Clarke's model (2006, 2012): (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) creating the final report. The researchers began by immersing themselves in the data through repeated readings, which facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the content and allowed for the initial identification of salient words and phrases. These keywords served as a basis for generating preliminary codes. As the process evolved, the codes were systematically organized into broader patterns, which led to the development of emergent themes.

Furthermore, thematic analysis highlights the importance of reflexivity, encouraging researchers to remain aware of how their perspectives and assumptions influence the process of interpretation. This reflexive stance helps strengthen the analysis by making it more transparent and trustworthy (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2002). In this study, a mixed coding strategy was adopted to allow for both theoretical guidance

and openness to participants' voices. Deductive codes, such as locus, stability, and controllability, were guided by Attribution Theory, while emergent themes were drawn from how participants articulated their experiences. One such theme was the lasting impact of inconsistent teacher assessment on students' writing motivation. For instance, a student shared that this inconsistency discouraged her and diminished her interest in writing, an effect that continued in her university studies.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers engaged in reflexive memoing to examine their assumptions and positionality. This helped minimize potential biases and kept student perspectives at the center of interpretation. A brief coding trail was also maintained to track how themes evolved and to ensure analytical transparency.

4. Results

This section presents the main findings that emerged from how undergraduate students explained their perceived progress, or lack of English writing, particularly in relation to teacher encouragement or discouragement at the senior high school. The data were derived from a focus group interview with four students (two male and two female) enrolled in two programs: BSc Renewable Energy Engineering and Petroleum Engineering at a Ghanaian university. All participants had a secondary education background in science and attended different high schools in Ghana. Pseudonyms R1 and R2 represent students from Renewable Energy, while P1 and P2 represent those from Petroleum Engineering. The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed five key themes: (1) teacher presence and structured support, (2) feedback and guidance, (3) classroom environment, (4) challenges in writing, and (5) teacher consistency.

Using Attribution Theory as the interpretative lens, the study highlights the causal clarifications students construct for their writing behaviors and attitudes, and how these attributions relate to their motivation, engagement, and self-perceptions.

4.1 Teacher Presence and Structured Support

Students' reflections emphasized the central role of teacher presence and engagement in influencing their writing attitudes and practices. Teachers who were consistently present, punctual, and invested in students' writing in English class fostered a more sustained engagement with writing tasks. P1 shared:

"Back in SHS, there was one teacher who helped me learn writing. She never missed her class and was always punctual. She always made us write something anytime she was in our class. Furthermore, because I love it, I was doing everything she asked us to do."
(Excerpt 1: P1)

However, P1 also noted a discrepancy between classroom effort and assessment outcomes, which led to confusion and self-doubt:

"But to my surprise, my end-of-term exam result wasn't good... I had done all that the teacher taught us." (Excerpt 2: P1)

In contrast, R1 described an absence of such support during senior high school, stating:

"They were not teaching us... We were not given the opportunity to practice writing. My foundation was built at the basic school... I didn't get [support in writing] at SHS. That's why I don't like writing even at university." (Excerpt 3: R1)

These narratives highlight the significant impact of teachers' presence and pedagogical commitment, or their absence, on students' long-term behaviors and attitudes toward writing. Students viewed teacher consistency as an external factor that was unstable yet beyond their control, often crediting their progress to the teacher's structured support. In contrast, when such guidance was missing, students tended to internalize their struggles, indicating a shift toward attributing failure to stable and uncontrollable personal factors.

4.2 Feedback and Guidance

Constructive feedback emerged as a critical factor in students' writing improvement. P1 recounted how a teacher's advice to prioritize clarity over complexity transformed her writing approach and exam performance:

"One teacher pointed out that writing is not about big words... but to make it simple and conspicuous... I listened to the advice... and indeed, I had A1 when our results came." (Excerpt 4: P1)

In contrast, feedback perceived as punitive or discouraging had a negative effect. R2 stated:

"I didn't like writing essays because when you get your paper, you would see a lot of red pen marks in it." (Excerpt 5: R2)

These contrasting experiences highlight the impact of feedback not only as a pedagogical tool but as an attributional cue, guiding students to view success or failure as linked to effort rather than fixed ability.

4.3 Classroom Environment

The broader classroom atmosphere also influenced students' willingness to engage with writing. P2 attributed his sustained interest in English to a teacher who created a relatable and interactive classroom and lessons:

"Our teacher was a young guy. He would start with a discussion topic that interested the boys... like soccer or trending news. This helped all of us sitting at the back to interact and participate." (Excerpt 6: P2)

This participatory environment helped mitigate disengagement typically observed among students who previously sat "at the back" of class, a physical and symbolic position often associated with detachment. On the other hand, R2 shares a contrasting classroom experience, which led to disengagement and a failure of a high-stakes English exam:

"When our teacher came in, we, the boys, were sitting at the back of the class, and he would open a story book and then look for somebody to read. Then everybody would put their heads on their desks [because] when you make a mistake, they laugh at you, so I didn't like anything about the English language. At the end, I didn't make it on the WASSCE English, though I passed all the other subjects." (Excerpt 7: R2)

The West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is a high-stakes exam taken in the final year of high school and serves as a primary requirement for university admission. R2 had to retake the English language exam, and during the preparation, he had a different teacher:

"I didn't pass the English subject and did a resit of the paper. I was given a tutor, and the Madam helped me because my focus was on the English language, and this time I did well. From there, I developed an interest in English." (Excerpt 8: R2)

This contrast reflects the emotional valence of classroom settings: supportive atmospheres facilitate adaptive attributions, while threatening ones foster external, uncontrollable attributions.

4.4 Persistent Challenges in Writing due to Instructional Gaps

Students noted challenges in structuring essays despite teacher support. These included difficulties in structuring essays, particularly in beginning and ending compositions under timed exam conditions. R1 observed:

"The start and the ending of essays were difficult for me... You don't have much time to finish, and you want to summarize everything. If you're not careful, you can even deviate in the ending." (Excerpt 9: R1)

Such comments suggest a need for more targeted instruction in writing strategies and essay organization, especially within high-stakes assessment contexts.

4.5 Assessments Inconsistencies

Mixed evaluations from different teachers confuse students and lead to contradictory self-assessment. R1 noted that dissuasion from inconsistent grading reflects a need for standardization in assessment practices.

"Sometimes a teacher would say you are very good at writing essays, but another one would say you are not good... which discouraged me sometimes." (Excerpt 10: R1)

This variation in teacher judgments points to a broader issue of standardization in writing instruction and evaluation. Students appear to benefit from clear, consistent, and sustained pedagogical approaches to feedback and assessment.

The findings indicate that motivated and consistent teacher engagement, along with constructive and context-sensitive feedback, can positively impact students' engagement with writing. In contrast, the absence of such support, coupled with inconsistent evaluations and limited instruction in English writing classes, can inhibit students' progress. A holistic and sustained pedagogical approach that centers student experience and provides scaffolded support is critical for writing interests and competencies among high school learners.

5. Discussion

In this study, we have explored students' perception of the factors shaping their English writing interests and growth, focusing on teachers' encouragement or lack of it. In what follows, we interpret the results in the light of the research questions and previous studies.

5.1 RQ1: What specific teacher behaviors do students attribute to their motivation or demotivation in English writing?

Students' reflections revealed that teacher presence, engagement, constructive feedback, and complete instructional support were key motivating behaviors. Conversely, the absence of these behaviors was perceived as demotivating, impacting their attitudes toward writing.

Teachers who were consistently present, punctual, and invested in students' writing success fostered sustained engagement with writing tasks. Students attributed their interest in writing to the teacher's visible commitment and opportunities for self-expression through regular writing activities. P1, for instance, highlighted how a teacher's punctuality and structured lessons encouraged participation and improved learning outcomes. Such findings corroborate Patrick, Anderman, and Ryan (2002), who observed that teachers' genuine interest and respectful engagement cultivate stronger student motivation and connection.

Students also emphasized the motivational role of constructive, personalized feedback. P1 explained that advice to simplify vocabulary improved her clarity and

performance, underscoring how adaptive feedback can reframe causal beliefs about success. This aligns with Weiner's (2010) notion of reattribution training, where feedback redirects students' attributions toward controllable causes like effort and strategy. Similarly, Wentzel (2002) compared effective teachers to supportive parents, noting that clear communication and high expectations foster student adjustment and motivation. In contrast, poorly delivered feedback, particularly harsh corrections without explanation, was widely seen as demotivating. R2 recalled receiving essays covered in red pen marks, which fostered discouragement and disengagement. Such feedback often led students to attribute failure to fixed ability rather than effort, reflecting Weiner's (2000) concern that maladaptive attributions can trigger helplessness. Dörnyei (2001) similarly identified poor or vague feedback as a critical factor in student demotivation.

Instructional completeness also emerged as decisive. Students noted persistent challenges in structuring essays, particularly introductions and conclusions, under exam conditions. R1 observed: *"The start and the ending of essays were difficult for me... If you're not careful, you can even deviate in the end."* The lack of explicit instruction in such areas led some to misattribute difficulty to inherent inability, reinforcing negative self-assessments. This illustrates how insufficient scaffolding undermines attributional clarity and erodes student confidence (Graham & Williams, 2009).

These findings highlight that while teacher motivation and enthusiasm are essential, they are insufficient in isolation. Motivation must be supported by deliberate pedagogical strategies, targeted feedback, and complete instructional guidance. When these supports were present, students perceived progress as linked to external but controllable teacher behaviors. When absent, they tended to internalize difficulties as stable, uncontrollable deficits in ability. This aligns with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, which stresses that competence, autonomy, and relatedness must be nurtured for motivation to flourish.

5.2 RQ2: How do students' attitudes toward their English language teachers relate to their perceived writing performance and progress?

This section explored how students' attitudes toward their English teachers shaped their perceptions of writing performance and improvement. The findings suggest that classroom atmosphere played a central role in influencing engagement with writing and in shaping students' attitudes toward their teachers. For instance, P2 attributed his sustained interest in English writing to a teacher who created a relatable and interactive classroom environment: *"Our teacher was a young guy. He would start with a discussion topic that interested the boys... like soccer or trending news. This helped all of us who sat at the back to interact and participate."* Such participatory conditions helped mitigate disengagement often associated with students positioned *"at the back"* of the classroom, both physically and symbolically linked to detachment. Students who described their teachers as engaging, approachable, and encouraging reported stronger motivation and perceived progress in writing. They typically explained their improvement in terms of effort and strategy—internal, unstable, and controllable attributions that enhance persistence

(Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Thus, positive perceptions of teachers foster adaptive attributions and reinforce productive writing behavior, encouraging emotional engagement and a belief in the efficacy of effort.

By contrast, negative classroom climates undermined writing motivation and interest. R2 recalled experiences of shame and ridicule: *"They laughed at you when you made a mistake"*, which he linked to disinterest in English and failure in a final-year high-stakes exam. Such experiences prompted external and uncontrollable attributions, echoing Graham's (2006) finding that public criticism during writing tasks fosters avoidance behaviors and disengagement. Yet, R2's later experience with a supportive teacher illustrates the transformative power of positive classroom relations: *"... I was given a tutor, and the Madam helped me because my focus was on the English language, and this time I did well. From there, I developed an interest in English."* This contrast highlights how teacher support can reverse negative trajectories, underscoring that classroom environments are pivotal in shaping attributional beliefs and student outcomes.

Another recurring theme was the destabilizing effect of inconsistent evaluation practices, often caused by teacher turnover. R1, for example, received contradictory evaluation—one teacher praised her essay writing while another harshly criticized it—leading to confusion and fluctuating self-assessments. In attributional terms, such inconsistency encouraged external, unstable and uncontrollable attributions, weakening students' belief in effort as a reliable path to success. This unpredictability undermined motivation and impeded writing progress, fostering a negative perception of teachers. To prevent this mixed evaluation, Brookhart (2017) stresses that transparent, fair, and consistent assessment is essential, as grading should reflect mastery of learning goals rather than serve as behavioral control. When feedback is inconsistent or grading criteria shift (e.g., rewarding punctuality over content quality), students lose confidence in the causal link between effort and achievement. Such practices distort attributional patterns and can erode agency. By contrast, formative feedback, standards-based grading, and reflective teaching practices provide students with stable grounds for attributing success to controllable factors, reinforcing motivation and growth. Standardized assessment is especially important in classrooms with high teacher turnover, particularly in rural communities, such as those in Ghana's countryside, where difficult living conditions hinder teacher retention.

Taken together, these findings reveal that students' attitudes toward their English teachers are strongly tied to perceptions of their own writing performance and growth. Motivation emerges not as a fixed personal trait but as a dynamic outcome of teacher-student interactions. Supportive environments and consistent evaluation foster adaptive attributions and sustained engagement in writing, while hostile climates or erratic assessment encourage disengagement and external attributions. It may be argued that teacher educators and practitioners should recognize that, beyond pedagogical tools, the relational and evaluative context of the classroom can play a particularly important role in shaping students' writing trajectories.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The authors acknowledge several limitations of this study. First, the small sample size comprising only four second-year engineering students from a single public university limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the study prioritized depth over breadth, future studies should involve larger and more diverse participant groups, including students from different academic disciplines, schools, and regions. This would allow for comparisons across linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Second, the study relied on retrospective self-reports, which are inherently susceptible to memory distortion and selective recall. Although the focus group format facilitated rich discussion and the co-construction of meaning among participants, the time elapsed since senior high school may have affected the accuracy of their recollections. This limitation is acknowledged, as specific teacher behaviors and attitudes may not be recalled with complete precision. Nonetheless, the shared narratives and recurring themes across participants suggest that certain experiences left a lasting impression, offering valuable insight into how students retrospectively attribute their writing development and interest to prior teacher influence.

Third, the study did not include teacher perspectives or triangulation with classroom observations, which limits the ability to validate students' accounts or assess the actual classroom conditions. Understanding how teachers themselves interpret motivation, and feedback could provide a more comprehensive picture of the teacher-student attributional dynamics. Future studies should adopt a multi-actor approach to explore how teachers understand and enact motivation within complex institutional settings.

Fourth, the focus on Attribution Theory, while analytically useful, may have constrained the exploration of other relevant factors such as peer influence, language ideology, or systemic inequities in writing instruction. Integrating complementary theories, such as Self-Determination Theory or socio-cognitive models, could offer a more holistic understanding of students' motivational trajectories.

Finally, the cross-sectional and qualitative nature of the study precludes assessment of change over time. A longitudinal design would offer deeper insight into how attributional beliefs develop and shift across educational transitions. These limitations underscore the need for future research to adopt more diverse samples, mixed methods design, and multi-actor perspectives to build a richer, more nuanced understanding of how teacher motivation and student writing development interact.

7. Conclusion and Implications

This study underscores the influential role of English language teachers in shaping students' motivation and perceptions of writing during their academic journey. The findings reveal that students attribute their writing engagement and perceived improvement to specific teacher behaviors, particularly consistent support, clear

feedback, and engaging instruction. Conversely, inconsistent teaching practices, lack of scaffolding, and negative feedback were perceived as demotivating. These perceptions directly influenced students' attitudes toward writing and their beliefs about their own potential, suggesting that teacher behavior plays a critical role in shaping students' attributional beliefs and writing confidence. Importantly, the study highlights that teacher motivation is not merely an individual trait but a relational and structural practice that affects how students interpret success and failure. Teachers who foster positive classroom climates and relational trust enable students to form adaptive attributions, which sustain effort and engagement in writing tasks.

The findings have practical implications for English language instruction at the secondary level, where foundational academic writing skills are developed. Teachers who demonstrate pedagogical consistency and motivational engagement can positively influence students' beliefs about writing as a learnable and improvable skill. Effective practices include providing explicit instruction in challenging writing areas such as introductions and conclusions, offering process-oriented and personalized feedback, and maintaining a consistent presence throughout the writing process. These strategies help students attribute success to effort and strategy rather than fixed ability or luck, thereby enhancing motivation and long-term performance.

In terms of teacher education, the study recommends incorporating training in learner motivation, and feedback literacy. Teacher preparation programs should also emphasize relational pedagogy, focusing on classroom climate and emotional engagement, as these factors significantly influence student writing development. At the policy level, the study calls for staffing stability to reduce fragmented instruction and support sustained writing development. Schools should be equipped with resources for interactive, formative writing activities and teacher collaboration. Curriculum development must integrate student perspectives on motivational teaching to create responsive, inclusive, and engaging writing programs that support equity and sustained learning.

While the study offers valuable insights, its scope is limited to the perceptions of second-year undergraduate students and should be interpreted within that context. Broader claims about policy and practice should be made cautiously and supported by further research across diverse educational settings.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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