

LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS WRITING IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated attitudes of linguistically diverse students towards writing in English in four different domains: general academic writing, writing in humanities, writing in science-related subjects (STEM), and writing in electronic communication. A total of 77 Hispanic bilingual/ELL adult students at an alternative high school in Southwest Texas participated in a survey. Based on self-identified information, they were divided into an English-dominant group (n = 29) and a Spanish-dominant group (n = 48). The main part of the survey consisted of 22 attitude questions with a Cronbach's alpha of .799. Results of a Mixed ANOVA showed statistically significant findings in the main effect of writing domains; between-group differences of English-dominant and Spanish-dominant groups; and in an interaction of domain and dominant language. When all four domains were compared, participants' attitudes were significantly more positive towards writing in electronic domain than in others. As for academic writing, attitudes towards general writing were significantly more positive than subject specific writing in humanities and science subjects. Additionally, the English-dominant group showed an increase in positive attitudes towards electronic writing and caused a significant interaction effect. There was no significant language group difference found in the other domains. This study discusses implications of these statistical results and suggests the teaching of writing as a means of communication as opposed to an abstract skill set as conceptualized in the current test-driven environment.

Writing is a major determining factor of academic success. Throughout their academic careers, students are expected to engage in various writing assignments. Because of this, poor writing has a far reaching impact on students' academic and professional lives. Poor writers suffer from lower grades, particularly in courses where writing plays a significant role in assessment, and are less likely to attend college (Graham & Perin, 2007). Exploring the relationship between students' language backgrounds and their writing experiences may provide insight to academic achievements of linguistically diverse students, including bilingual speakers and English Language Learners (ELL).

Writing is often considered an especially difficult second language skill to attain, as several factors are involved in second language writing success, including cognition, language proficiency, writing proficiency, and affective variables (Graham, Berninger & Fan, 2007; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hayes, 2000; Pajares, 2003). One affective variable that is often studied by researchers is attitude toward writing. Research supports a causal relationship between attitude and motivation for both second language acquisition and writing skills development (Graham, Berninger & Fan, 2007; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995).

This study explored the writing attitudes of linguistically diverse students in various writing domains and examined attitude differences from one domain to another. The findings of this study may be a meaningful contribution to teaching writing to linguistically diverse students as well as to the research of second language writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though the number of linguistically diverse students in American school systems has increased over the last few decades (Kena et al., 2015; Kim, 2011), this group tends to have relatively high dropout rates across the U.S. In Texas, preparing linguistically diverse students to be successful in postsecondary education is of particular concern due to the growth of the Hispanic population (Rodríguez, 2012; Ruecker, 2013).

The State of Texas has a fast-growing rate of linguistically diverse students. However, their academic success is still a challenge for educators, as indicated by their relatively high dropout rate. As of the 2014-2015 school year, there are almost 890,000 ELLs who speak Spanish as their first language, about 17% of the total student population in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2015). Texas's ELL dropout rate was 14.9% in 2013, over twice the state average of 6.6% (Texas Education Agency, 2014).

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES FOR LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

On average, ELLs in the U.S. do not achieve basic levels of literacy proficiency across grade levels (National Assessment of Educational Progress, n.d.). Low literacy proficiency follows these students throughout their academic careers. ELLs often struggle with the reading and writing demanded at the university level (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012). In addition, speaking English as a second language is often cited as a perceived barrier to educational attainment for Hispanic ELLs. Becerra (2010) examined data collected from 1,508 self-identified Hispanic adults, and found participants with lower linguistic acculturation perceive that college success is impeded by poor high school education and tuition costs. The study concluded that low linguistic acculturation limits exposure to the education system and serves as an obstacle in accessing financial aid.

Research on ELL high school dropouts shows that language issues are a major contributing factor to why these students are at such a high risk of dropping out of high school. In a study of 85 schools serving a predominantly Latino population, Zarate and Pineda (2014) found that ELLs in schools with a higher concentration of language minority students, students were less likely to graduate from high school. Zarate and Pineda speculate that this is due to fewer opportunities to communicate in English. Moreover, Watt and Roessingh (2001) found that ELLs with beginner English proficiency dropped out at a 40% higher rate than students with advanced proficiency, indicating that "language proficiency sets the tone for the challenges" (p. 219) for ELL students. English language proficiency becomes particularly relevant when considering the impact high-stakes standardized testing has had on education. In Texas, students must write an expository and a persuasive essay in order to pass the English language arts STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) exams, which are high school graduation requirements (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). Because testing is done in English, language has become an integral aspect of content knowledge. Therefore, due to the prevalence of high-stakes standardized testing, ELL students are at a disadvantage with regard to language (Menken, 2010), and tend to have lower high school test scores and greater need for college remediation (Flores & Drake, 2014). In their study, which explored 18 years of student data from both the K-12 and higher education contexts in Texas, Flores and Drake concluded that Hispanic ELLs are negatively affected by English language

deficiencies. These deficiencies may be due to lack of access to high quality ESL services, since remedial high school courses often do not provide students with rigorous curricula. Furthermore, other studies report difficulties of writing for ELLs and their awareness of shortcomings as academic writers. In the study of ELLs' perceptions of writing, Kim and Garcia (2014) reported a participant said, "I know how to speak already. Writing, I just have [a] hard time to write like grammar and everything (p. 308). Throughout their report, there is a general consensus that these students feel writing is a major factor holding them back from academic success. These students cited several aspects of writing that seemed beyond their grasp; not only grammar, but spelling and word choice as well. They also attribute their placement in less rigorous classes to their difficulties with writing. This finding again supports a negative perception of remedial courses as the courses focus solely on high school graduation requirements and may not prepare students for university writing, which contributes to their difficulty catching up to their peers. Additionally, Allison (2009) discusses the "accord, or lack thereof, between expectations in/across the two settings" (p. 76), college and high school and its impact on ELLs. She attributes much of the mismatch to high-stakes standardized testing saying, "if anything, literacy tasks are more closely determined by what will be assessed on high-stakes standardized tests" (p. 83), while college writing is relatively student-centric on form and content. The discrepancies in the high school approach may amplify how challenging university-level writing may be for incoming students.

ATTITUDE STUDIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

In social studies, an attitude is defined as "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols" (Hogg, & Vaughan 2005, p. 150). It is widely accepted that attitude can be measured as the components of a tripartite model. The components of attitude are affect, behavior and cognition. Affect refers to an emotional reaction toward an attitude object. Behavior encompasses overt actions and intentions related to an attitude object. Cognition is a person's value system, beliefs, and/or perceptions regarding an attitude object. These components are generally considered an accurate representation of attitude in lieu of directly measuring a subject's brain activity.

In language studies specifically, Krashen (1982) discussed how a language learner's attitude may affect his/her ability to acquire the target language. As per Krashen, research about attitudinal variables fall into three categories: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. High motivation, high self-confidence, and low anxiety not only predict that students will more actively seek out comprehensible input, but allow for the input to be more easily acquired by the learner. A high affective filter (i.e. low motivation, low self-confidence, high anxiety) serves as an obstacle to language acquisition.

In the affective realm of second language writing studies, there is research exploring affective variables such as self-efficacy, self-confidence, attitude, motivation, and anxiety, among others (Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert, 1999; Dornyei, 2005; Pajares, 2003; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). Hayes (2000) posits that the relationship between cognition and affect – specifically with regard to motivation – is closely interconnected. One aspect of motivation often explored in second language studies is attitude. Attitude and motivation are generally thought to have a correlational relationship; some research supports a causal relationship in that attitudes influence motivation. In general, second language writing literature strongly supports an association between writing attitude, motivation, and achievement. Masgoret and Gardner's (2003) meta-analysis of attitude, motivation, and second language acquisition studies concludes "the evidence strongly supports that the correlations are consistently positive" (p. 200). They examined 75 studies of independent

samples which had been conducted by Gardner and his associates. Their findings conclusively support that correlations between motivation, various components of attitude, and achievement are “consistently positive” (p. 153). Furthermore, Ansarimoghaddam and Tan (2014) compared how Malaysian university students felt about writing in their L1 versus English to find a correlational relationship between positive attitudes toward English and a preference for writing in English. Participants who preferred writing in English to writing in their first language (L1) more often used English when performing writing tasks. Additionally, Merisuo-Storm (2007) found a correlative relationship between attitude, literacy development, and English proficiency. These students, who were participating in a bilingual Finnish-English program, had more positive attitudes toward language learning, had higher levels of literacy, and became more proficient in English than the control group. The researcher does not draw a strong causal relationship between these three aspects of the study; however, she does observe that positive attitudes are associated with higher levels of success in language learning. In sum, students’ attitude toward writing can be a contributing factor to a success in their education and future profession.

AIM OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate attitudes of linguistically diverse students toward writing in English in different domains (e.g., general writing, writing in humanities, writing in STEM, and electronic writing) and an interaction of students’ language backgrounds and their attitudes toward English writing in the domains. Supporting that attitudes may have a positive relationship with motivation, and, therefore, achievement in school, this research would contribute to the teaching of second language writing and the promotion of academic achievement of linguistically diverse students.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

For this study, there were 77 students in total ($N = 77$) at an adult alternative high school in south Texas. The ages ranged from 18 to 35. Seventy-five chose their ethnicity as Hispanic and two did not specify. When asked to choose a dominant language, 29 chose English and 48 chose Spanish. For the present study, language dominance is defined as the language that a bilingual speaker considers their dominant language. Based on the findings that adults are considered to be able to reliably self-report their dominant language (Bedore et al., 2012; Marian, Blumenfeld & Kaushankaya 2007), participants were directly asked to choose their primary language: English, Spanish, or other.

INSTRUMENT

This study used a paper-based survey that asked participants questions pertaining to their demographic information, language background, and attitudes toward writing in various contexts. The demographic portion of the survey asked participants for their age, gender, and ethnicity. As for the rating of statements, the survey used a six-point Likert scale.

The survey also included the questions about how they felt about writing, how they behaved in regard to writing and if they recognized particular qualities related to writing anxiety. The two attitude aspects addressed in the survey were related to ‘affect’ and ‘behavior’ dimensions of the tripartite model of attitude in Gardner’s work (2004). In addition, it included items about anxiety as it is widely studied area of second language acquisition.

The four domains of writing included in the survey were general writing, writing in humanities classes, writing in STEM classes, and writing in electronic communication. Many academic disciplines can be broadly generalized under the umbrella terms “humanities” and “STEM.” Writing standards for these two groupings of disciplines emphasize different composition and cognitive skills. (North, 2005). In addition to academic writing, the survey included a domain of electronic communication, as today’s technology has allowed for an explosion of electronic written communication. Young people send countless text messages per day and consider strong writing skills to be “important to success in life” (Lenhart, Arafeh & Smith, 2008).

In sum, the survey was designed to ask participants about their perceptions of the three attitudinal aspects (i.e., enjoyableness, writing behaviors, and writing anxiety) in four domains of writing (i.e., general writing, writing in humanities, STEM writing, and electronic communication writing). Two items were used to address each attitudinal attribute in each domain, thus there were six questions per domain in a total of 24 items.

However, a reliability coefficient of items in each domain showed a concern about the items in the domain of electronic communication. The two items related to anxiety produced negative correlations with other items in the domain, so they were removed. With the elimination of two electronic communication items, the total number of the survey items included in this study was twenty-two, and the Cronbach’s alpha of all the items was .799. The reliability coefficient of items in each domain ranged from .659 to .525.

The survey questions included in assessing general writing attitude were as follows, with Cronbach’s alpha = .659.

- *I like school work that involves writing.*
- *I try to avoid writing for school work whenever possible.*
- *Writing for school stresses me out.*
- *I generally find writing to be a relaxing activity.*
- *I try to do my best on writing assignments.*
- *The writing I do in school is not enjoyable.*

The survey questions included in assessing humanities writing attitudes were as follows, with Cronbach’s alpha = .601.

- *I hate writing about topics in English and social studies.*
- *Writing in English and social studies is not at all stressful.*
- *I like putting my ideas on paper in English and social studies.*
- *I try to practice my writing skills as much as possible in English and social studies.*
- *If we have a writing assignment in English or social studies, I try to write as little as possible.*
- *My mind goes blank when I try to do a writing assignment in English and social studies.*

The survey questions included in assessing STEM writing attitudes were as follows, with Cronbach’s alpha = .657

- *Writing in math and science classes is enjoyable.*
- *I try to write in math and science as much as I can.*
- *I never stress out when we have to write in math and science.*
- *Trying to write about what I’ve learned in math and science causes me anxiety.*
- *I don’t like to write in math and science.*
- *If we have writing assignments in math and science, I try not to do them.*

The survey questions included in assessing electronic communication writing attitudes were as follows, with Cronbach's alpha = .535.

- *I prefer to use English when I send texts, instant messages, and emails.*
- *I try to avoid sending texts, instant messages, and emails in English.*
- *I want to use English when I text, instant message, or email.*
- *I dislike communicating through English texts, instant messages, and emails.*

DATA ANALYSIS PLAN

First, in order to examine a language effect, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to compare two language groups in each domain of general writing, writing in humanities, writing in STEM, and writing in electronic communication. A post hoc analysis would reveal a domain that would have a difference between the two language groups. In addition, to understand each language group, paired *t*-tests were conducted for each language group separately to examine if there was a domain difference per language group.

RESULTS

A mixed ANOVA was used to examine the effects of both between-groups factors and within-groups factors. This study started with a mixed ANOVA to examine the effects of within-writing domain factors and between-language group factors on writing attitude ratings. It also allowed us to investigate interactions between factors. Checking assumptions for the use of mixed ANOVA, the test of sphericity indicated a violation of sphericity along with epsilon > .75, and, therefore, the Huynh-Feldt correction was used to correct degree of freedoms (*dfs*) (as described by Leech, Barrett & Morgan, 2008). A set of follow-up analyses was conducted and is presented alongside relevant findings to provide a thorough examination of writing attitudes of different language groups in the writing domains.

WRITING DOMAIN EFFECT

The results of within-group analysis indicated a significant main effect of writing domain, $F(2.52, 189.33) = 21.70, p = .000, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .224$. This indicated a significant main effect of writing domains with an effect size much larger than typically found. According to Cohen's general interpretation of the strength of a relationship, $\eta = |.45|$ indicates an effect size much larger than typical (Leech et al., 2008, p 81).

In order to locate the significant main effect, this study conducted additional paired-*t* tests of writing domains. As shown in Table 1, a statistically significant difference was found between general writing and writing in the humanities, $t(76) = 2.99, p = .004$, and between general writing attitudes and writing in STEM courses, $t(76) = 2.79, p = .007$, with general writing attitudes being higher than both humanities writing and STEM writing. Additionally, there is a significant difference in the attitude scores of STEM writing and writing in electronic communication, $t(76) = -5.72, p = .000$, and in the comparison of humanities writing and electronic communication, $t(76) = -4.96, p = .000$. In both cases, electronic communication attitude scored higher.

Table 1
Results for Paired T-Tests Comparing Attitudes of the Total Population Toward Writing Domains

Writing Domains Compared	<i>t</i> -value	df	<i>p</i>
General Writing, Humanities Writing	2.99	76	.004**
General Writing, STEM Writing	2.79	76	.007**
General Writing, Electronic Communication	-3.66	76	.000**
Humanities Writing, STEM Writing	.727	76	.469
Humanities Writing, Electronic Comm.	-4.96	76	.000**
STEM Writing, Electronic Communication	-5.72	76	.000**

** Significant at $p < .01$; * Significant at $p < .05$

However, there was no significant difference found in the pair of humanities writing and STEM writing.

WRITING DOMAIN AND LANGUAGE GROUP INTERACTION

The results of mixed ANOVA found a significant interaction between domain and language group, $F(2.52, 189.33) = 4.55, p = .007, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .057$. It suggested that with a typical effect size, the rating pattern of one language group across domains was significantly different than that of the other group.

When the mean ratings of domains for each language group were examined (see Table 2), the two groups had an identical order of the highest to the lowest: STEM writing << humanities writing << general writing << electronic writing. However, the difference between the two highest ratings, general and electronic writing, was drastic in English-dominant speakers causing an interaction between domain and language group. The interaction was noticeable in Figure 1. It also confirmed a significant difference in the comparison of general and electronic writing for the English group, $t(28) = -4.20, p = .000$, while no significance found for the Spanish group, $t(47) = -1.36, p = .181$.

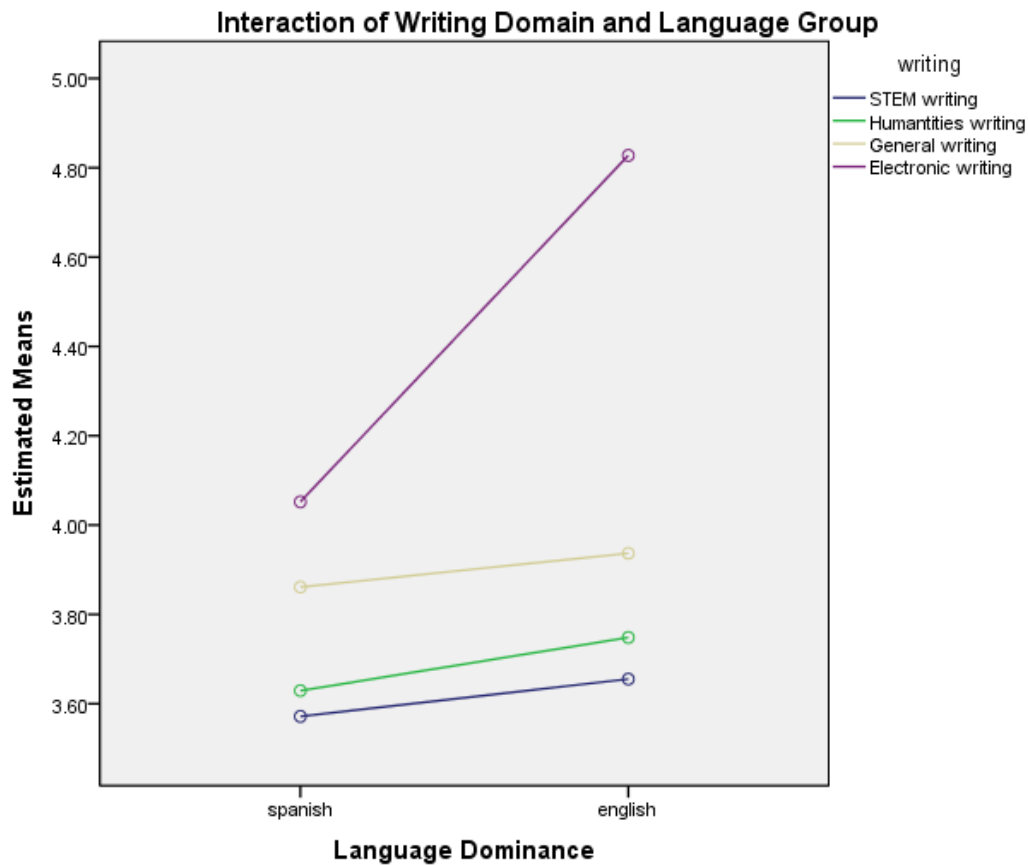


Figure 1. *Interaction of attitudes towards writing domains and language groups*

LANGUAGE GROUP DIFFERENCE

Also, there were significant differences found between language groups, $F(1, 75) = 3.95, p = .050$, partial $\eta^2 = .050$. Although the effect size is rather small, it indicated that one language group rated writing domains significantly higher or lower than the other group. One-way ANOVA results showed that two language groups had a statistically significant difference in their ratings of writing attitude only in the domain of electronic communications, $F(1, 15.91), p = .000$. As shown in Table 1, all the other domains had no significant difference between English-dominant speakers and Spanish-dominant speakers.

Table 2
Results for One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) between Language group

	Dominant Language		<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	η^2	<i>p</i>
	English	Spanish				
General Writing	3.94 (1.00)	3.86 (.660)	1	.161	.002	.689
Humanities Writing	3.75 (3.63)	3.62 (.700)	1	.402	.005	.528
STEM writing	3.66 (.907)	3.57 (.788)	1	.182	.002	.671
Electronic Writing	4.83 (.894)	4.05 (.784)	1	15.91	.182	.000***

Note. *** Significant at $p < .01$; * Significant at $p < .05$. The sample size of language group is $n = 29$ and $n = 48$ for English-dominant and Spanish-dominant group, respectively.

This finding of group difference in electronic writing had a larger than typical effect size even closer to much larger than typical, $\eta = .418$ (the square root value of $\eta^2 = .182$). The mean scores of the English group were higher than those of the Spanish group in every domain, but the analysis finding suggested that the higher mean values of the English group were not significant except for electronic writing. This result indicated no language effect on attitudes toward academic writing. However, electronic writing such as texting and emailing could be considered as a different domain to academic writing, and their dominant language has a significant effect on how much they enjoy writing or how they like writing in English in the context.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate writing attitudes of linguistically diverse students; specifically, the relationship between students’ language background and their attitudes toward writing in English. The results regarding attitudes toward writing domains show that participants’ attitudes toward general academic writing are statistically more positive than writing in specific academic subjects. One factor that may contribute to the present study’s participants’ less positive attitudes toward academic writing in specific classes is a possible impact of the standardized testing associated with those classes. In general, standardized testing has had a largely negative impact on the schooling of minority communities (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008), especially students whose second language is English (Ruecker, 2013). For the sample population of this study, a major focus is preparation for the exit tests because it is a graduation requirement that many of them lack (Pharr-Alamo-San Juan ISD, n.d.). The emphasis on writing for standardized testing may be related to their less positive attitudes toward writing in humanities and STEM. The finding of more favorable attitudes toward electronic writing than toward writing in all the other domains is in agreement with other research findings. Lenhart, Arafeh, & Smith (2008) found that high school students tend to enjoy writing in low-stakes situations, for personal reasons, or to communicate. It also shows that students have a preference for self-selecting topics, something that is often discouraged in a test-centric environment. Moreover, it has been argued that language learners in particular struggle with timed writing prompts considering that they not only elicit students’ knowledge of unfamiliar information, but expect students to use grammar and mechanics on a level similar to native English speakers (Song & August, 2002). While linguistic accuracy may come naturally to a native English speaking student, it may not come naturally to an ELL. As for the language group difference, this study found a statistically significant difference between English-dominant participants and Spanish-dominant counterparts when it comes to using English

for electronic communication: the former group felt more positively toward electronic communication in English than did the latter. There was no statistically significant difference between these groups in the school-related writing domains. The less positive attitudes of Spanish dominant participants toward electronic communication in English could reflect an affective response or could be a matter of convenience. Because texting is a way to maintain relationships, people may feel more comfortable expressing themselves in their dominant language due to associations with their identities and language communities. It supports the research finding that texting in one's dominant language is more efficient than trying to use a second language (Carrier & Benitez, 2010). The result may support the notion that a dichotomy exists between "communication" and "*real* writing" (Lenhart, Arafeh, & Smith, 2008, p. *i*). Writing in texts, emails and instant messaging "carries the same weight to teens as phone calls and between-class hallway greetings" (p. *i*). In their study, the participants indicated that while they felt that writing is important, they do not think of texting as "writing," but simply as a form a communication.

In sum, as mentioned in the literature review of this study, attitude plays a key role in promoting writing motivation and achievement, thus developing positive attitudes toward writing may help students become more motivated to lead to an academic success. As for adolescent and adult learners, the results of this study support the inclusion of more low-stakes writing assignments in traditional educational settings, as opposed to test-driven writing activities. Teaching writing through low-stakes and informal writing activities may promote positive writing attitudes to improve students' ability to produce the target language. It may be desirable to promote a sense of real communication and to give students real-world topics for which they have motivation to express themselves.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study adds to the knowledge base regarding language and writing attitudes and adult English language education. Having a positive attitude toward writing is an essential factor in writing achievement, which may affect one's academic success. Students should also be encouraged to think of writing as a means of communication, as opposed to the abstract skill set conceptualized in the current high-stakes, test-driven environment. Such a shift in perspective could aid ELLs in developing positive attitudes toward writing, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation to write and improving their writing achievement.

There are some limitations of this study. The current study did not include open-ended questions on the survey in order not to put linguistic pressure on the participants, as most of them were Spanish dominant speakers. To further explore student population's attitudes toward writing, interviews or open-ended questionnaires could be administered.

Also, the generalization of the findings seems somewhat constrained due to the participation population of non-traditional postulation. Future research can explore writing attitudes of students at a traditional high school or university setting or students of various language backgrounds to represent a more generalizable student population.

As for future research, it may be meaningful to investigate the English academic writing development of students with similar needs as this student population, such as long-term ELLs, bilingual adult students in the U.S., non-traditional or GED students, at-risk students, students who live in a language minority area, etc. Exploring the writing attitudes of these particular populations could give researchers more insight to their struggles with academic writing.

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