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# Constructive Feedback in L2 Writing with Chinese High School Students in Taiwan

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University of San Francisco

**Constructive Feedback in L2 Writing  
with Chinese High School Students in Taiwan**

A Thesis Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

by  
Chiawei Diane Yang

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# CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lack of motivation in L2 writing of Chinese high school students in Taiwan. The subject of this study was to examine how age, culture, and the education system in Taiwan influenced students' motivation in learning English writing. It provided insight about how academic environments influence students' motivation in learning English, how teachers' feedback shapes students' learning attitudes, and effective ways to increase students' motivation and self-esteem. The study utilized Krashen's (1981) affective filter hypothesis and Dornyei's (1994) three levels of motivation theory. Ten Taiwanese students participated in this study. All of the participants studied in Taiwan high schools and each came from diverse backgrounds in terms of different education systems and ethnicities in Taiwan. The results suggest that teachers need to be aware of the difficulties with which students struggle in academic and social environments. An implication of the study is that teachers need to provide constructive feedback and stimulate students' motivation to improve Taiwanese high school students' English writing.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem

Statistics released in 2009 by the Ministry of Education Testing Center in Taiwan indicated that 16% of high school students taking the General Scholastic Aptitude Test (GSAT), a proficiency test assessing writing competence, scored zero (Ting, 2011, p. 416). With limited learning hours, only 5 hours a week studying, one of the most difficult academic challenges for Taiwanese high school students is learning how to write efficiently in English. English has been taught as an assigned foreign language in Taiwanese high schools for decades. Although the Ministry of Education reformed the English curriculum in 2008 to prepare high school students for college entrance examinations, ironically there have been reductions of the teaching hours for English courses per week because parents and educators think English is too annoying for the students (Kuo, 2004). The Ministry of Education insists that English is to be taught in schools. The education reform in 2008 was designed to increase student engagement and to reduce student boredom with standardized tests by focusing on extra-curricular activities. However, parents and educators are concerned about the impracticality of the new curriculum and overloading activities and they feel that extra-curricular activities should not be made compulsory. Thus, increasing students' English literacy becomes a challenge.

The process of writing in a foreign language is unique, because it is a complex cognitive activity that requires drafting, revising, and editing. Writing should be a critical element in the school curricula. There are numerous ways to improve students' second language (L2) writing skills such as peer review, direct feedback, and group review. The problem does not lie with teaching strategies that may or may not be excessively concerned with correctness. Rather, the

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problem may lie with teacher-student interaction and low motivation of Taiwanese students.

Although English has been a compulsory subject for Taiwanese students from the third grade to the first year in college since 2005 (Lu, 2011), learners neither have direct contact with English speakers, nor do they need English for social survival. Due to limited opportunities for Taiwanese high school students who speak Mandarin (L1) to utilize their English skills (L2) in social environments, measuring the effectiveness of English language acquisition is challenging. To assist Taiwanese high school students in learning how to write in English, teachers should provide constructive feedback and stimulate the motivation that they are lacking.

### Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to address the lack of motivation in L2 writing of Chinese high school students in Taiwan. It will discuss how academic environments influence students' motivation in learning English, how feedback shapes students' learning attitudes, and effective ways to increase students' motivation and self-esteem. I chose this project because achieving fluency in writing was a long journey for me when I was learning English as my second language. This study will explore how students' low motivation can be tied to the effectiveness of the curriculum presented by the teacher. It is my expectation that this project will benefit teachers who want to continue promoting academic success and find effective practices in English writing classes.

### Theoretical Framework

The project is based on two theories: Stephen Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, and Zoltan Dornyei's motivation in language learning. First, as Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1981) emphasized, emotional blocks could be one of the primary factors that affect how well a

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student can learn a language. Second, Zoltan Dornyei (1994) proposed three levels of motivation: language level, learner level and learning situation level. The learning situation level, which deals with social factors, has great impact on today's language learning. Krashen's theory supports this project in terms of the importance that motivation plays in second language acquisition. Dornyei's theory explains how each level of motivation shapes learning behavior in English writing; specifically, it connects to how different types of feedback relieve students' stress in English writing. Discussion around these two theories will enable us to understand the lack of motivation in L2 writing of Chinese high school students in Taiwan and to take a closer look with teacher's feedback.

### Significance of the Project

Taiwanese high school students have learned English for many years; however, they are not able to write conventionally appropriate English compositions (Ting, 2011, p. 416). By reviewing high school students' literacy performance, the project provides additional insights into the Taiwanese academic and social environments in learning English. The project also offers significant benefits to high school English teachers in Taiwan. The first of which is a close look into how academic and social environments influence students' motivation in learning English. Second, it examines how teachers' feedback affects students' motivation and explains what teachers can do to relieve students' stress by providing useful strategies. Third, it provides constructive feedback that teachers should consider when designing writing courses. If the teachers can relieve their students' pressures and remove cultural barriers, then the students are likely to learn how to write English more effectively.

### Methodology

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The participants were ten students who graduated from Taiwanese public or private high schools. All of the participants were born and grew up in Taiwan and spoke different first languages: Hokkien, Hakka and Mandarin Chinese. Only one of them had lived abroad prior to high school. All of the participants also had attended cram school in Taiwan to improve their English. The study used survey-based methods to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers' feedback shapes students' English acquisition. The survey contains ten questions. All questions and responses were in English.

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### Definition of Terms

The following definitions of terms are provided to define special terminology in this project. This will clarify the terms in different cultural backgrounds and connect with the readers for better understanding of specific cultural groups.

**Affective filter hypothesis:** Learners' motivation, anxiety and stress can strongly relate to the process of second language acquisition.

**Constructive feedback:** This is positive feedback or suggestions, not negative advice.

**Error correction:** This is commentary on how to improve one's work.

**Hakka:** This is the native language spoken by a significant minority of Taiwanese.

**Mandarin Chinese:** This is the official language of Taiwan.

**Second language acquisition:** This is the process of how one learns a second language.

**Social factors:** There are factors that can affect one's behavior in a given society, including family, culture, religion and education.

**Taiwanese Hokkien:** Also known as Minna or Tai-yu, this is considered a native language and a Minnan dialect spoken by the majority of people in Taiwan.

## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Overview

There is little research on Taiwanese high school students' English writing development. My review of the literature consists of three categories: the effect of the critical hypothesis period (CHP), Taiwan's education system, and sociocultural factors in learning English. First, the critical hypothesis period claims that there is a critical point, occurring around puberty, for second language acquisition (Brown, 2007, p. 58). Brown also noted that, after puberty, the ability to develop one's second language acquisition quickly declines due to the biological timetable. The category of CHP contains the studies of age-related factors that can affect second language acquisition. CHP discusses why learning a second language can be difficult after the critical point. Second, the education system in Taiwan plays a crucial part in a students' English language learning environment. This category contains the studies of the education system's influences in Taiwan's English education. Last, the category of sociocultural factors contains the overall cultural factors that influence Taiwanese students' aptitude in learning English.

### Critical Period Hypothesis

The critical period hypothesis proposed by Lenneberg (1967) claims that CPH is important because it represents the development stage on which language acquisition is quickly outgrown at the age of puberty (as cited in Singleton, 2005, p. 271). Singleton investigated whether the CPH is a misleading factor in second language acquisition. He challenged CPH to be regarded as a scientific hypothesis and discussed the various versions of CPH through the theories of Penfield and Roberts (1959), which focused on neurobiological factor, Krashen's cognitive –development theory (1975), and Schumann's social psychological distance (1978).

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Singleton concluded that CPH cannot simply be regarded as a scientific hypothesis or something that can be confirmed. He claimed that “language acquiring capacity is not operative only for a maturational period which ends at puberty” (Singleton, 2005, p. 280). Rather, the explanation of the CPH refers to affective-motivational factors. (Singleton, 2005, p. 277). Krashen (1983) claimed in the affective filter theory that motivation factors play a key role in students’ learning (as cited in Lin & Chien, 2009).

Tokudome (2010) cited a study by Chiswick and Miller (2008) that utilized the 2000 U.S. census data to perform research on CPH by analyzing thousands of data points of Mexican immigrants, and assessing their proficiency of English. They concluded that no sudden gap of English proficiency between younger and older students as argued by the CPH. The research showed that late learners can have native-like proficiency. As cited in Tokudome (2010), Urponen (2004) tested the grammatical knowledge of L2 English of 100 Finnish women with an age arrival to the U.S. or Canada ranging from 12 to 50. Urponen found that the responses of 38% of Finnish-born subjects were indistinguishable from the responses of the native English-speaking control group. Based on the findings, CPH does not provide a full explanation for a decline in second language acquisition across age groups. It is possible that other factors such as motivation, play a crucial role in the final proficiency of an L2 (Tokudome, 2010, p. 25). The education systems or students’ cultural backgrounds remain factors to be explored in further study. The above conclusions are reflected in the proposed project, underlining the hypothesis that motivation plays an important part in language development.

### Education Systems’ Effect on Language Acquisition

A number of studies have shown that school systems affect the acquisition of a second language in terms of learners’ resources, teaching materials, and curricula. In its yearly report on

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Taiwanese student' English proficiency, the Language Training and Testing Center (LTTC) stated that less than 26% of the participants passed the writing test, which was equivalent to the proficiency at the high school level (LTTC, 2013). Ting (2011) investigated 111 Taiwanese high school students' literacy performance problems. Based on their essay writing scores on the 2010 General Scholastic Aptitude Test (GAST), Ting (2011) categorized them into three groups that had taken the national Vocabulary Level Test (VLT). He found that only 25% of students passed the vocabulary level at 2,000 words and only 14% passed at the 3,000 word level. She concluded that students with a higher vocabulary level were more likely to produce quantitatively better written works, and therefore teachers can adopt a pedagogic strategy that emphasizes the students' reading and writing skills by introducing reading materials that are well-organized in terms of vocabulary usage (Ting, 2011, p. 422).

Teemant (2010) used semi-structured interviews with 13 ESL students from diverse backgrounds (Chinese, Korean, Belorussian, Russian, Portuguese, and Spanish) to determine their perspectives on testing practices. These participants had studied English in their high schools in their respective home countries and then joined university programs in the United States. In her research, she found the testing system was more demanding in Taiwan. Students explained that the assessment was made to be difficult in Taiwan's education system (Teemant, 2010, pp. 93-94). She concluded that anxiety about the test affected the students' ability to demonstrate content knowledge. She also concluded that "students would benefit when faculty shares responsibility for equitable testing outcomes" (Teemant, 2010, p. 100).

Wu (2014) discovered that the Taiwanese government requires English to be taught as a foreign language (EFL) in public schools, whereas private schools teach English as a second language (ESL). Different strategies were used in teaching EFL and ESL. For example, teaching

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EFL in public schools does not involve social interaction with foreigners who speak English. Wu (2014) found that Taiwanese English teachers use Mandarin to teach English under a teacher-centered methodology that limits students' interactions in using English (pp. 3-4). The teaching strategy used in the Taiwanese public schools decreased the students' motivation to use English. It should not be presumed that the use of one's first language is similar to the use of one's second language (Maarof & Murat, 2013, p.54). The decrease in motivation explains the low English proficiency among Taiwanese high school students. "The biggest challenge facing English as a second language learners in Taiwan is their lack of opportunity to practice speaking English," (LaPointe, Grevsen & Barrett, 2004, p. 1). Baker and Boonkit (2004) pointed out that successful and less successful learners of English proficiency differed in the frequency of their English use (as cited in Maarof & Murat, 2013, p. 54).

Lin and Chien (2009) investigated the effectiveness in English writing courses in Taiwan. They researched an eight-week course with members trained in different writing strategies. They discovered that "all volunteers agreed they preferred to read peer feedback to teachers' comments" (Lin & Chien, 2009, p. 79). They concluded that most students agreed that peer feedback was somewhat effective. In their research, students' anxiety created by the teachers' direct feedback lowered their motivation in learning English (Lin & Chien, 2009, p. 84).

### Culture

There are some cultural barriers for students to learn English in Taiwan. Confucianism has a great influence in Taiwanese culture. Confucius (551-479 B.C.) was a highly respectable Chinese teacher and philosopher in the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history. In Confucius's time, one had to pass the imperial examinations to become a useful person. Huang and Brown (2009) pointed out that exam-driven education creates a high of pressure and

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unbalanced development in students (pp. 645-646). Cultural belief motivated students to put more effort into passing examinations than in the success of second language acquisition.

Krashen (1982) claimed that “the best acquisition will occur in environments where anxiety is low” (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 295).

Errington (2009) investigated the reasons that Chinese students learn English. The study was administered by a web-survey carried out between July 2, 2009 and August 2, 2009.

Through his study, he discovered that 78.6% of Chinese respondents said they feel strongly about nationalism (p. 44). Most Chinese support their country by speaking their own language.

Fan (2000) found Chinese culture gives Chinese people their basic identify and the core value distinguishes itself from Western cultures (as cited in Errington, 2009). This study showed that some Taiwanese people share a similar culture value as the Chinese core value of being unwilling to be Westernized and lose their identity.

Dornyei (2001) stated that motivation is a multifaceted construct that includes conscious and unconscious dichotomy (as cited in Errington, 2009, p. 8). Talley (2014) investigated students' learning autonomy in Taiwan in 112 first-year non-English major students from four English communication classes who answered a 47 item questionnaire. Autonomy is a self-learning behavior. He found that 62% of the students believed that the teacher is responsible for evaluating how much they learn in the English class. Tsai (2007) explained that traditional Confucian pedagogy in Taiwan discouraged students from learning English because Confucianism focuses on form in a high-context culture, whereas Western education is a low-context culture (as cited in Talley, 2014, p. 24). In a high-context culture, fewer words can communicate effectively. Students feel challenged to use low-context style to communicate explicitly in English.

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Ho (2010) drew attention to his research in 1996 with 480 junior high school students that investigated pupils' attitudes in learning English. In his study, he found that "English is a foreign language not used in people's daily life, as medium of school instruction or as an official language" (p. 174). Obviously, Taiwanese students do not need English in their daily activities for social survival. His finding showed that both junior high and high school students had good attitudes toward learning English and American culture; however, there was no significant correlation between their attitudes and their English test scores. Gardner and Lambert's (1972) studies indicated that motivation as a construct is made of certain attitudes (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 193). The test-driven culture simply demotivated students in building English proficiency. Schumann claimed that "the success in second language acquisition depends on the degree of social and psychological distance between the learner and the target language and culture" (as cited in Singleton, 2005, p. 278).

### Summary

Learning English in Taiwan presents several challenges. Research has demonstrated that motivation is interrelated with the education system, and culture and holds the key to language acquisition. Motivating our students to learn the language should be a priority (Csizer & Dornyei, 2005a, 2005b; Dornyei, 1990, 1994, 201a, bb, 2006; Dornyei & Skehan 2003) for language acquisition to be successful in both academic and professional lives (Bahous & Nabhani, 2011, p. 40).

Although the critical period hypothesis indicates that language learning declines after the age of puberty, adult learners can still achieve native-like proficiency in a foreign or second language (Thu, 2009). Motivation plays a crucial role in final acquisition (Tokudome, 2010).

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Recently, the Taiwanese government has emphasized English education through several educational reforms. Unfortunately, it has influenced students' academic performance only minimally. Evidently, the high anxiety created by test-driven education affects their ability to demonstrate context knowledge. Krashen (1982) stated that even if students understand the message, they tend to seek less input when anxiety is high (p. 31).

Under Confucianism and the exam-driven culture, students' language production only focuses on form and grammar. In addition, without the need to use English in daily life, students are less motivated to learn English. As Ehrman and Dornyei (1998) confirmed, norms regulate students' behavior toward their learning goal (as cited in Wong, 2007, p. 32).

Motivation is a key element in language acquisition, so understanding any de-motivational factors in a learning environment will contribute to improving students' English proficiency. Adapting a pedagogic strategy that emphasizes students' English production, creating a low-anxiety study environment, and providing opportunities to speak English are ways to improve English education in Taiwan.

CHAPTER III  
DESCRIPTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

Description of the Project

This project contains four parts. Part one covers the problem of Taiwanese high school students' writing competence in English. Part two reviews how these possible factors shape students' learning in terms of age, culture, and educational system as well as teachers' feedback. In part three, the project explores the findings through students' survey responses and provides an explanation of how different teachers' approaches and feedback influence students' language acquisition and motivation in learning English writing. Finally, an overview of the project provides the applicable approaches for improving the teaching of English in Taiwanese high schools, as well as ways to enhance students' learning by creating a low-anxiety learning environment.

Development of the Project

As an English learner, I had a long journey in learning how to write effectively in English. Although I started learning English during high school in Taiwan, English was taught as a foreign language. The course material focused on passing exams which did not value English language writing at that time. I had no opportunities to practice writing English during my high school years. Therefore, writing became the biggest challenge to me when I started my college studies in America. There were many challenges that I had to face in college. To begin with, I had to pass the college placement exam in writing for non-native speakers. At first, I thought that was the only writing exam I had to complete; unfortunately, that was only the beginning, as there were more writing assignments waiting in line for all of the classes that I took. Indeed, some of my English language learner (ELL) friends dropped out of college because they failed to pass all

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of the writing exams. In addition, like most foreign students, I had problems adding classes because many professors were under the impression that foreign students lacked competence in academic writing. It was only the support of my family, my writing center tutor, the international students' advisor, and my English-as-a-second language (ESL) teachers that got me through this very difficult time during my college years and encouraged me to be competent academically.

After I started to teach, I found many ELLs had the same problem that I had with writing effectively in college. It is not hard to find students who can speak fluently in English but who are unable to express themselves in writing. Often, they have problems surviving in an academic environment. That piqued my curiosity and started my search for answers on behalf of students like me who struggled with writing. I began to wonder if something was missing in students' learning journey. I volunteered to tutor students and engaged in research to discover the cause of difficulties with writing fluently in English as a non-native learner. One time, during discussions with my students and other teachers in a Taiwanese high school, I was stunned to find that most students who understood grammar rules still had problems writing effectively. As cited in Giridharan and Robson (2011), Hinkel (2004) claimed that the research reports point to poor academic writing skills in ESL students even though they are grammatically more fluent (p. 2). Despite the fact that there were few opportunities at school to help students practice their writing skills, most students just could not see the point in the long term of improving their writing. There are numerous factors in the culture, school environment, and teachers' approach that demotivate students' desire to write in English.

I have always tried to encourage students to develop their writing skills at earlier stages before entering college and have tried numerous methods, such as texting or emails to motivate their learning outside of the classroom, through technology. It is my hope that the proposed

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project can share all of the discoveries made through the student survey and provide applicable approaches through which teachers can help students improve the fluency of their written English.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers' feedback shapes high school students' English learning in Taiwan. The project examined how age, culture, and the education system in Taiwan influence students' motivation in learning English writing. According to the Ministry of Education Testing Center in Taiwan, high school students' English writing competence scores reveal that 16% of the respondents scored zero of the General Scholastic Aptitude Test (GSAT), (Ting, 2011, p. 416). The objective of the project aims to provide applicable approaches for improving the teaching of English in Taiwanese high schools and ways to increase students' motivation in learning English. This chapter introduces the methodology of this project, including the participant profiles, instruments and data collection, limitations and findings of the research.

### Participant Profiles

A total of 10 Taiwanese students, four males and six females, participated in this study. All of the participants studied in Taiwanese high schools and each came from diverse backgrounds in terms of different education systems and ethnicities in Taiwan. Those backgrounds included the schools that they attended (public or private) and their first language. There are three major languages spoken in Taiwan: Taiwanese Hokkien (Minnan), which is spoken by the majority; Hakka, which is spoken by a smaller segment; and Mandarin Chinese, which is the official language in Taiwan (Beaser, 2006, p. 2). In addition, all of the students have learned English in Taiwan for at least six years, including three years in the middle schools. Although the participants speak different first languages due to their individual family

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backgrounds, their English levels are sufficient to complete the survey. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1.

### *Student profiles*

Student Name (pseudonyms)	First Language	Age started to learn English	Education System	Years learned English	Culture
Paul	Hokkien	13	Public	6	Taiwanese
Elsa	Hokkien	13	Public	6	Taiwanese
Trista	Hakka	6	Private	13	Hakkanese
Sarah	Hokkien	13	Private	6	Taiwanese
Brenda	Hokkien	13	Public	6	Taiwanese
Jack	Mandarin	12	Public	7	Chinese
Emma	Mandarin	13	Public	6	Chinese
Peter	Mandarin	13	Public	6	Chinese
Tim	Mandarin	13	Public	6	Chinese
Katie	Mandarin	13	Public	6	Chinese

Paul and Elsa are brother and sister. They were born in a traditional Taiwanese family that spoke Hokkien. With their outstanding middle school GPAs, both were enrolled in public high schools. They speak fluent Hokkien and Mandarin Chinese. They are now college students in the United States and have achieved an intermediate level of English proficiency.

Trista's parents speak Hakka, and her parents brought her to Taiwan when she was very young. She speaks fluent Hakka and Mandarin Chinese and a little Hokkien. She went to a private high school and has the highest English proficiency among all of the participants.

Sarah was born in Taiwan and was raised by her grandparents who spoke fluent Japanese. With her multicultural background, she speaks a little Hokkien, intermediate Japanese, and fluent Mandarin Chinese. Her parents sent her to private high school and hoped that she could learn English as a second language through a well-designed curriculum.

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Brenda and Katie were high school classmates. Both of their parents came from China and only spoke Mandarin Chinese. They both went to public high schools, which provided fewer opportunities for them to speak English. Both of them speak very fluent Chinese Mandarin but very little Hakka or Hokkien.

Jack was born in Taiwan, and his family speaks Hokkien. He went to public high school in Taiwan but attended summer school in the United States every year during his high school years because his parents wanted him to learn English as a second language. Surprisingly, among all of the participants, his English pronunciation sounds most like that of a native English speaker.

Emma, Peter, and Tim are brothers and sisters. Like Brenda, their parents were from China, and Chinese Mandarin is the only language that they speak at home. They all went to public schools, which enforced Chinese Mandarin as the only language spoken at the school. Thus, they speak very little in other languages, including English.

### Data Collection

To evaluate the relationship between teachers' feedback and students' motivation as well as factors such as age, culture, and education systems that influence English language attainment, a total of 10 questionnaires were sent by email. Students' ethnic backgrounds were briefly introduced at the beginning of each questionnaire. The survey was a partial replication of the survey developed by Lin and Chien (2009) in discussing English writing in Taiwanese colleges. However, the study attempted to investigate how the social and academic environment affected Taiwanese high school students' learning in English writing, so Lin and Chien's questions were modified. The study also discusses the problems with Taiwanese students' writing competence

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do not start in college; rather, these problems begin at the high school level when students first learn how to write in English. Therefore, all of the data were collected from high school students.

In order to gather students' perspectives more accurately, the data were collected from students who have attended Taiwanese high schools and who were taking English courses at least five hours a week during their high school years. The questionnaire was written in simple English with the consideration that participants would be comfortable answering the questions with their limitation in English.

The study used a survey to gather data for comparing participants from different ethnicities and academic backgrounds. Because the researcher had tutored a few students in Taiwan, all of the participants' information could be gathered easily. In Taiwan, English is learned as a foreign language, and the environment does not provide any opportunities for students to practice English, nor do they need English for social survival. Due to the limitation of participants' English proficiency, a survey with three levels of three different agreement was adopted. The participants were asked to pick one of the choices: "do not agree", "agree", or "strongly agree".

### Rationale for the Questionnaire Items

According to Dornyei (2001), motivational components consist of three parts: language level, learner level and learning situation level (as cited in Wong, 2007, p. 11). Wong (2007) stated that the learning situation level deals with the social aspect of motivational factors affecting English learners more than the previous two. The components of learning situations consist of three parts: course-specific, teacher-specific and group-specific components. Course-specific components relate to syllabuses and course materials, teacher-specific components refer

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to the teacher's feedback style, and group-specific components relate to social norms and culture (pp. 11-12). Through these survey questions, the project analyzed the learner's attitude in these three areas.

As shown in the appendix, the questionnaire is composed of three sections. Questions one through five ask questions about teacher-specific motivation. Questions six and seven ask about course-specific motivation. Finally, questions nine and ten represent group specific motivation.

### Limitations

The project has its limitations. Due to the limited opportunities for Taiwanese high school students to utilize their English skills in a social environment, measuring the effectiveness of English language acquisition is challenging. Moreover, most participants were the students whom the researcher had tutored and their answers might have been altered in an attempt to please the researcher. In addition, having a small group of participants from one city may show similar survey results and biases. The solution for these limitations could be improved by including peer reviews from different schools in different cities to increase the credibility.

### Findings of the Study

The purpose of this research was to provide insights into the Taiwanese academic environment and to bridge the gap in its high school students' competence with English writing. In this study, several factors were examined through the survey with participants, including age, the education system, and the students' first language (Hokkien, Hakka, or Mandarin Chinese). Thus, three questions were developed: First, what are the impacts of the influential factors on students' motivation to learn English writing? Second, what can we learn from the questionnaires on the students' responses to their teacher's feedback? Lastly, what unique characteristic, such as

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students' first language, might affect the students' confidence in learning English? The present study was designed to address the lack of students' motivation in learning English writing in Taiwan, rather than reviewing all of the factors including social or teacher's feedback strategies in the academic environment.

What are the impacts of the influential factors on students' motivation to learn English writing? First, there was no significant evidence found that age has a critical impact on Taiwanese students' motivation to learn English. English is an assigned foreign language in Taiwan. Nine out of ten participants started to learn English in Taiwanese middle school around the age of 12 and one started to learn at the age of 6. According to the participants' brief introduction about their English proficiency, all of them have positive attitudes towards learning English. However, only two participants believed that they reached an intermediate level of English competence, and others were beginners in English after six years of schooling. This shows that the time of the beginning of the study of English is not necessarily linked to one's eventual English proficiency. Based on the findings, the Critical Period Hypothesis does not provide a full explanation of second language proficiency across age groups. The finding matches the literature review that it is possible that other factors such as motivation, play a crucial role in language development.

Second, the survey explored the significance of differences in the demographic characteristics of students who attended private high schools compared with students who attended public high schools in Taiwan. Unlike public high schools in Taiwan, most private Taiwanese high schools teach English as a second language rather than as a foreign language. In private high schools, English teachers are mostly native English speakers; and students are provided with more opportunities to learn English through all kinds of social interactions, such

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as foreign summer school and overseas activities. In contrast, most English teachers in public schools use Mandarin Chinese to teach English, which limits students' opportunities to practice authentic English (Wu, 2014, p. 3). Furthermore, private high schools in Taiwan are more Westernized in their teaching approach than are public high schools; for instance, they use the power of teacher' praise to encourage students in learning. In the public schools, teachers' feedback is generally accepted without question. In this research, students who attended public Taiwanese high schools generally showed anxiety at a higher level when asked to complete the questionnaires about their English writing classes than those who attended private Taiwanese high schools.

In addition, the survey responses showed that private school participants did not agree that teachers' corrections embarrassed them and demotivated them to learn English writing. In contrast, participants who had attended public schools strongly agreed that teachers' feedback played an important role and affected their motivation negatively and English attainment.

What can we learn from survey questionnaires on the students' responses to their teacher's feedback? Table 2 summaries participants' responses to their teachers' feedback.

Table 2.

*Students responses about the questionnaires (N = 10)*

Question	Do not agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel that my teachers' correction embarrassed me and influenced my motivation in learning writing.	4	3	3
My teachers' positive feedback makes me feel more confident in learning English writing.	1	4	5
I prefer receiving short feedback on my work over seeing all of the corrections made by my teacher.	4	5	1
When my teacher praises my English writing, I	0	4	6

## CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

will pay more attention in class.			
It will be better for my teacher to give out a group review rather than an individual review.	3	7	0
If the class is fun, I am motivated to learn more about the subject.	0	5	5
Through interesting course design in the class, I am inspired in writing.	0	7	3
If I were a teacher, I will give more positive feedbacks than negative feedbacks.	1	4	5
I feel more relaxed for my classmates to proofread my essay.	4	4	2
I am less confident in writing when none of my friends writes in English.	5	1	4

As a survey-based study, ten questions were given in each questionnaire to ten participants, and the following explanations reveal students' perspectives in learning English writing. In the first language, six out of the ten participants felt that the teachers' corrections embarrassed them; and influenced their motivation to learn English writing. Three students strongly expressed their feeling about this statement. Naturally, it came as no surprise that on question two: does teachers' positive feedback make me feel more confident in learning English writing? Nine participants felt more confident with teachers' positive feedback. There was only one participant who did not agree that positive feedback built his confidence.

Of particular interest in the study was participants' responses to the third question: what unique characteristic, such as students' first language, might affect the students' confidence in learning English? Six out of the ten students preferred to receive brief feedback from the teachers. All of the participants agreed that the teachers' praise motivated them to pay more attentions in class, according to responses to the fourth question. In addition, the fifth question revealed that, seven out of the ten participants favored a group review from the teachers to an individual review. With regard to the course design, the participants' responses to the sixth question revealed that

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all of them felt motivated to learn about English when the class atmosphere was fun and with low anxiety, and five participants strongly agreed that it was an important factor in their second language acquisition. The same was shown as true in responses to the seventh question; all participants agreed that they were inspired to learn English writing when the course design was interesting.

To summarize, most participants responded that they would give more positive feedback than negative feedback if they were a teacher. Many participants expressed that they felt more relaxed when their classmates proofread their essays. Even though most of the participants stated that the teachers' corrections demotivated them in their learning of English, they still needed the teachers' commentaries more than their peers' feedback. Finally, more than half of the participants attributed their learning of English to their friends but indicated that they were no less confident in writing when none of their friends wrote in English.

What unique characteristic, such as students' first language, might affect the students' confidence in learning English? Table 3 shows the result of participants' responses of teacher's feedback.

Table 3

*Result of participants' responses of teacher's feedback (N = 10)*

Student Number	Students' Ethnicity	Teachers' feedback increase students' confidence
5	Hokkien & Hakka	52%
5	Mandarin Chinese	80%

As mentioned in this chapter, Taiwan has three major spoken languages, including Hokkien, Hakka and Mandarin Chinese. The main objective of this study is to investigate the motivation of two groups of Taiwanese students with different cultural backgrounds. The

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participants generally come from two groups. The first group includes students who were born in Taiwan and speak Taiwanese Hokkien or Hakka at home. The second comprises non-Taiwanese Hokkien speakers including Mandarin Chinese speakers after the immigrants lost their place in mainland China following the Chinese Civil War. Before Taiwan's democratization, local languages, including Hokkien and Hakka were banned and discriminated by the KMT regime as inferior (Chang & Lu, 2014, p. 7).

Taiwanese Hokkien is spoken by the majority; Hakka is spoken by a smaller segment; and Mandarin Chinese is the official language in Taiwan (Beaser, 2006, p. 2). The participants in this study included five Mandarin Chinese students, four Hokkiens and one Hakkonian. The survey results produced fairly large differences between sample groups regarding students' perspectives to teachers' feedback. The data showed that participants whose first language was Hokkien or Hakka gained less confidence from their teachers' feedback than the Mandarin Chinese participants due to the local culture having a slightly more positive view toward Mandarin Chinese speakers. The study showed that the cultural stereotypes of one's first language had a negative impact on students' confidence in learning English.

### Summary

The analysis of the collected data showed that the participants provided insights into the academic environment and lack of motivation in learning English writing in Taiwan. Responses were collected from three questions: First, what are the impacts of the influential factors on students' motivation to learn English writing? Second, what can we learn from survey questionnaires on the students' responses to their teachers' feedback? Lastly, what unique characteristic, such as students' first language, might affect the students' confidence in learning English? As noted, this study focuses on addressing the lack of students' motivation in learning

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English writing in Taiwan, rather than reviewing all of the factors in the academic environment and teachers' feedback strategies in detail.

For the first question regarding age, the education system, and culture, there was no significant evidence showing that age had a critical impact on the students' motivation to learn English. All ten of the participants started to learn English in middle school and said that their English writing skills were at a beginner's level, according to their self-reflection on the survey. Obviously, learning English at earlier ages, around puberty, for example, does not guarantee success in English literacy. Moreover, regarding the school system's effect on students' desire to learn English writing, all of the ten participants attended private or public high schools in Taiwan and expressed positive attitudes that learning to write in English was important; however, the overbearing school tests and extra-curricular activities decreased their motivation to learn English. Their responses explained why the test-driven culture simply demotivated students from building English proficiency.

For the second question, the survey results revealed an interesting finding regarding students' responses to their teachers' feedback. In general, the students believed that praise from their teachers inspired them to learn to write in English. Moreover, they preferred group feedback to individual feedback. For the third question, the data showed that students whose first language was Hokkien or Hakka gained less confidence from their teachers' positive feedback than the Mandarin Chinese participants, due to the local culture having a slightly more positive view towards Mandarin Chinese speakers. In summary, the participants' responses provide insights into why motivation plays a key role in helping students improve their English writing.

# CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

## CHAPTER IV CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

The purpose of this project was to investigate the impact of age, education systems, and culture on Taiwanese high school students' English writing proficiency. The study explored the difficulties that Taiwanese high school students need to overcome to write efficiently in English. Although, English was an assigned foreign language in Taiwanese high school courses for years, with limited learning hours and resources, English writing is the most difficult academic challenge for Taiwanese high school students. The problem does not lie with teaching strategies that are concerned with correctness. Rather, I will consider a closer look at teacher-student interaction and students' low motivation.

The purpose of this project was to discuss the fundamental issues of students' motivation to learn English. It aimed to address lack of motivation in L2 writing of Chinese high school students in Taiwan. It discussed how academic environments influence students' motivation to learn English, how feedback shapes students' learning attitudes, and effective ways to increase students' motivation and self-esteem.

By reviewing high school students' literacy performance and the survey results, the project provided several insights. First, it provided a close look into the Taiwanese academic environment in English education. Second, the project examines how teachers' feedback influences students' motivation and what teachers can do to relieve students' stress by adopting useful strategies. Third, it provided that English teachers constructive feedback that could be incorporated in designing writing courses.

Even though Taiwanese students start to learn English in middle school, after six years of learning, from middle school to high school, Taiwanese high school students still have trouble

## CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

writing English effectively. As noted in the literature review, a critical hypothesis argued by Lenneberg (1967) claimed that language is quickly outgrown at the age of puberty (as cited in Singleton, 2005, p.271). According to the survey results of this study, most students felt that their English writing was still at the beginner level even though they started to learn English before puberty. Obviously, there are some other factors, such as education system and culture that influence students' motivation to learn English.

As for the Taiwanese education system, English is taught differently in public and private schools. In public schools, most teachers use Mandarin Chinese, the official language to teach English as a foreign language, whereas in private school, teachers focus on using English as a second language to teach students in immersion education. In addition, public school teachers follow a traditional teaching style in which their teaching cannot be questioned. In contrast, private school teachers are mostly native English speakers, and the pedagogy toward use the power of praise to motivate students to learn English. Therefore, students at public schools have fewer opportunities to practice their English than students at private schools. Moreover, private school students have more chances to practice their English in English-speaking environments.

The survey results show interesting data that public school students agreed that teachers' feedback can strongly affect their learning in English writing; however, students in private schools thought teachers' feedback, peer review, and curriculum were all important in their learning. This indicates that teachers' feedback plays an important role in students' learning and that interesting course curricula and a low-anxiety environment can increase students' aptitude.

Culture plays an important part in Taiwanese students' English education. In this exam-driven society, students are under enormous pressure to learn English in order to pass tests. People in Taiwan are still strongly influenced by the belief of Confucius (551-479 B.C.), the

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highly respected Chinese teacher and philosopher in the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history, that one must pass exams to honor the family. With high anxiety, students do not learn English as a language to communicate or to improve their English proficiency. They learn English to pass the college entrance examinations that focus on grammar and forms.

Furthermore, people in Taiwan share similar cultural values with people in China. In Fan's (2002) study, some people were proud to speak Mandarin Chinese to avoid being Westernized and losing their identity (as cited in Errington, 2009). Furthermore, students in Taiwan do not need English for social survival. Thus, learning English in Taiwan presents many challenges. Students' lack of motivation seriously affect their English education. In conclusion, to improve Taiwanese high school students' English writing, teachers should provide constructive feedback and stimulate students' motivation.

### Recommendations

In order to bridge the gap, this study focused on addressing the students' lack of motivation to learn English writing in Taiwan, rather than reviewing all of the factors in the academic environment and teachers' feedback strategies in detail. To evaluate the relationship between teachers' feedback and students' motivation as well as factors such as age, culture, and education systems that influence English language attainment, a total of 10 questionnaires were sent by email. Students' ethnic backgrounds were briefly introduced at the beginning of each questionnaire, which contained 10 multiple-choice questions. Ten participants were selected from Taiwanese public and private high schools. All of them had a different ethnic background and spoke a different first language, such as Hokkien, Hakka or Mandarin Chinese. In order to help the participants better understand the questionnaires and respond in English, the content was modified into simple English.

## CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

In the study, three questions were answered: First, what are the impacts of the influential factors on students' motivation to learn English writing? Of the major factors: age, education system and culture, the study found that education system and culture in Taiwan influence students' motivation to learn English the most. Second, what can we learn from survey questionnaires on the students' responses to their teachers' feedback? The strategies will be discussed in this chapter. Lastly, what unique characteristics, such as students' first language, might affect the students' confidence in learning English? Students' ethnic background was found to deeply connect with their learning aptitude and thus affect their English attainment.

Two theories were recommended to give teachers a clear picture in view of students' motivation to learn English in Taiwan. Stephen Krashen's affective filter hypothesis and Zoltan Dornyei's motivation in language learning. As Krashen's (1981) affective filter hypothesis claimed, emotional blocks could be one of the primary factors that affect how well a student can learn a language. The traditional pedagogy in Taiwan's English education stressed grammar only using a memorizing teaching strategy, neglecting what students need for language acquisition. Krashen's theory directed the attention to exploring the fundamental question of why students need to learn English in Taiwan? The project suggested that teachers should motivate students to learn English and remove the emotional blocks to help them learn better instead of using tests and an overload of school activities to make learning uninteresting. Krashen (1982) stated that even if students understand the message, they tend to seek less input when anxiety is high (p. 31).

Another theory proposed by Dornyei (1994) focused on three levels of motivation: language level, learner level and learning situation level. Of the three levels, learning situation level deals with social factors that have great impact on today's language learning. Learning situations consist of three parts: course-specific, teacher-specific and group-specific components.

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Course-specific components relate to syllabus and course materials, teacher-specific components refer to the teacher's feedback style, and group-specific components relate to social norms and culture (as cited in Wong, 2007, pp. 11-12). According to the survey results, most participants agreed that interesting courses will inspire them to learn English, teacher's praise is powerful to move them forward, and peer review activities benefit them to learn writing in English without too much anxiety.

Several teaching strategies are recommended in this study. From the students' perspective, writing in a second language presents many challenges. Writing requires a certain linguistic proficiency to draft, revise, and edit through a complex cognitive process. With the limited learning hours and high-pressure schooling in Taiwan, high school students struggle to learn English. Although the survey results showed that most participants have a positive view toward learning English, the participants felt they were forced to learn English composition to pass the college entrance examinations. Based on the survey responses, here are a few suggestions.

Most participants favored their teachers' positive feedback more than their negative responses. The participants believed that their teachers' praise boosted their confidence in their English writing skills and reduced their anxiety in the classroom. With that said, the findings are in line with those of Kreshen's (1981) and Doryei's (1994) theories in which students learn the best when their anxiety is low. With this in mind, the teachers' positive feedback is a more approachable way to help students learn English.

The majority of the participants preferred group feedback instead of individual feedback. The survey results indicated that most of the participants felt embarrassed when their teachers corrected them. The students felt that group feedback was a more practical way to equip them for

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learning English composition. This is not to say that the teachers' corrections are not important; instead, it is not necessary for the students to see all the corrections. Through group feedback, students not only learn from their mistakes; but also learn from other students' insights. After all, overly correcting decreases students' confidence in developing their writing skills in English. Group feedback or indirect feedback simply avoids making the students feel embarrassed while providing the benefits from the teachers' feedback.

The survey results also showed that peer reviews help students learn how to write English more effectively. In traditional Taiwanese schooling, peer reviews were rarely adopted in teaching strategies because the teachers highly criticized their effectiveness. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Confucian culture has long put forth teachers as authentic figures who can never be dared to be challenged. However, five participants in the survey revealed that they felt more relaxed when their classmates, not their teachers, proofread their writings. The responses explored how utilizing peer reviews can create a low-anxiety, and engage classroom, while enabling students to become aware of their writing mistakes and engaging more with their classmates. Thus, peer reviews deserve more attention in teaching practices.

Cultural conflicts create many barriers for Taiwanese high school students in learning English. The survey responses indicate that; although the participants understand the importance of learning English, they don't need English in their daily life. Evidently, years of Taiwanese education reform that focused on English education did not improve high school students' English literacy. Part of the blame is on the traditional pedagogy of teaching English in an isolated way. In addition, the survey results reveal that Taiwanese cultural stereotypes of one's first language had a negative impact on students' confidence in learning English due to their teachers having slightly more positive view toward Mandarin Chinese speakers. Therefore,

## CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

utilizing the learners' knowledge of their heritage language through writing activities, such as creating heritage culture reports, is one way to remove the cultural barriers and rebuild the students' confidence in learning English. Teachers can incorporate culturally relevant materials from various ethnic groups into the classroom to make teaching English more meaningful in Taiwan.

As discussed, two major conclusions can be drawn. First, motivation is the key to Taiwanese high school students' English success. After the students are motivated to learn, then all the effective teaching strategies can come into play. Second, teachers' feedback plays an important role in students' English writing development. Utilizing the constructive feedback, including positive, indirect, and group feedback can have a "wash back" effect on students: This effect refers to students' future language development (Brown, 2010, p. 37). Teachers need to be aware of the difficulties with which students struggle in academic and social environments. If the teachers can relieve their students' pressures and remove cultural barriers, then the students are likely to learn how to write English effectively and become proficient learners. There is a need for qualitative research to analyze students' writing performance and the interrelationship between their motivation and strategies in order to provide more insights into helping Taiwanese students improve their English writing successfully.

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Appendix A.

### **CONSENT FORM**

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

## CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

### CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH SUBJECT

#### **Purpose and Background**

Ms. Diane Yang, a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco is doing a study on constructive feedback and motivation with high school students in Taiwan. Motivation is key to students' learning. The research is interested in how feedback shapes students' learning attitudes, what are effective ways to increase students' motivation, and how might we build self-esteem in English classrooms.

I am being asked to participate because I am over 18 years of age and have finished high school education in Taiwan.

#### **Procedures**

If I agree to be a participant in this study, the following will happen:

1. I will complete a short questionnaire giving basic information about me, including age, gender, race and a brief experience in learning English.
2. I will complete a survey about my teacher's feedback and how they motivated students.

#### **Risks and/or Discomforts**

1. It is possible that some of the questions on the motivation survey may make me feel uncomfortable, but I am free to decline answering any questions I do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.
2. Participation in the research may mean a loss of confidentiality. Study records will be kept as confidential as is possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. Study information will be coded and kept in locked files at all times. Only study personnel will have access to the files.

#### **Benefits**

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of the effect of the high school experience on students who learn writing in English.

#### **Costs/Financial Considerations**

There will be no financial costs to me as a result of taking part in this study.

## CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

### Questions

I have talked to Ms. Diane Yang about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have further questions about the study, I may contact her at (408) 806-6808.

If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should first talk with the Ms. Diane Yang or I may contact Dr. Brad Washington at (415) 422-2062. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the IRBPHS, which is concerned with protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS office by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by e-mailing IRBPHS@usfca.edu, or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

### Consent

I have been given a copy of the "Research Subject's Bill of Rights" and I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study.

---

Subject's Signature

Date of Signature

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date of Signature

## Appendix B

### Survey Sheet of Constructive Feedback

Please choose a number according to your perception of learning writing in English.

## CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK IN L2 WRITING

1. Do Not Agree      2. Agree      3. Strongly Agree

Q1. I feel that my teachers' correction embarrassed me and influenced my motivation in learning writing.

Q2. My teachers' positive feedback makes me feel more confident in learning English writing.

Q3. I prefer receiving short feedback on my work over seeing all of the corrections made by my teacher.

Q4. When my teacher praises my English writing, I will pay more attention in class.

Q5. It will be better for my teacher to give out a group review rather than an individual review.

Q6. If the class is fun, I am motivated to learn more about the subject.

Q7. Through interesting course design in the class, I am inspired in writing.

Q8. If I were a teacher, I will give more positive feedbacks than negative feedbacks.

Q9. I feel more relaxed for my classmates to proofread my essay.

Q10. I am less confident in writing when none of my friends writes in English.