

## Learners' motivation and identity in the Vietnamese EFL writing classroom

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*ABSTRACT: The study reported in this paper explores issues of motivation and learners' identity in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classroom in Vietnam from the perspectives of the learners. It was conducted with thirty English-major students at a university in central Vietnam. While relevant literature appears to place much emphasis on students' extrinsic motivations related to institutional needs, their linguistic need, and social needs in learning EFL writing, students are not only concerned with these but more significantly, with their intrinsic motivations such as their interest, passion and inspiration, which are linked to their personal and cultural needs in writing. Students in this study show their potential to write independently, creatively and passionately if they are really motivated. This reflects an image of students who are able and ready to write with a sense of authorship in a foreign language, which is different from how they appear to be in the routine described with writing as imitating the model and developing some preconceived ideas. The research also suggests that decisions about appropriate methods and materials for teaching writing in the study context need to be based on a comprehensive interpretation not only of visible signs or visible needs (mainly shaped by institutional requirements and social expectations) but also of what is deep inside students' act of writing in a foreign language, involving their own cognitive and affective process embedded in their unrecognized needs.*

*KEYWORDS: Vietnamese EFL students, learner motivation, academic writing.*

### INTRODUCTION

The research reported in this paper was carried out with thirty students enrolled in their third year of a four-year Bachelor of English course in the English Department of a university in Central Vietnam. It aims to explore Vietnamese student-writers' attitudes and motivations in learning English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) writing. In this context, the four main English macro-skills, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing, are taught as separate subjects. At the time of this study, the writing teacher was often in charge of a class averaging 50 students. The English writing course, which lasts for four years, is compulsory. In terms of the writing curriculum, the Department follows the university's annual teaching plan for the writing subject of the Bachelor of English course, which is in turn based on the curriculum standard framework from the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). In this context, learners' needs in learning writing are often looked at from the perspectives of the teachers, the experts and the administrators and are identified to be mainly involved with linguistic and social needs. This study is an attempt to gain insights into students' needs and motivations in a Vietnamese EFL writing course from their own perspectives. The main themes

concerning attitudes and motivation in learning EFL writing in the study context which emerged from the data are centered on the following aspects: external elements, linguistic needs, audience, teacher's enthusiasm, teaching techniques and learning activities, topics for writing, passion and inspiration.

## **THE CLIMATE OF TEACHING WRITING IN VIETNAM**

The focus of EFL teaching in Vietnam has traditionally been on the language form of the target language. In particular, teaching writing in Vietnam has been quite product-oriented and the written product is often evaluated mainly in terms of language knowledge in accordance with a set of conventions largely derived from a sample or model of a certain writing genre. However, the process of writing (Tribble, 1996), as well as writing as a communicative activity appears to have been neglected in teaching and assessing writing. Ellis (1996) observes that language teaching principles that emphasize processes are a whole new experience for Vietnamese EFL teachers. In teaching writing, the process of writing may not often be made explicit for students. Rather, the teacher often analyses the model for a particular type of writing, presents the main structures used in this model, and after that discusses with students what is required for the writing exercise that they will do as their homework. Therefore, the teaching writing approach in this context seems to be mostly product-based.

Vietnam has shared with many countries in Asia some common features in learning English in general and learning writing in particular. For a long time, grammar along with sentence structure has been an important component in the teaching of writing in Vietnam. This common practice is greatly shaped by the grammar translation method that has dominated the language teaching and learning reality in Vietnam for decades (Pham, 2000). Most often, writing has been conducted in the classroom as an individual activity with the teacher as the sole audience, and the students are quite quiet (Tran, 2001). Currently, Vietnamese EFL teachers are on the way to integrating the process genre-based and communicative approaches into their writing classes.

Regarding the issue of expectations and motivation, Pham's (2000, p. 25) study contends that Vietnamese language learners would be disappointed and confused if the explanation of the vocabulary, and sections on grammatical rules and style-points were absent in a writing lesson or an English lesson in general. Traditionally, it has been expected by students that grammar should be an important component in the learning of writing. Thus, the question well worth Vietnamese teachers' concern is how to integrate grammar effectively into teaching writing so that the writing lesson can meet Vietnamese learners' needs and be in line with the writing curriculum objectives, while avoiding the old route embedded in the traditional writing lessons which are driven mainly by grammar. Tran (2001) reports from her practice of teaching EFL writing that most students are motivated in practising writing in pairs or groups, which is often considered relatively new in Vietnamese writing classrooms. This is because they expect, not only to learn from one another in terms of linguistic knowledge and linguistic skills, but also to understand their neighbours' insights as a human being through each other's idea expression in such

writing activities. It can be seen that along with new methods, the parts of this traditional method which should be retained in the teaching of writing is an issue that requires more research.

According to Ellis (1996), however, Vietnamese EFL learners' motivations are shaped by the "teacher's initiative" and the "students' will to succeed" (mainly in examinations) (p.215). Le (2000) also shares the view that Vietnamese learners are bound to extrinsic motivation as a result of the pressure to pass exams. Moreover, as a matter of fact, many Vietnamese students tend to be more interested in learning other skills such as speaking, reading and listening than writing, and writing seems to be regarded as a chore or a burden, for a homework exercise is always waiting for them after each writing lesson (Tran, 2001). Also, most students consider writing difficult and unrewarding. It is obvious that lack of interest and motivation in writing is a problem facing many students in Vietnam. How to help students overcome this has long been a major concern and a challenge to Vietnamese teachers of writing.

The lack of consideration of the students' expectations and needs in learning writing, which is embedded in the ways the writing curriculum is designed, also contributes to complicating the above problem. The writing curriculum document at the study site shows that real needs do not seem to be made explicit. Learners' needs have been decided for them by the curriculum developers from the university and from the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), who develop policies based on their perceptions of what is best and necessary for students to study. When the curriculum is carried out in practice, learners' needs in turn tend to be largely decided by the teacher who is in charge of a particular class. On the one hand, it is advisable for curriculum developers and teachers to share an important stake in giving estimates concerning learners' needs, because their experience and knowledge often allows them to have a sensible understanding of the context of learning, society's demands, work demands and educational demands and what is relevant and appropriate for students at a certain level to learn. On the other hand, the way learners' needs are mainly decided by teachers, experts and administrators is limited in the sense that need itself is also subjective and should be bound to individual learners themselves as well. The curriculum model also reveals that learners' needs are assumed to be linked to language needs only; cultural needs, personal characteristics and attitudes of the EFL learners seem to be somewhat neglected.

As for students in this context, who are unfamiliar with voicing their needs and may be bound to the culturally situated distance between students and teachers, researchers or administrators in the university, they may hesitate in telling their real needs individually. This is one of the reasons why I have decided to use an open-ended questionnaire rather than interview to explore learners' perspectives, even though my earlier intention was to conduct in-depth interviews with students. The attempt to have insight into Vietnamese students' voices remains limited owing to the commonly held belief that teachers are traditionally considered the knowledgeable "expert" (Nguyen, 1989; N.T. Tran, 1999). Thus, students may think that it is more beneficial to let teachers decide their needs, because teachers know more about what they need to learn and how their knowledge will be assessed in examinations. More importantly, students may be constrained in

expressing their real needs owing to Vietnamese communal values, a sense of community growing up from the 4000-year-old agricultural (water paddy) civilization of which the essential spirit is that individual needs, benefits and ideas tend to be a part of and should be in line with communal needs, benefits and ideas. This results in the fact that personal attitudes and needs that students think may not match with those of the majority or their community may be restrained. Therefore, strategies are needed to help students understand that they will be benefited and not disadvantaged if they tell their real needs rather than what seems beautiful or common, and that their personal opinions will be valued rather than judged. Using a questionnaire for students in a flexible space and timeframe with careful and sensitive explanations from the researcher rather than face-to-face interview appears to work well in this context.

### **LEARNERS' NEEDS, VALUES AND MOTIVATIONS IN STUDYING EFL WRITING**

Recent research in the teaching of writing has shown great interest in learners and what their concerns and values are (Pennington, Brock & Yue, 1996; Leki & Carson, 1997; Tarnopolsky, 2000; Benesch, 2001; Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002). Learners' needs analysis, in Benesch's view, is expected to include rights analysis. Regarding writing classes, needs analysis is centered on empowering students to be participants in shaping the content or topic for writing and the forms of assessment. Based on the results of Ukrainian EFL learners' needs analysis, Tarnopolsky (2000) stated that demotivation in learning writing emerges from the absence of an immediate need for acquiring writing skills or the lack of fun in the content of the writing assignments. It was revealed from the study on students' account of ESL writing by Leki and Carson (1997) that there seems to be a need for EAP writing teachers to help NNS students establish a link between their own knowledge and cultural values, as well as their personal needs and the wider social context through the content of source texts. In a study about an EAP writing course, Basturkmen and Lewis (2002) found little overlap between students' and their teachers' perceptions of success in writing. Similarly, the investigation of Hong Kong students' response to process writing by Pennington, Brock and Yue (1996) illustrated the complexities of cause-and-effect relationships between teachers' and students' attitudes in the context of an innovation in applying process writing.

A large part of the literature has been devoted to exploring the role of motivation in influencing language learning (see, for example, Gardner & MacIntyre, 1990; Belmechri & Hummel, 1998; Dornyei & Csizer, 2002). Dornyei and Csizer (2002), categorised two major motivational sources: the situation-specific source comes from the "student's immediate learning environment" and another, more stable and generalized, originates from the "student's past experience in the social world" (p. 424). One of the most influential paradigms in approaches to motivation is proposed by the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This theory distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, which refers to motivation to engage in an activity for the sake of enjoying pleasure and satisfaction in doing it, and extrinsic motivation, which is related to activity engaged to achieve an instrumental end such as getting an extrinsic reward or avoiding a punishment.

Most of the research in the area, however, tends to focus on motivation in foreign and second-language learning in general rather than on motivation in learning a particular subject such as writing in a foreign or second language. Also, it seems that almost all study on motivation utilizes a quantitative research paradigm (for example, Gardner & MacIntyre, 1990; Belmechri & Hummel, 1998; Dornyei & Csizer, 2002).

### **The participants**

I called for volunteers among third-year students in a four-year Bachelor's programme majoring in EFL at a university in Central Vietnam to participate in the study reported here. At the time of this study, there were two, third-year EFL classes with an average of around 50 students in each. I asked the teachers who were in charge of the two writing classes for 10 minutes to talk to the students about this research and invite them to fill out the questionnaire. Thirty out of one hundred students completed and returned the questionnaires within the timeframe of two weeks. The reason for my choice of third-year students was that they had studied writing as a component in the English programme for more than two years; in the writing curriculum, this stage marks the move in terms of focus from general writing to academic writing. Thus, the familiarity with the programme and the learning experience from the transition stage may help them reflect deeply on their expectations and motivations in learning writing.

### **Data collection and data analysis**

The data collection instrument chosen was the questionnaire. The open-ended questions employed in this study helped to leave space for students to contribute individual points of view and thus reveal a wide range of participants' attitudes (Chamot, 1995, p. 5; Berdie, 1986, p. 27). Using an open-ended questionnaire, the study was therefore an attempt to respond to the need to interpret unheard voices or unperceived values related to students' motivations and expectations in learning EFL writing. In addition, this study used the self-administered questionnaire method, as suggested by Oppenheim (1992, p. 9). That is, the questionnaires were distributed to the informants and then the purpose of the inquiry was explained by the researcher. After that, the participants were left to complete the questionnaires in a flexible timeframe convenient to them. The student participants were told to fill out the questionnaires either in Vietnamese or English. It was believed that, in doing so, it would be more convenient to reflect on their values and concerns in learning writing. Another reason which made my earlier intention to conduct interviews with students fail is that along with EFL writing, third-year, English-major students had to take nine other subjects during the first semester of their third year and they were too busy with classes and assignments.

Along with data from students' questionnaires, the syllabus document for the writing subject and the course book which the students learnt at the time of the study were also examined. The open-ended questions in the questionnaire focused on exploring students' classroom context, their motivations in learning writing and their personal values in learning writing. The questionnaire also asked students to reflect on how cultural factors

might affect their writing and what sort of writing they were interested in and thought they might need in the future.

In looking for emerging themes and patterns from the questionnaire data, I attempted to foreground the participants' perspectives "more for the striking or poignant expression of ideas than for the frequency with which they recur" (Cadman, 2000, p. 478). In doing so, it was hoped that the so-called unrecognized needs in leaning EFL writing in my context could be unpacked. For the purpose of preserving their anonymity, the student participants are referred to as VS1, VS2....VS30.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The main themes concerning attitudes and motivations in learning EFL writing in the study context which emerged from the data are centered were as follows: external elements, linguistic needs, audience, teacher's enthusiasm, teaching techniques and learning activities, topics for writing, passion and inspiration.

### **External elements and linguistic needs**

The literature about Vietnamese EFL teaching and the learning context appears to indicate that getting high marks is one of the most important factors which motivate Vietnamese students to write. Students are more motivated if they know that the writing assignment will be part of continuous assessment and will be counted in the final result. Two out of thirty students considered this to be their motivation to write (VS3 and VS16). What has been left out in the related literature, but was mentioned by students as a source of motivation for them, is their wish to fulfill the teacher's expectations (VS12, VS19, VS25, and VS27). In addition, students reported that teacher's feedback on their writing motivated them to engage in further writing practice (VS5, VS8, VS17, VS24). In particular, they said that they felt more motivated to write more if a teacher's feedback was explicitly concerned with both the weaknesses and strengths of their writing so that they knew how to improve their writing. As reported by Ton (2001) and L. Tran (1999) in their reflections on feedback provision in Vietnamese EFL writing classes, teachers' feedback, particularly teachers' praise on positive aspects of students' writing, plays an important role in making students feel motivated, encouraged and invited to write. Students in this study thus attributed their extrinsic motivation to not only "marks" but also teachers' expectations and feedback.

Linguistic needs were perceived by students as another source of motivation for them to write (VS5, VS29, VS8, VS17, and VS24). What strongly motivated them to write was their desire to improve their writing skill so that they would be well prepared for their future jobs. In this sense, students' motivation in writing originates from their objective as EFL students in learning writing.

## Audience

According to students, motivation in EFL writing can be bound to their sense of audience. Students took into account the *real* audience, such as teacher, instructor or friends as a source of motivation. For example, one student, VS7, stated that, "I am motivated to write because I want to express my ideas to my friends, teacher and others." Another showed his/her view that students would be motivated to write if their good pieces were chosen to be published in the Department bulletin, *News and Views*<sup>1</sup>, so that others could read them as well.

In the course book, *Writing in English, Book 3*, students are asked to write to an imaginary audience, for example, write a letter to your uncle in the US asking him about the opportunities to work there, or write a report for the manager about the rice export of your company this month. In the light of this, the course book and the writing syllabus appear to focus on the value of the writing activities which help students reach future goals, and referred to as "extrinsic utility value" by Dornyei (1998, p. 120). It is thus interesting to compare students' views and the perspectives toward audience as a motivation for students' writing reflected in the course book. While the textbook seems to highlight the potential audience for a writing genre that students may encounter in their future discourse community or social life, these students were concerned largely with the real audience in their current context, which reflected their wish to express their ideas and interact with real people in their writing. The motivational source emphasized by the students, which emerged from their immediate learning environment, is characterized as a situation-specific source (Dornyei & Csizer, 2002).

## Teacher's enthusiasm

Students in this study thought teachers' enthusiasm in giving feedback helped them see their "progress" and "weaknesses", thereby causing them to feel motivated to write more (VS5, VS8, VS17, VS24). "All of these make me like to write," reported one student (VS5). Students believed that teachers' enthusiasm manifested in their feedback provision should be an indispensable characteristic of a writing teacher (VS5, VS8, VS17 and VS24). However, finding effective ways to give feedback on student writing in large-sized, EFL writing classes in the Vietnamese context appears to be a challenge for teachers (Tran, 2001). In addition, Vietnamese teachers of writing, unlike Western ones, are constrained by a huge teaching load of about 20 hours per week (plus extra teaching to secure their income). Therefore, writing teachers may find it very hard to be enthusiastic in giving feedback on their student writing in large and multi-level classes.

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<sup>1</sup> *News and Views* is the bulletin of the English Department at the University where this study was conducted.

### **Teaching techniques and learning activities**

Some students expressed their opinion that it is necessary for teachers to introduce the way to approach a particular genre of writing first and then help them to practise (VS1, VS7, VS29). For instance, VS7 said: “Teachers should first tell how to write a new type of writing and after that guide us to practise at once with as many exercises as possible so that we do not forget the techniques.” Others thought that teachers should instruct students more carefully, through giving some samples of a writing genre and then asking students to write on their own (VS10, VS30). One student (VS4) placed great emphasis on the need for teachers to guide students to make an outline regularly and give a lot of exercises, ranging from easy to difficult and general ones. Thus, students expressed their wish to be introduced to a particular genre through some samples of writing so that they knew the way to approach a type of writing but then be encouraged to write on their own. It was also a student expectation, as indicated in the questionnaires, that teachers needed to “guide students to brainstorm ideas” (VS6, VS20) and “make an outline regularly” (VS9). In this sense, students’ needs embraced the essence of both the genre-based approach (Martin & Rothery, 1993) and the process approach (Tribble, 1996; Zamel, 1987). Moreover, the fact that students also desire to be encouraged to write on their own seems to be in conflict with a stream of literature which indicates that Asian students, including Vietnamese students, tend to be passive and depend on their teacher and samples for ideas rather than being independent.

Students also stressed the importance of a “lively” method and “lively” activities in the writing class (VS2, VS9, VS18, VS 23, VS26, VS28). They stated that rather than simply following activities suggested in the textbook, creating an enjoyable atmosphere for the writing class through games, riddles or extra-curricular activities related to a writing genre was indispensable in making them interested in the lesson, and then feel motivated to write (VS9 and VS28). This aspect of students’ linguistic and affective needs shares a common feature with their cultural needs, which are deeply rooted in the Vietnamese tradition favoring *playing with words* (N.T. Tran, 1999). This tradition has been cultivated at meetings at the village well, the banyan tree, the communal hall in traditional festivals, or even in the rice field, where Vietnamese people *play with words* through a variety of games, riddles, tales, folk songs, poems, mother’s lullabies and Hat Doi –Vietnamese impromptu clever verses and couplets. Moreover, this aspect of Vietnamese classroom culture, which demonstrates how learning is made light and fun through wordplay, has been reflected in the literature related to EFL learning and teaching in Vietnam (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996, p. 207). This research questions the common belief in Vietnamese EFL classes, that playing with words through games and plays is best applied mainly in speaking and reading lessons and is less appropriate for writing lessons.

### **Topic as a source of motivation**

According to my students, interesting topics were those related to their “daily life” (VS5), “emotional feeling in the community” (VS11) or, in other words, those about which they



have some “notions” or “background knowledge” (VS20, VS23). Although students were aware that there is a distance between the context and the writing types and topics they learn (VS5, VS23), they were still primarily driven by their favouring of familiar topics, while teachers tended to be also concerned with the topics possibly necessary for students in their future. All the course books teachers and students were using in the study context were, however, Western-produced and Western-based. The written texts and topics the students in my context used to learn writing were naturally subject to the conventional forms of the target language or in other words, highly culturally determined in the context in which they emerged.

Given this point, students showed expectations on the content of learning and teaching writing, which differed from what is outlined in the writing syllabus. Students suggested that teachers should read and select topics from *Youth* and *Students*<sup>2</sup>, since students thought that these topics were suitable for their age and they had background knowledge about them (VS5, VS20). As VS5 stated, “There are some interesting topic in *Youth* which we can write about,” and VS20 said, “It is very good for teachers to read *Youth* and *Students* because these magazines often have topics good for students’ age and we (students) know well about them.” In their opinion, topics given by teachers sometimes confused them as they found these topics hard to understand; simply the fact that they did not really like these topics resulted in a lack of interest to write (VS14, VS21). In particular, students seem to prefer self-selected topics, since they mentioned that sometimes only students can think of interesting topics which are related to their feelings and situations. Obviously, in this sense, students wish to be empowered as active participants in the topic or material decision-making process. From the pedagogical perspective, this can be considered a significant step towards boosting students’ autonomy (Benesch, 2001) and awareness in academic writing, which is one of the aspects of a critical language awareness approach to teaching writing (Clark, 1992).

### **Passion and inspiration as a source of motivation and identity in writing**

What has been left silent in the literature about Vietnamese students learning EFL writing, but stated by the students, is inspiration and passion as elements motivating them to write. According to students (VS5, VS23, VS8, VS27), passion and inspiration may originate in interesting topics or when they are encouraged to write about their own experience or to do free writing. One student said that when allowed to integrate personal experience into their writing, they felt “sure” of what they are writing or can write “comfortably and confidently without being restricted in the idea flow” (VS5). In this respect, students attributed passion and inspiration for their writing to the cognitive factor (flow of thinking) and affective factors (enjoyment of writing and confidence in writing). The fact that students viewed passion or inspiration as their source of motivation reflects not only their personal needs, but cultural needs as well, and this is influenced by both their culture and their educational background.

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<sup>2</sup> *Youth* and *Students* are amongst the most popular magazines for students in Vietnam.

The spirit of writing with passion and inspiration may emerge from the Vietnamese cultural, poetic outlook on the universe and humanity (N.T. Tran, 1999). Vietnamese students have been brought up with this principle of expression and writing with which they learn, interpret and describe the world. When they go to school and study Vietnamese and literature (the core subjects of the secondary programme), teachers often help nurture and strengthen the belief that they can hardly produce a good piece of writing without passion and inspiration.

Inspiration often goes hand in hand with the notion of creativity. Creativity is valued in Vietnamese writing, and the nature of creativity is more towards emotional expression and imaginary richness embedded in metaphoric expression with poetic and figurative word usage and flow of thinking, rather than associated with the logic of constructing arguments as in Western tradition. That is, the notion of creativity in Vietnamese written work, which is bound to emotional feelings and subjective assumptions or even personal imagination, has great impact on students' underlying beliefs about what deeply motivates them to write. This aspect of Vietnamese students' motivation in EFL writing tends to be in line with what Dornyei and Csizer (2002) describe as "a succession of student's past experiences in the social world" (p. 424).

Discourse types modify identities for people through their subconscious choice to participate in them (Ivanic, 1997, p. 20). In EFL writing, Vietnamese students' identity may be framed and constructed by the forms of discourse that they choose to engage in. However, at the same time, they also bring into their writing their own cultural and personal identity in writing and, in this case, it is perhaps the spirit of writing with passion and inspiration. When student use language in a writing course, they may acquire a new identity, one closely bound to the language of communication and other aspects of discourse such as discourse types, ideologies and conventions. The presence of a new identity leads to a process in which personal identity and cultural identity are "framed, modified, confirmed, challenged and negotiated" (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 112, cited in Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p. 266). In the struggle to engage in the target discourse and socialize but cherish their identity in writing, students seem to be in favour of free writing because, in this way, the act of writing seems to help them seek a negotiation between their commitment to prescribed conventions and their interest, passion and inspiration in writing. That is, they can write freely and passionately to express something that matters to them in the conventional linguistic forms of the standard written discourse. While the conventions on which students draw position them in a particular way (Ivanic, 1997, p. 11), the practice of free writing in the classroom may leave room for their self-representation as well. In this process of negotiation, students seem to relate the act of writing to the act of expressing or modifying identity rather than to the act of following patterns of prescribed language use.

It is noteworthy that students thought that writing diaries should be promoted and teachers should take time to look at them (VS5, VS23). More importantly, according to one of them (VS5), teachers need to show students the benefit of practising this skill. Apart from encouraging free writing, teachers can at the same time help students to be aware of the benefit of this practice for the development of their language skill as well as

the growth of themselves personally. The practice of writing in this view embodies the idea of writing as a process and a tool for reflecting, expressing and learning rather than as a product and occasional demonstration of knowledge (Crème, 2000, p. 99). More significantly, free-writing helps to build students' confidence in reflecting on their ability in writing and exploring their own voice embedded in their own ideas, rather than restating what someone else has said in different written texts or sample writings, as claimed by teachers. In short, free writing as a form of academic writing invites all aspects of students' own experience to be brought in as a part of the teaching and learning setting. Such a practice indicates that the process of empowering students in their EFL writing is linked with the accommodation of their experience as a component of the content of learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study appear to be contrary to the commonly held perception that in an examination-driven setting such as Vietnam, students' motivation in writing is mainly rooted in the expectation of getting good marks. Thus, the view that learning motivation in Vietnamese EFL classes is largely dependent on "teachers' initiative" and "students' will to succeed" (mainly in exams) (Ellis, 1996, p. 215) may be to some extent true for students learning English as a general subject rather than for English-major students learning a particular subject such as writing. While relevant literature appears to place much emphasis on students' extrinsic motivations related to institutional needs (marks), their linguistic needs, and social needs, students are not only concerned with these but more significantly, with their intrinsic motivations such as their interest, passion and inspiration, which are linked to their personal and cultural needs in writing. While in the EFL context which the study reported here is concerned with, teachers may often base their interpretations on visible signs in the writing class, students in this study reveal what is deep inside their act of constructing a piece of writing, which may be shaped by both their personal desires and their cultural tradition in meaning-making in writing.

The study helps to portray the image of Vietnamese students learning EFL writing. Students show their potential to write independently, creatively and passionately if they are really motivated. This reflects an image of students who are able and ready to write with a sense of authorship in a foreign language, which is different from how they appear to be in the routine described with writing as imitating the model and developing some preconceived ideas. This fact indicates that attempts to have insights into what students need and what motivates them to write are increasingly recommended for teachers themselves in classroom-based research and action research. In engaging in such reflection and research, teachers are better able to weave the fabric of the pedagogy for their writing class based not only on their knowledge of methods but also on their interpretation of their students' perceived needs as well as unrecognised needs.

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